

THE SOKOTO CALIPHATE AND NATION-BUILDING.

**Text of a Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the
*International Conference on the Sokoto Caliphate
and its Legacies,*
Abuja, Nigeria,
Monday, 14th June, 2004.**

by

**Yusufu Bala Usman,
Department of History,
Ahmadu Bello University
Zaria, Nigeria.**

This International Conference on the Sokoto Caliphate and its Legacies, can only serve a useful purpose, if, right away, we locate it in the national, regional, and global, contexts, and circumstances, in which it is taking place, and locate its subject in the actual historical epoch in which it existed. Unless we locate it in these, we shall find our deliberations in the air, high above, and floating away, from the actual historical experiences of the Sokoto Caliphate and of the historical epoch, which it belonged to. Or, we shall find ourselves stuck with, narrow and parochial, hole-in-the-ground, views of historical and contemporary events. In both cases, we shall become incapable of learning useful lessons from the rich and complex experiences of the Sokoto Caliphate in the 19th and 20th centuries, for our survival and progress in the 21st century.

Location

Let us, therefore, be very clear from the outset, as to where we are within the framework, and within the currents, of the historical processes that have produced and reproduce the politics in which our forebears lived and in which we now live. This conference is taking place, two hundred years after the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate. One hundred years after its conquest by the British, and the abrogation of its

sovereignty, and the incorporation of most of its territory and population into the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria. Forty-four years after this territory and population became emirates in the provinces of one of the regions of an independent and sovereign Federation of Nigeria.

The conference is taking place in the capital city of this Nigerian Federation, which just over forty years ago became, the Federal Republic of Nigeria. This capital city of Abuja, where we are holding this conference, is named after, and is located on what were, the south-eastern borders of the Kingdom of Abuja, ruled by Hausa kings, independent, and, most of the time, antagonistic to the Zazzau Emirate of the Sokoto Caliphate. This kingdom was formed around a ruling dynasty, which had been driven out of Zazzau in 1807. The father, and immediate predecessor, of the Sarkin Zazzau, Makau, who was driven out of Zazzau, and who took the flight, which ended up with the establishment of the Kingdom of Abuja, was the Sarkin Zazzau, Ishak Jatau, who, in the dry season of late 1804, pledged allegiance to the Shehu Usman Dan Fodio, and was formally turbaned as Emir of Zazzau, in the dry season of early 1805, becoming, the first emir of the whole of the Sokoto Caliphate. His direct descendants, who went to establish Abuja, however, continued in their antagonism to the Caliphate up to the British conquest, regarding their king as the legitimate Sarkin Zazzau, in opposition to the Emirs of Zazzau, who succeeded their father and grandfather in the City of Zaria and over most of the territory of the Kasar Zazzau.

Right here, where we are holding this conference, the territories of the Kingdom of Abuja, the Gbagyi kingdoms of Karu and Kurape, and those of the emirates of Keffi and Nassarawa, came together in a complex intermeshing of peoples in which distinct clans and lineages of the Koro, the Gade, the Gbagyi, the Bassa, the Fulbe, the Hausa, the Ebira, and others, lived and worked together in the same settlements and in neighbouring settlements. The situation here before the establishment of

Abuja as the federal capital, and since, reflects the, descent, cultural, social and political diversity and complexity of the actual realities of human existence in most parts of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Throughout this country in which we are holding this international conference, the inter-relationships, went much deeper than links between distinct languages and ethnic groups. What we had, and we have, in the Abuja area, was the intermeshing of dialects, clans, lineages, and so many different types of households, and of, occupational, cultural and religious networks, at so many different levels and with so many different dimensions.

We have now located our conference in our present context. Let us locate the subject of this conference, the Sokoto Caliphate, in the historical epoch in which it was produced and in which it existed.

Momentous Changes

The Sokoto Caliphate was a polity established in a particular historical epoch in which we have to place it, if we are to begin to grasp an important aspect of its contemporary significance. The late 18th century and the early 19th century, when it was produced and established, were years of momentous political upheavals and political transformations, in many parts of the world, particularly in Africa, South America, the Caribbean, North America, Europe and the Middle East. The Sokoto Jihad occurred and the Sokoto Caliphate was established as one of these processes. In these processes, social and political forces emerged in several continents, to challenge the existing political orders, and often succeeded in overthrowing, or significantly transforming hitherto existing systems of political organisation, and the basis of the political communities.

