

## LIBERALITY IN THE SOKOTO CALIPHATE

BY

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### Abstract

*Accommodation, progressiveness, open-mindedness, and tolerance are the major ingredients for the survival and success of a human society. This is on the background that, humans are diverse, and tend to differ in almost everything, personal or public. Therefore, the same way people differ in their biological make-ups, physical statute and color, it is natural they vary in taste, understanding, perception, experience, beliefs and political propensities. The ability of a government in a given society to exploit these differences for positive change, peaceful co-existence and for mutual and constructive development should have been one of the major indicators for its civility and advancement. The contribution of the Sokoto Caliphate in fusing the once divided and opposing states in West Africa, and creating harmony and understanding between belligerent populations to build a solid and viable polity is such a legacy that should be a source of reference and inspiration for modern West African nations generally and Nigeria in particular. One of the identifiable factors that aided that achievement was the spirit of tolerance and freedom that thrived as bedrock and cornerstone of the administration of the Caliphate. It is the resolve of this paper that these similar areas of practical governance in the Sokoto Caliphate provide great deal of exemplary workable experiences which would help plural and multi-faceted states like Nigeria to positively address their multiple problems.*

**Keywords:** *Sokoto Caliphate, Tolerance, Liberality and Islamic Institutions*

### Introduction

African scholars and researchers should intensify efforts to critically examine the concept and lexis regarding 'freedom', 'tolerance', 'fair-play', and peaceful coexistence, which the Western world portrayed Africa as generally lacking. The recent cases prevalent in Europe of ban against mosque building, minarets, prohibition of use of veil by Muslim women, illegitimizing of polygamy and legalizing promiscuous relations between sexes and gay marriage, protests against building of Muslim Cultural Center in New York, USA, the activities of the Skin Heads in Germany, over four hundred ethnic Roma populations were expelled from France in 2010 for no reason but their ethnic identity, these and similar ethnically motivated killings and violence widespread in Europe and America provoked questions, as to what freedom, equality, Human Rights, the civilized world has set to achieve. At the international and diplomatic spheres, the so-called super-imperialists nations' prize to the world is war, annihilation and destruction of civilizations or generations. That was clearly demonstrated in Japan during the Second World War, as well as apartheid South Africa, Nicaragua, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, Pakistan and other developing nations.

However, the legacy of the Sokoto Caliphate provides a sharp contrast with the Western world in internal stability and equality among citizens, as well as external relations with other nations. The initial set up of the movement for establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate encouraged unification of ethnic and tribal groups in the region for the smooth running of the government and success of the administration. Sheikh Abdullahi Fodiyo stated in *Tazyin al-Waraqat*: We are an army victorious in Islam, and we are proud of nothing but that, tribes of Islam, and Torobbi is our clan. Our Fulani and our Hausa all united, and among us other than these, certain tribes joined together. For the help of God's religion-made up the union.

The Sokoto Caliphate was the first state in sub-Saharan Africa that was ideologically based with active support and participation of almost all tribes and ethnic entities of the region. Thus, it was never a Fulani affair as the European writers and their cohorts would want us to believe. At the intra and inter-state perspectives, the level of tolerance demonstrated by the Caliphate was momentous. Abdulsalam of Gimbana's protest against the Caliphate was academically handled. Scholarship and intellectual exercises took center stage than the use of force and military options.

Sultan Muhammad Bello invited him for a dialogue, which was a living legacy that led to the compilation of a book entitled, *Sard al-Kalam flma jara bainana wa baina Abd al-Salam*. The same exceptional level of tolerance can be found in the case of Sokoto-Borno relations, where correspondences that were highly coordinated and intellectually oriented had helped in resolving the fracas affably without further bloodshed and violence between the two Muslim states.

In the light of the above, the paper strongly affirms the relevance of the polity of the Sokoto Caliphate, in solving not only subtle problems of the Nigerian state, but other complexities that are threatening the existence of the our planet as a result of intolerance, naivety, bigotry, parochialism, and misuse of military strength and capabilities between stronger and weaker nations.

### **Concept and Practice of Toleration in the Sokoto Caliphate**

The question of tolerance as perceived and practiced by the nineteenth century West African Caliphate of Sokoto, was because of the efforts of the pioneers of the movement in adopting the true Islamic teaching and eschewing bigotry and unwarranted extremism as exemplified by the Prophet and rightly guided Caliphs. The principle of tolerance and liberality designed and followed in the affairs of the Caliphate, had transcended three major areas. Principally, tolerance between the diverse peoples, who accepted the teaching of the Shehu, in spite of their ethnic, cultural, traditional, regional, and linguistic differences. The ability and success of the Jihad leaders to establish an unprecedented fraternity among the hitherto contending peoples in Hausa land and beyond, and creating a single union that brought them together, under the same umbrella and banner of religion of Islam was historically fascinating.

