

## Historicising the Views of Scholars on the Origin of the Jihad of Shehu Uthman Dan Fodio

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### Abstract

*The Jihad of Uthman Dan Fodio had been interpreted in different ways by scholars and researchers. In many literatures, views of many authors differ hence the Jihad had been a subject of debates even after two centuries of its occurrence. The argument is equally peculiar among the Muslim scholars. It is this seemingly unending topical issue that prompts the relevance of the paper. The argument is that the Jihad of Uthman Dan Fodio is inherently carried out to purify the essence of Islam. The methodology is thematic and analytical applying historical interpretation of extant literature.*

**Keywords:** Historicising, Views, Scholars, Jihad, Shehu, Uthman

### 1. Introduction

During the last quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Shaikh Muhammad bi 'Uthman Muhammed bi Salih known to history as Uthman Dan Fodio preached in all Hausaland and Borno and possibly in the whole of Western Sudan. Uthman was born in December 1754, received his education following the traditional pattern of training of a Mallam and grew up to be a very learned theologian and a pious Sufi. Based at Degel in Gobir, he began his preaching career in 1774-1775. Ironically, Shaikh Uthman Dan Fodio, as was called, directed his efforts to those who already accepted Islam, exhorting them to purify their practices of religion in accordance with Sunni Orthodox.

In Gobir, only Sultan Bawa appeared friendly and co-operative. In fact, Bawa created conducive atmosphere for the Shaikh and his followers to practice Islam. This was manifested in the way the Sultan acquiesced to the five-point demands of Shaikh bi Fodio in respect of smooth practices (in accordance with the Qur'aan a Sunnah) of Islam by his followers without hindrance. Successive Sultans (Nafata and Yunfa) became openly hostile as a result of his growing influence in the area. Constant attack and count-attack on the Shaikh and his followers forced him to migrate from Gobir. He migrated from Degel to Gudu on February 21, 1804. It became known generally as hijra, reminiscent of Prophet Muhammad's flight from Mecca to Medina. This apparent minor accident of history proved the signal for the outbreak of the Jihad. The case for the Jihad as publicly proclaimed by Shaikh Uthman Dan Fodio was among other disabilities which the Muslims suffered by living under governments that were not based on the Shariah.

The heretical observance of the Hausa rulers as seen by the Shaikh emphasized that these rulers administered oppressive laws contrary to the Shariah. The rulers imposed uncanonical and excessive taxation, took bribes, forcibly seized property of their subjects and forced Muslims to fight "unjust" wars and pay heavily for failure to comply. They prohibited Muslims from doing things that were Sunna for them such as the wearing of the Turban by men and the veil by women. Further, the rulers indulged in luxurious and voluptuous living, reveling in immoral music, wearing ornamented fineries and accumulating women, often as many as 1,000 in their harem. The rulers either indulged in or condoned heathen practices. More heinous was the charge of polytheism, the most reprehensible departure from Islam. Uthman Dan Fodio frowned at the practice of worshiping spirits and gods and making sacrifices to them.

The foregoing aberrations created tension and difficulties for the pious Uthman who, though anxious to be orthodox was compelled to compromise faith. These non-Islamic aspects of practices in these societies obviously represented the dilemma of the Shaikh, the magnitude of which forced him to take up arms, thus, the beginning of the Jihad. The origin of Uthman Dan Fodio's Jihad became debatable as various intellectuals and scholars advanced views on its origin. Some of these scholars viewed the Jihad purely from religion, politics and economics; others saw it as a combination of all these factors; yet others viewed it from the racial tribal and intellectual perspectives. Some of these views were indeed full of

historical parallelism. This paper intends to discuss these divergent views and perspectives, at the end of which it concludes with a standpoint.

## 2. Views and Perspectives

R.A. Adeleye strongly perceived the phenomenon from the racial/tribal view point. He believed the Shaikh undertook the Jihad to achieve Fulani domination. The obvious point as believed by Adeleye is that the Fulani were aliens in Hausaland and denied effective and direct participation in the government of their adopted homes. This isolation of the Fulani may in part, be ascribed more to the difficulty of aliens fitting into an indigenous society than to any deliberate antagonism of the indigenes. Such a situation, Adeleye argued, could nevertheless provide a fertile ground for fostering Fulani solidarity and separate identity. It was easy in the circumstance, for the Fulani to see any form of oppression by government as hatred for their ethnic group.