The movements for independence against the British, Spanish, French and Portuguese empires in South and North America and the Caribbean, and against Ottoman rule, and European domination, in Egypt, forcibly raised not only the question of the right to self –

determination but also the issue of the basis and the composition of the political community which has that right of self determination. The Haitian Revolution, and the American Wars of Independence, were not only about independence, but were even more basically, and profoundly about the composition of the political community, which had the right to exercise that independence.

From the massive peasant uprising led by Pugachev, on the vast plains of Russia, in the 1770s, which shook Tsarist rule to its roots, right across to the resurgence of the Irish independence movement, in the 1790s, in which the United Irishmen, led by a Protestant, Wolf Tone threw a serious challenge to the political order of the, so-called United Kingdom, headed by the English monarch and the hierarchy of the Anglican Church, the issue of rights and freedoms was deeply connected with the issue of who should have these rights and freedoms and on the basis of what. The movements against the powers and privileges of the monarchies and aristocracies of Europe, which most dramatically erupted in the French Revolution, in the 1790s, were not only about the right and freedoms of the citizens, but were also about who was a citizen, and what constituted the basis of that citizenship.

On the African continent, from the Nile Delta to the Drakensberg Mountains in South Africa, and from the Senegal Valley to the Ethiopian Highlands, such challenges were thrown to the existing political orders. The Sokoto Jihad was one of the outstanding examples of these challenges, which transformed the old order over several continents in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. It created the Sokoto Caliphate, a polity incorporating people from hundreds of ethnic groups, covering a territory of about one million square kilometres, slightly larger than the area of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, spread over what are now the territories of the republics of Mali, Niger, Benin, Nigeria, Chad and Cameroon.

Significance

What made the Sokoto Caliphate distinct among the political communities which were produced by these upheavals of the late eighteenth and early 19th centuries, was that while some of the others made declarations over the rights of man and the rights of nations to self-determination, descent, and particularly, race, remained the major factor in determining who belonged to them and who did not. In the United States of America, and in almost all the republics of South America, a free person of African origin, that is a black person who was not a slave, even, if he was a Christian pastor, was excluded from full citizenship, even though his ancestors have been there for centuries. But, a recent immigrant from Europe was immediately incorporated and given full citizenship.

In the Sokoto Caliphate, the only basis for full citizenship, in all the emirates, was to be a Muslim, without any regard for descent, tribe and race. Right in the middle of the Jihad campaigns, in 1806, the Shehu Usman Dan Fodio emphasised this in his major work, the ***Bayan Wujub al Hijra***. The Shehu warned that:

“...One of the swiftest ways of destroying a kingdom is to give preference of one particular tribe over another, or show favour to one group of people rather than another...”

In writing this, the Shehu was obviously affirming an ideal. But unlike in most other major Muslim polities around the world, this ideal was pursued in the Sokoto Caliphate, which, in fact, was essential in allowing for its very creation in a part of the world with such immense and complex ethnic diversity. It was the pursuit of these ideals, written down and widely disseminated by words of mouth, in prose and verse, and in books, letters, and pamphlets, which were the pillars on which the Sokoto Caliphate was built and sustained. It was essentially built by these and not by cavalymen wielding spears and lances, as misrepresented by the logo used for this bicentenary. The cover of such

books and pamphlets are more appropriate symbols for this bicentenary, than this durbar postcard picture of fancifully dressed, armed, horsemen.

But what has all this got to do with nation building, as far as we are concerned, here and now? We have to locate our deliberations on what we have before us and the issues and problems we face and which our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren are likely to face.

Fact and Figures

This country, Nigeria, where we are holding this conference is a polity, which has many unique features. It stands out among other countries in Africa and the world because of these features. Its linguistic and ethnic diversity, for example, is immense. The magnitude, multiple dimensions and motion of this diversity are hardly recognised, as simplistic stereotypes of its ethnic and religious geography have been developed to obscure this.

