

Causes of the Jihad of Usman Dan Fodio: A Historiographical Review

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the historiography of the causes of the Jihad of Usman Dan Fodio. While classifying them under separate headings as religious, ethnic and socio-economic causes, the paper argues that the historian should integrate all these explanations within a coherent framework in order to account for the multi-dimensional process of transformation of northern Nigerian society triggered by the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate.

Introduction

Like the heated debate over the causes of the American Civil War, the debate over the causes of the Jihad of Usman Dan Fodio and the other jihads of nineteenth century West Africa continues, and is unlikely to be resolved simply or easily.¹ History is a complex process, in which the relative proportions of various causes are difficult to separate out. It is also a chaotic process in which one small, unrecorded event may have

1 For a summary of the major theories of the causes of the American Civil War, see Edwin C. Rozwenc, *The Causes of the American Civil War* (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1961). For a recent summary of the major theories of the causes of the jihad of Usman Dan Fodio, see M.O. Junaid, "19th Century Reforms in Hausaland: an Appraisal of Conflicting Hypotheses," *Hamdard Islamicus* 13, 1, 1990, pp. 33-38.

great ramifications which would be impossible for anyone to anticipate.² Thus, important causes of historical events can never be known with certainty. As one major investigator of the question has put it:

the causation behind the *jihad* and the nature of the Shehu's support may be thought of as a mosaic: some of its pieces are by now clearly delineated, others only dimly discernible, and many more have yet to be discovered.³

It is difficult to generalize about these causes for every area where the jihad occurred. This paper will concentrate on northwestern Hausaland and the ideas of the jihad leaders there, since that area is better documented, and since the jihad began and the overall leadership emerged there. However, one should remember that in other areas, especially outside Hausaland, the mix of factors was different, with some factors not being present at all, while new factors were present.⁴

Sultan Bello acknowledged the complexity of the causes which drove people into the community which the jihad had created. In a short work listing the types of people in the new community he included ten groups. Some merely feared the previous rulers. These participated neither in classes nor in campaigns. Another group were Fulani chauvinists who despised anybody who was not Fulani, a frank admission of the problems caused by the ethnic factor in the jihad. These were better than the first group since they went on military campaigns, but neglected religion. The third group were learned men who supported the jihad because it was intellectually fashionable. They were found in classes but not on

2 For a brief introduction to the mathematical theory of chaos, and why scientists no longer think that knowing all the variables would be sufficient to predict the outcome of chaotic processes, see J.P. Crutchfield, J. D. Farmer and Norman H. Packard, "Chaos," *Scientific American* 255, 6 (December, 1986), pp. 38-49.
3 Mervyn Hiskett, *The Sword of Truth: The Life and Times of the Shehu Usman Dan Fodio* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 80.
4 For example, "it cannot be said that the Muslims in Fombina were denied freedom of worship or that they were forced to practice the pagan religion of the non-Fulbe. The jihad in the upper Benue region arose out of the social, economic and political conditions under which the Fulbe had been living." Sa'ad Abubakar, *The Lamibe of Fombina* (Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press, 1977).