He equally advanced that the outlook and world view of the Fulani, the bulk of who were nomads, differentiated them from their host peoples who were mostly peasants and townsmen. The basic animosity between the nomads and the townsmen completed the Fulani isolation and partly explains the tension between them and the indigenous peoples under whose rule they lived. In addition, the Fulani were better Islamized than their host people. Being largely outside the pale of government, the pious Fulani were more favourably placed to identify abuses against Islamic tenets than their counterpart indigenous Muslims, many of whom had vested interests in the existing system. According to Adeleye, therefore, the Fulani Jihad of Uthman Dan Fodio was ethnocentric rather than religious. There was no clear-cut demarcation between loyalty to kin and to religion. That the Fulani joined the Jihad en masse from a sense of racial solidarity cannot be ruled out.

Henry Barth, an European explorer to Africa, saw the Jihad as did Adeleye, as a continuation of racial and tribal struggle for domination which is seen as the basic theme of political evolution of the area from the earliest times to the present day. Barth saw the Jihad movement as the rise to dominance of the 'Fulbe', the most intelligent of all African tribes, and established an empire over them. Barth, according to Y.B, Usman, perceived all these in crude racial terms of the conquering tendency of the Fulbe. He saw other tribes falling 'prey' to them and through inter-marriage with the subject tribes degenerating in their habits and even in some of their habits and even in some of their physical characteristics.

The view of Barth was equally corroborated by that of Frederick Lugard in his second address at Sokoto on 21 March, 1893. His views on the formation of the Sokoto Caliphate which provided a historical justification for the British conquest, was explicit: "the Fulani in old times under Uthman Dan Fodio conquered this country. They took the right to rule over it, to levy taxes, to depose kings and to create kings. They in turn have by defeat lost their rule which has come into the hands of the British. All these things which I have said the Fulani took by conquest...now passed to the British.

According to M.A. Al-Hajji in "The Meaning of the Sokoto Jihad", the Jihad primarily was warfare by the Fulani against their Hausa overlords. This view indeed became popular among the British colonial administrators and was usually expressed unequivocally. Hogben expressed it thus:

*Religion was often made the pretext for the acquisition of worldly power... The Jihad had as its confessed object the purification of the Muslim religion, and it was directed against the corrupt rulers of Hausaland, who had been supposedly oppressing ...ignoring their Muslim subjects. In reality, it was originally a national flight of the Fulani, both Muslim and pagan against the forces of Yunfa...Fulani... who had retired to their flocks.*

Hogben is obviously presenting the views of the British administrator in an academic guise. What he is saying therefore, is that the role of pastoral Fulani (pagan Fulani) was decisive in the actual fighting and that at the outbreak of the Jihad; the Fulani and Hausa were different racial groups and that the episode resulted simply in the replacement of the Hausa rulers by the Fulani Mallams.

J.S. Trimmingham equally argued that the phenomenon was simply a warfare between the Muslims and the pagans, with the Fulani at the head of the former because they had a longer history of Islamization than the Hausa. He believed that the Moroccan invasion of Songhai in 1591 marked the beginning of a period of Islamic stagnation and pagan reaction in the whole of Western Sudan. The 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries witnessed a sharp decline in the fortunes of Islam as a universal religion and a vigorous revival of local cults: Islam was neutralized by being emptied of all elements of challenge to African ways of life and Muslims were accommodated in Negro society. The Jihad of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, therefore, represented the reaction of militant Umma against accommodation of Islam and paganism Sudanese societies.<sup>17</sup> This was the claimed of Trimmingham, an interpretation that is not altogether unconnected with the colonial theory.