In 1976, linguists identified 394 distinct linguistic groups within Nigeria. Some of these languages had distinct dialects, of which 125 were identified. Some of these languages were actually dialect clusters, which it was more convenient to label languages, even when some of the dialects were barely mutually intelligible. A few of these languages have since become extinct and, therefore, the number of linguistic groups in this country is now less than 394. But, it is not likely to be less than 350. The number of dialects of these languages has also been reduced by the spread of standardised dialects of many languages. But, since there seems to have been an underestimation when the figure of 125 was arrived at, the number of distinct dialects within various languages, at present, is not likely to be less than 100.

Unlike almost any other country in Africa, Nigeria has within its territory, substantial, number of speakers of three, of the five, families of languages found in Africa, namely Afro - Asiatic, Niger – Congo and Nilo – Saharan. The only language families in Africa, not found in Nigeria, are;

the very small Khoisan, spoken by the Khoi and the San of the Kalahari Desert, and the, essentially Asian, Indo – Malay languages of Madagascar.

What we have to face is that, there is hardly any other country in the world, which has Nigeria's linguistic and ethnic diversity. And it is diversity with deep historical roots. We should be able to see it more clearly when we view the country in terms of its basic geographical and demographic features, which are often hardly recognised.

With a population of 140 million, the Federal Republic of Nigeria is the tenth most populous country in the world, and the most populous African nation on earth. Nigeria's territory of 923.7 thousand square kilometres, amounts to less than 3% of the total territory of the African continent. But, it has within it, up to 25% of the continent's total population.

This position of Nigeria in Africa's has global significance, because, in both territory and population, Africa is the second largest continent on earth, after Asia, although the Euro-centric maps we use cover this fact up by exaggerating the size of Europe and reducing the size of Africa. The hard fact of the matter is that the African continent covers 30.3million square kilometres, amounting to 20.3% of the land surface of the earth. In comparison, Europe covers only 9.9 million square kilometres of the surface of the earth, amounting to only 6.7% of the land surface. Africa has a population, which, in spite of the ravages of poverty and disease, is heading towards one billion, by the beginning of the next decade.

This high level of concentration of Africa's population in this small corner of Africa, now known as the Federal Republic of Nigeria, has persisted over the centuries, in spite of the heavy loss of population the area suffered as a result of the Atlantic and Trans – Saharan slave trades, and substantial emigration from Nigeria to other parts of West, central, and North-Eastern Africa in the 19th and 20th Centuries.

Nation-Building

For the last five years the two major tasks facing the people and governments of this huge, diverse and complex polity, in which we are holding this conference, have, been the revival of the country's economy and the building of the public institutions for sustaining and developing a democratic system of government. These are at the core of the current stage of nation-building in the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

But, putting a battered, dependent, economy on the path of sustained growth and establishing a democracy on firm foundations of solid and accountable public institutions, after years of unaccountable military dictatorships, are not easy tasks for anyone, under any circumstances. These are, however, not impossible tasks. They can be tackled and successfully accomplished as has been done in the past and others are doing in other parts of the world.

For a country with, Nigeria's vast human and natural resources, the yearnings of all its people for, peace, security, harmony, employment and for better living conditions, and a five-year stretch of high, windfall, earnings from its major exports, giving, unprecedented, and persistently, massive revenue monthly flow into the treasuries of all its three tiers of government, the basic economic and social conditions, have been, and are, favourable. But, those elected to head the governments at all levels in this polity, have, after five years in power, failed to give the leadership required to put the country on the path to sustained economic recovery and build up and strengthen the public institutions for enduring democratic, civilian, rule. They have failed to face up to the task of nation-building and develop the public institutions, and the public commitment and public projects for national development required

Instead, the President of this Federal Republic of Nigeria, Olusegun Obasanjo, for example, has for five years continued to declare in words and demonstrate by his deeds, that the reform programme of his

government is primarily aimed at reducing the role of public institutions, reducing the public sphere, and leaving the leadership the country's economy in the hands of private businessmen. The ideals he is pursuing is to hand over this polity to those most capable of making profits,

These local and foreign private entrepreneurs, according to the President of this polity, shall in the course of their accumulation of private property and their search for private profit, somehow, revive the economy and enable this country to build a democracy, with very limited role for public institutions and a narrow public realm.