Thus, integration between regions and peoples of various ethnic and tribal groups in the areas of the Caliphate was made possible due to non-ethnic, non-tribal, as well as fraternal and Universalist policies adopted by the architects of the movement. Ideology and professionalism provided a strong bond cementing peoples together for the establishment of an egalitarian society, rather than ethno-tribal sentiments and chauvinism. In the *magnum opus* of the Shehu, *Kitab Bay an Wijub al-Hijrah ala-al-Ibad*, he says:

*One of the swiftest ways of destroying a kingdom (collapse of a nation), is to give preference to a particular tribe over another, or to show favor to one group of people rather than another, and draw near those who should be kept away, and keep away those who should be drawn near*

In addition, through their liberal teaching and orientation of the Muslims, they succeeded in creating a followership with broader mindset, and unincarcerated horizon of thinking, interpretation, and practice of the religious tenets. That was the basis for intellectualism, academic outlook and approach of the Caliphate in all its affairs.

In their relationship with non-Muslims, they came up with practical policies for peaceful co-existence. Although the primary motive behind the jihad was to reform the religion of Islam, specifically among the nominal adherents, some non-Muslim individuals and kingdoms were in contact with the Caliphate. Therefore the Caliphal leadership adopted rules and regulations governing the treatment of non-Muslims under an Islamic State. The basis for this could be traceable to the Medinan period when the Prophet signed peace agreement with non-Muslim Jews and Christians to co-exist in an Islamic state of Medina Usually, non-Muslims would be offered the choice of becoming Muslims or becoming protected peoples with a right to their own faith guaranteed in return for a payment of *Jizya*. The non-Muslims as *Amana* or *Dhimmah* people were supposed to pay *Jizya* annually in return for sendees and protection rendered to them, while the Muslims send Zakat and other tithes to the state treasury for the upkeep of the same service, which the non-Muslims were exempted.

In *Diya'al-Hnkkami* by Abdullahi Fodio and *Usul-al-Siyasat* by Sultan Mohammad Bello, leaders were charged with the responsibility of maintaining justice and improving the welfare of all the citizens within their domain both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Even the *Jizya*, which should be given to

an Islamic government by the non-Muslims, can only be collected from those who can afford to pay. Those who cannot are relieved and even assisted by the government. Umar Ibn al-Khattab enjoined his successor, as part of his last message, to take particular care of the rights and privileges of his non-Muslim subjects and in anyway not to burden them beyond their capacity.

In matters of litigation, the non-Muslims were also to be left absolutely free to determine whether to be judged with the Shariah - Islamic law- or their customary laws and practices. That was the practice in the defunct Sokoto Caliphate in dealing with cases involving non-Muslims. According to Naniya:

*In matters of litigation (in the Caliphate) involving Muslim, Alkali- invoke the Shariah to arrive at a judgment. When maguzawa (non-Muslims) were the parties, an Alkali normally provided the parties involved with the option of either the Shariah or traditional (customary) practice. In the event of the opting for the latter, the Alkali invited, the traditional leaders of the Maguzawa concerned to sit with him in court as assessors. Together they passed judgment.*

Such type of dealing with the cases involving non-Muslims was in order to ensure justice and fundamental human rights, which Islam is always advocating. Abdullahi and Muhammad Bello wrote extensively on the treatment of non-Muslim in an Islamic state (and emphasizing the rights of non- Muslims in the Caliphate). In *Diya id Hukkam*, Abdullahi specifically mentioned that non-Muslim should be treated with kindness in all affairs and should be left absolutely free to choose whatever form of worship they want. While Muhammad Bello in *Usui al -Siyasat*, made a general statement pertaining to a ruler and his subject, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Bello said, the ruler:

*Should be very flexible pertaining to allowable matters even if there is disagreement about their being allowable. He should not be strict with them about obligatory matters and prohibited things, which are subject to dispute, let alone things regarded as reprehensible. In all, he should not hasten to disapprove their activities or abuse their creeds (if they are non-Muslims) nor should he invalidate their worship or their commercial transactions (if they are Muslims)*

A Muslim leader is expected to be flexible and kind; he should respect creeds and religions of others, nor invalidate worship of his fellow Muslims but should encourage and teach them, while non-Muslims should be allowed to carryout or practice their forms of rituals. In order to ensure compliance Shehu Usmanu bin Fodiyo passed this information allover the Caliphate saying that:

*To make war upon the heathen (non-Muslims) to whom peace has been granted (al-kuffar aman) is unlawful by I assent, wrongfully to devour their property is unlawful by assent, and to enslave them is unlawful by assent. According to John Nengel, it was in the context and basis of such guidelines that the emirs*

According to John Nengel, it was in the context and basis of such guidelines that the emirs conducted their affairs with the pockets of non-Muslim settlements within the emirates as well as non-Muslim societies in the central Nigerian Highlands. The level of freedom and liberty granted to non-Muslims in the Sokoto Caliphate manifested itself in the existence of non-Muslim elements very close to Sokoto town, the seat of the Caliphate, untouched, practicing their own system of worship. The Maguzawa people areas of Tsafe, Kotorkoshi and some areas of Argungu and Arewa were the most closest to Sokoto, ( about 150 and 100 kilometers east and west of) the Caliphate headquarters. Throughout these areas, there was no record of forced conversion to Islam or maltreatments of people based on religious differences, although the Caliphate was in total control of the whole region.

However, the attitude of the latter emirs in respect of the non-Muslims and their treatment particularly on the question of slave raids received varying opinions among Scholars. Some scholars believed that the early jihad scholars and leaders were sincerely after the progress and advancing the bounds of the Islamic state in all angles. Dauda observed that the latter emirs misused the Islamic power and influence for their personal interests. He said: Instead of using the state power

for the proselytization of the non-Muslim countries the (latter) emirate leadership turned their cavalry power into instrument of slave raids of such communities for trade purposes. Such attitudes were deliberate attempts, according to him, to allow non-Muslim zones to exist in most emirates. A greater part of such zones lies in Zaria, Bauchi, Kontagora and Nupe and no attempt was made to make the inhabitants inclined to Islam. This, according to him, would affect the supply of slaves that they (the emirs) needed.

On the other hand, Tesemchi Makar disagreed to the above views especially with reference to the Middle Belt areas. According to him, most of the views expressed about slave raiding in the Middle Belt appeared to be somewhat superficial, unjustifiable and most of them are not based on facts. In his opinion, these wars were not meant to convert the people or capture them to slavery. They were such occasional conflicts found all over the world, not only in the African continent. After all, there were such conflicts involving non-Muslims communities only On the existence of non-Muslim zones in Zaria, Kontagora, Bauchi and Nupe Emirates as argued by Dauda and Trimmingham, Makar opined differently. In his view, the reason for the existence of non-Muslim settlements in the midst of Islamic state was further justification to the liberal and tolerant nature of the Caliphate towards other faiths. He said:

*A number of these conquests were not consolidated and the conquered people were not compelled to practice the Islamic faith. This fact alone seems to explain the presence of large non-Muslim communities found today in the Emirates of Lafia, Keffi and Nassarawa... 'Also, the idea that the middle belt region became a favorite ground for slave - raiding from the emirates does not seem to be justified*

Ayandele described the relationship between the Caliphate and the non-Muslim groups as normal coexistence such that were found widespread in the African continent and everywhere in the world. This is also the situation even in Europe particularly during the war periods, and the current relations they maintain with the developing countries. What really existed between the Caliphate and its non-Muslims subjects and neighboring states was dealing between *Dar- al-islam* and the *Dar- al-harb*. Ayandele further argued:

*It would appear that slave -catching should be regarded more as an effect than a cause of warfare in Northern Nigeria. The wars fought by the stronger emirates against the smaller and weaker pagan peoples had the characteristics of many wars in contemporary indigenous Africa."*

Supporting Ayandele's position, Nengel has shown that even before the jihad, inter-tribal wars existed between these communities even internally. He however, said that, though the disruptive and destructive effects of the battles between the communities (Muslims and non-Muslims) cannot be denied, none of the military expeditions undertaken by the emirs was in the spirit of rage vandalism and the sole aim of exterminating one another;". The spirit which the Caliphate promoted was based on Shehu's directives that:

*It is permissible for Muslims to walk hand in hand with the non-Muslims/Christians in order to fight oppression, or intercede in a good course. And should treat non-Muslims justly, equitably and compassionately in order to attract them to Islam.*

That was by showing the practical justice and tolerance imbedded in Islam, and not to deceive or hoax to make converts as practiced by other religions. It became one of the historic and indelible impacts of the jihad movement were the acceleration of integration of almost all societies that came under its influence. The transformation of most societies from the level of simple lineage, clan or tribal organizations to that of centralized emirates system was one of the major landmarks in the political setting of West Africa. . This involved an unprecedented diversification of the political communities refocusing of loyalties to supra-clan and supra-tribal institutions to a wider Caliphate and universal world view that the Caliphate represented. Ali Mazirui further confirms the state failure in terms of ethnic chauvinism past and present. To him, a state succeeds or fails in relation to wider societal configuration as well. In postcolonial Africa, ethnicity continues to be a major

conditioning success or failure of the state. That was what the Sokoto Caliphate for over two centuries was able to properly handle.