Murray Last's view became clear when he viewed the Jihad as being largely Fulani dominated, and as such the phenomenon was politically inclined. Murray Last seems to share the views of Barth, Lugard and even Adeleye. He argued that the Jihad was meant at changing the existing status quo of the Hausa rulers domineering tendency. Thus, he called for the complete change of government from the Hausa overlords whom the Fulani minority have hitherto seen as been tyrannical, brutal and unfair. A supporting argument was the fact that the bulk of the Jihad leaders were mainly Fulani, except Abdulsalami, Yakubu and Jaltan Sarkin Zazzau. These few non-Fulani Jihad leaders, it was gathered by last, were never sufficiently strong to constitute a major threat to Fulani rule. A parallel line was also drawn from the view of Thomas Hodgkins and other scholars. Hodgkins advanced that the Jihad's genesis is not unconnected with tribal struggle for domination between two antagonistic races based on religious impulse.<sup>20</sup> He opined that there was politics in the Jihad. To substantiate further, he stressed:

*To make war upon the king, who is an apostate, is obligatory by assent and that to take the government from him is equally obligatory by assent.*

H.A. Johnson, on the other hand, described the Jihad as a class struggle in which the Fulani were pitted against the Hausa ruling class in Hausaland and the Fulani and Hausa united against "pagan tribes" and Bauchi and Adamawa and presumably elsewhere outside Borno and Hausaland. Islam, claimed Johnson, provided an impulse to the Fulani and was the cause of tension within the society between the devout and lax Muslims. The focal point of Johnson's view is the assertiveness of the Fulani against the constraints imposed on them by the Hausa and the pagan chiefs. He is in this vein assumed that the Fulani had lived among the other tribes and inter-married with them; they somehow remained distinct and superior in character, temperament, culture and intelligence. All these put together, Johnson argued, merged the "Fulani Empire". The resulting empire (out of this struggle) did bring about unity between the Fulani "Art of Government", 'scholarship' and 'religion'.

M.G. Smith equally perceived the Jihad as a political and tribal struggle between the Hausa (Habe) and the Fulani which struggle resulted in the establishment of Fulani domination with Islamic reform providing justification for it. To substantiate his stand, Smith argued that the Fulani pastoralists who had remained distinct from the Hausa agriculturists almost at all levels of existence (examples – 'language, ethnicity, cult, stratification, ecology and kinship') provided the following for the settled Muslim Fulani who led the Jihad. He also believed that the Fulani rulers or emirs and the conquering aristocracies in Kano and Katsina treated the Hausa as a defeated people who were systematically denied jural and political rights of clientage and protection. They were not formally and categorically accepted or treated as Muslims. The Fulani were in monopoly of taxation, military, political, and jural resources. According to him, the Hausa were: "Corporate disabilities in political, civil, religious and economic spheres as a leaderless category, the subject people likely to revolt and to be suppressed; nonetheless Fulani males while reserving their kinswomen in marriage for themselves, recruited harems of Hausa concubines.

Smith contended that the Fulani merged with the Hausa in order to exploit and dominate the pagan tribe. One scholar seems to divorce himself from similar views of various scholars already discussed in this paper. He is Abdullahi Smith. Abdullahi Smith in divorcing himself from others' views, said his stand is essentially an intellectually one. Smith considered the Jihad of Uthman Dan Fodio intellectually motivated, involving the conception of an ideal society and a theory of revolution by which this ideal could be approached. According to him, all ideals are intellectual, but the ideals of the Jihad of Uthman Dan Fodio was also academic, not in the sense of unreal or impracticable but in the sense of educational, having to do with what is taught in school, in academics. Thus, Uthman was primarily a teacher and a student, and not a politician, tribalist or warrior. Smith therefore argued that the Jihad of Uthman Dan Fodio was inspired mainly from an intellectual conception.

Looking at the Jihad from the religious ground, Ahmad Khani believed that it had no other source of origin except Islamic revivalism. This scholar debunked all other justifications (especially racial and tribal) as the basis of the Jihad's origin. To disabuse the minds of scholars looking at the Jihad as tribal and racial, Khani in his book '*The Intellectual Origin of Sokoto Jihad*' showed that Uthman Dan Fodio categorically condemned tribalism in all its facets. To him, therefore, Uthman waged the Jihad on religious ground i.e. an attempt at reviving the sunnah of the prophet. He maintained that throughout the Jihad of Uthman, he never had anything to do with the "Sultans" of the Hausaland and never stood between them and their desire. His main concern, Ahmad claimed, was the Islamic revivalism, quelling of bad innovations and the education of the masses. This became manifested in all his writings, doings and actions.