President Obasanjo's claims to be reforming, the public services and public institution, rid them of corruption and make them more efficient and accountable are just empty words. They are just empty words, because in so many cases, the elaborate machinery set up, before May 1999, and since, to deal with the corrupt public officials has been prevented from functioning, and he set the example, by, among others, preventing the trial of corrupt practices in the Ministry of Defence, involving his own nephew, Dr Julius Makunjola, its Permanent Secretary under his presidency, in 1999 – 2001.

The governors of the thirty six states, and the elected and un-elected chairmen of the over seven hundred local governments, of all the political parties, have shown that they basically agree with the intentions of Obasanjo's so-called reforms, and are following him along on that path. This is, of course, as long as it is only public institutions and their responsibilities which are cut down, and reduced, and not the flow of public revenue, into public treasuries, whose public funds they are determined to continue to be responsible for disbursing, as public officials.

The most prominent and vocal sectors of the political opposition, to President Obasanjo, drawn from all parts of the country, have even gone beyond Obasanjo's cutting down the, scope of the public sphere and the role of public institutions to demand a Sovereign National Conference to

decide on reducing the scope of all national public institutions, or even break up the whole country. They are persistently insisting that instead of Nigerians focussing their attention on the building of effective national, and local, public institutions for ensuring and sustaining democratic rule at all levels of government, and in all the public sphere of life in the country, they should demand a Sovereign National Conference at which representatives of the ethnic and religious groups in the country shall meet and deliberate on how to dismantle the existing national public institutions in the country, ostensibly in order to allow every ethnic and religious group to go its own way, in a confederation or in separate, ethnic and, or, religious, sovereign states.

The fact that the problems of corruption, lawlessness, painlessness, waste, lack of accountability and the resort to violence in disputes, exist at all levels of Nigerian society and within every family, clan, lineage, village group, chiefdom, emirate, local government and state is seen from this position, as something that does not matter. The major problems are seen as being located in the composition and structure of the national public institutions of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and are, according to this opposition groups, likely to disappear, or, be reduced, if these institutions are dismantled, or, have their role significantly curtailed.

President Obasanjo reforms are intended to hand the country over to private entrepreneurs, including white settlers from Southern Africa. The most prominent leaders of the opposition to him want the country handed over to a national conference of leaders of ethnic and religious groups, hereditary, non-hereditary, elected, un-elected, and gerontocratic, with sovereign powers over the people and territory of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

The choice being posed to us is one between, the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy, NEEDS, of President Obasanjo and the Sovereign National Conference, SNC, of the

most prominent leaders of the opposition to his regime. Where does this choice between NEEDS, and the SNC, leave 140 million citizens of this polity, in whose federal capital we are holding this conference? Where does this choice leave us in the context of current domestic and international lawlessness?

Lawlessness

Right now, in this country, violent conflicts arising out of attempts at driving one ethnic, or religious community out of one part of the country, or, just molesting it under the cover of religion, have persisted and are undermining the economy and the growth of democracy. Open, and covert, ethnic, regional, and religious secessionist movements have remained active and are becoming more vocal and organised. As NEEDS, SEEDS, and LOGEEDS, fail to meet our needs, the conditions for all this violence to erupt and all these secessionist movement to expand will spread in more parts of the country. The take-off of the contest for the 2007, presidential and other elections, will make many of the politicians resort to the crudest and most disruptive forms of the manipulation of clan and other kinship networks, ethnicity, sub-ethnicity, region, religions and religious sects.

The international context in which this polity exists and operate is increasingly unfavourable to the nurturing of stable democratic rule and the entrenchment of the rule of law, which is one of its pre-requisites. For, what we have is that, instead of the rule of law, increasingly prevailing, in domestic and international affairs, we have, increasingly, the rule of lawlessness. International relations are, increasingly sinking into disorder and chaos.

The governments of some states, in the world today, believing that, they are now militarily invincible, have embarked on the outright invasion, occupation, and annexation of other countries and the killings, incarceration and torture of the citizens of these occupied territories in brazen violations of numerous resolutions of the United Nations General

Assembly, and the Security Council, and of basic provisions of international law, governing the conduct of relations between sovereign states, and the treatment of civilians and combatants in armed conflicts.

With few exceptions, the use of force, and the threat of the use of force, are increasingly replacing the resort to the law in the resolution of civil and international disputes, threatening to wreck all that has been achieved in the constructive efforts at domestic nation-building and international peace-building, in the middle years of the 20th century. The brazen violations of international law, which is becoming rampant, is going hand-in-hand with the violations of domestic law in many countries, increasingly making a mockery of the world-wide claims to democracy and lawful government.

Lessons

What should we do about all this? A conference on the Sokoto Caliphate cannot avoid attempting to tackle this question. It may, or may not get to an answer or, contending answers. This conference should, seek to learn lessons which can be derived from the rich and complex history of the polity whose two hundredth centenary it is being organised to commemorate. Some of these lessons should be useful for us in working out what to do now.

Do we hand over the running of the economy of this country, and therefore of its society and politics to private businessmen, as President Obasanjo says he wants to do. Or, do we, support the initiation of negotiations on its fate, and hand over these negotiations on our destiny, as its citizens, to ethnic and religious notables and spokesmen, as the most prominent opposition leaders to President Obasanjo insist we should do.? Or, do we reject all these two options presented by President Obasanjo's and by the leaders of his opposition and seek other options? What are these other options?

The fact of the matter is that, the Sokoto Caliphate was more than just a product of an attempt at Islamic reform. It was certainly that and

has to be understood in the West African and worldwide context of attempts at the reform of Islam in the 18th and 19th centuries. The beliefs, values and whole world-view of its leaders and members were profoundly Islamic. The particular attempt at reform led by the Shehu Usman Dan Fodio, which established the Sokoto Caliphate, was only one, among several others, which sought to reform Islam in the Central Sudan in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

There were definite attempts at Islamic reform from the top, by rulers, namely the Etsu Nupe Jibrilla (1718- 1746), the Sarkin Katsina Gozo, (1796-1801) nicknamed, "Son Allah Gozo"; the Sarkin Kano, Muhammad Alwali (1781-1807); and the Sarkin Zazzau Ishak Jatau (d.1806), who received the letter, the **Wathiqat ahl al-Sudan**, from the Shehu Usman Dan Fodio in 1804 and straightway pledged his support and allegiance and was turbaned as the Sokoto Caliphate's first emir in the dry-season of early 1805.

There were also reform movements led by scholars, namely the Shehu Abdurahman Chacha in the Nupe Kingdom, and by one of Shehu Dan Fodio's teachers, Shehu Jibril ibn Umar, in the Adar. There were, most likely other attempts at Islamic reform, before the one led by Shehu Dan Fodio, which we have not yet got historical evidence of. Therefore, what made the movement, which produced the Sokoto Caliphate distinct, was more than that it was a movement for Islamic reform. Several others were.

What made it distinct and favoured its success were, firstly, the commitment of its leaders to justice, ensured by the law and by economic, social, educational and cultural development promoted by responsible public institutions. Secondly, their insistence on universal values and standards of incorporation into the new polity it established, derived, of course from the Koran and the Sunna, over and above all tribal and racial differences.

The prominence the leaders of the Sokoto Jihad gave to justice is widely recognised. But what is not so widely recognised was that this justice was to be implemented by the government carrying out, among its other obligations, its responsibilities for the purposeful economic development of the polity. What the Sarkin Musulmi, Muhammadu Bello (1817-1837) wrote to the Emir of Katsina, Umarun Dallaji (1808-1836), in his concise treatise on government and politics, the **Usul al Siyasa** (The Principle of Politics) was that:

“...the Emir should provide public amenities for the people of his state for their temporal and religious benefits. For this purpose, he shall foster the artisans, and be concerned with the tradesmen who are indispensable to the people such as farmers and smiths, tailors and dyers, physicians, and grocers, butchers and carpenters...The ruler must allocate these tradesmen to every village and every locality. He should urge his subjects to seek foodstuff and keep it for future use. He must keep villages and countryside in prosperity, construct fortresses and bridges, maintain markets and roads and realise for them all what are of public interest, so that the proper order of this world may be maintained.”

The responsibility of the learned participants of this conference is to examine the extent to which such ideals were pursued in the Sokoto Caliphate. They should also examine the relevance of these ideals to the contemporary polities whose existence has been built on foundations laid down by the Sokoto Caliphate. Some of these, as in the case of Nigeria, are passing through crucial stages of nation-building and require a sound grasp of where they are coming from, in order to work out and determine, where they should be going. #