Hisket appeared to reason along the line of Khani when he concluded that the genesis of Uthman Dan Fodio's Jihad was religion. To buttress the statement, he argued that Shaikh Uthman Bunduri, one of Uthman's teachers, exercised decisive influence on him Fodio. Shaikh bin Fodio's association with Shaikh Bunduri was very important. The

Shaikh was learned and pious, well-known for righteousness and the ordering of the rights, and the forbidding of the wrong and for being occupied with what concerned him. Shaikh Uthman Dan Fodio accompanied him for two years, moulding himself according to his pattern in piety. Hisket therefore believed that the teaching of Shaikh Bunduri had a formative influence on Uthman Dan Fodio's training. Often in Islam, this principle was used to justify reform by force. Hisket equally debunked the racial-tribal viewpoint of the Jihad. He saw the Fulani as a small group of cultured people whose standard was low. That they were able to carry out the Jihad to a successful end did not mean it was tribal or racial. Rather, it was due to their sense of cohesion and intellectual superiority over the surrounding Hausaland.

A.E. Afigbo saw the genesis of the Jihad as the tensions which had existed in Sudanic society for sometimes before the 19<sup>th</sup> century Jihad. To Afigbo, there was that initial conflict in most Sudanic communities between Islam and the traditional religions of the people. This is in spite the fact that Islam was many years old among most Sudanese peoples, however it had not succeeded in displacing the traditional cults. This, he believed was an explosive situation, for in orthodox Islamic doctrine, the only way to good life in this world and to salvation in after-life was provided by the teaching of Prophet Muhammed. He consequently opined that this age-long tension also manifested itself politically.

Afigbo's argument along this line was based on the promise that the Muslim clerical class was better educated than their pagan or nominal Muslim neighbours. As educated men, they were often employed as secretaries and advisers by rulers; they also had a high reputation as makers of powerful charm which could protect the wearers from evil-minded people and spirits; these Muslims clerics therefore enjoyed a great deal of influence in the communities in which they lived. This became a source of conflict between them and the non-Muslim groups in the Sudan. The clerics became politically ambitious after having tasted power as secretaries and advisers, hence between the Habe rulers and the Muslim Fulani, who usurped the already discriminatory situation described as politically under-privileged to wage a Jihad. To Afigbo, therefore, the Jihad was a manifestation of an age-long tension that had hitherto existed in the Sudanese society.

To agree with Afigbo on this was another history scholar Elizabeth Isichie. Elizabeth wholly saw the origin of the Jihad as nothing short of politics. The endemic conflicts of interest between the farmers and the pastoralists were as a result of the resentment at their total lack of political power in a country they had lived in for centuries. Isichie saw the ethnic solidarity as the result of the capacity of some clan leaders to forment problem and their desire to plunder.

The general course that the Jihad took is well established and not in dispute, but there had been several reasons advanced as the real motives of the origin of Jihad of Uthman Dan Fodio. So varied and complex are these reasons that historians are not agreed on their true nature. The orthodox view is that it was a religious movement, but another school of thought has suggested that it was a revolution designed to give the Fulani control of the less gifted peoples among whom they had settled. More recently another theory has advanced to the effect that the movement was as much a peasant revolt as a Jihad. Yet others saw it as an intellectual movement. The question still remains: were the private motives of the reformer the same as those proclaimed publicly?

Our view on this is that the movement was fundamentally a religious one. Nothing illustrates this truth so clearly or proves it so conclusively as the fact that from the beginning to the end the leadership remained in the hands of an unworldly mystic. It has equally been said that Islam is not merely a religion but a whole way of life, at once pervasive and demanding. Based on this premise, therefore, the Jihad of Uthman Dan Fodio was waged to revive the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammed in the already morally decayed Sudanese societies where the Jihad found its genesis.

From our introduction, it is true that the abuses Uthman condemned were the practices Islam forbade, and the only reforms he demanded were those Islam required. This point is well illustrated by his attitude to taxation; what he criticized was not any excessive burden of taxation but the imposition of taxes which the Shariah did not recognize, and all other societal phenomena incidental were judged solely from a religious stand-point. His aim was to establish a theocratic state which he, as God's chosen instrument, would direct in strict accordance with the sacred law.

### 3. Conclusion

No matter the motives deduced by scholars in the origin of the Jihad of Uthman Dan Fodio, we strongly believe that it was on the basis of the integrating force of the Islamic ideology of the Ummah (Community of Muslims) that the Caliphate was established and sustained. Yet large scale political, social and tribal integration was part of the consequences of the Jihad: unforeseen and therefore, not specifically prepared for by the leaders of the reform movement.

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