### **Intellectual Liberty, Freedom of Thought and Opinion: Foundation for Political Civility and Accommodation in the Sokoto Caliphate**

The intellectual nature and scholarly orientation of the Jihad movement provided avenue for freedom of opinion and independent judgment among the pioneers of the reform and their people. The broad concept of knowledge and its search among the scholars and followers in the Sokoto jihad movement was unprecedented in the History of Hausaland. It was the liberal nature that made them opened all the gates for rigorous pursuit of knowledge for women, and to have ventured into the fields of science, technology and other related sciences. That was against the criticism and blasphemous label against them by the traditional and reactionary scholars who thought knowledge was exclusive rights of the menfolk, and must not go beyond rituals.

*In the same way they tried liberate the horizon of thoughts, and capacity for academic exploration by insisting on the Muslims liberty to explore al Mazdhabs - School of Thoughts, not only to traditional Maliki School hitherto followed not only in Hausaland but the entire West Africa. In his **Hidayat al-Tullab**, the Shehu made it categorically clear that neither Allah in the *Qur'an* or His Prophet in his hadith made it mandatory for any Muslim to stick to only one School of thought against others.*

On the relevance of this giant effort by the Jihadists, and the continuous relevance of the educational and intellectual liberalization on the contemporary educational orientation of the Muslims, Prof. A. A. Gwandu appeals:

*We should be reasonable in our views and should be tolerant towards fellow Muslims whose interpretation of the sources of Islam differs from ours. We should leave the doors of Islam wide open and should not take pleasure in anathematizing those whose views differ from ours, (that was the teaching of the Sokoto Caliphate).*

This was visibly manifested in the stand of Abdullahi Fodio on the subject of dialogue against his brother Shehu and his nephew Muhammad Bello. In the opinion of Abdullahi, assisting the Hausa kings in their fight with the Shehu and his followers cannot constitute unbelief under Islamic law. The position he continued to clearly and fearlessly argue out in his books, especially his *tafsir* - exegesis of the glorious Qur'an - *Diya'a ol-Ta'wil fi ma'ani al-Tanzil*, and others of his books such as *Diya' al-Hukkam* refuting the evidences put forward by the Shehu and Muhammad Bello. Further, the nature, character and commitment to truth in the person of Abdullahi were made bare by that opinion he held. About Abdullahi's unwavering posture regarding the truth, Gwandu shows that 'he (Abdullahi) was guided not by personality but by ideas.' What brought Abdullahi in disagreement with his kinsmen was the issue of a Muslim who gave help to non-Muslims against the Muslims. In spite of the fact that Shehu tried hard to convince him as presented in *Najm al-Ikhwān* of Shehu Danfodiyo, quoting the ruling of al-Maghili on the case of Sonni Ali and Askia Muhammad of Songhay and other related sources, Abdullahi remained resolute that assisting non-Muslim against a Muslim cannot constitute unbelief. Although, he accepts that helping the non-Muslims with the intention of denouncing the faith of Islam can constitute unbelief, but not helping the non-Muslims while one retains his faith.

The case of Malam Abd al-Salam, one of the students of Shehu Usman Danfodiyo who was critical of the government especially during the consolidation period was very glaring. After the establishment of the Caliphate the territories of Kware (few kilometers from Sokoto town); were given to Abd al-Salam due to his enormous support and contribution to the success of the Jihad . The Abd al-Salami's opposition however, continued and even took a military dimension, but was handled perfectly by Sultan Muhammad Bello with diplomacy. The series of petition and counter petitions between the opposition and the Caliph were compiled into a book titled, *Sard al-Kalam fi ma jara bainana wa baina Abd al-Salam*. In spite of the fact that, total control of the army and other security operatives of the Caliphate were under Muhammad Bello, no harm was meted against Abd al-Salam for holding an opposing position with the government of the day. It was only when

he took up arms against the State that he was dealt with in accordance with the law. Indeed, Abdullahi Fodiyo latter appointed Buhari son of Abdulsalami as the Sarkin Kebbi of Jega.

At the diplomatic sphere, we can see the opposition of Borno to the Sokoto Caliphate. The way and manner through which the dialogue was conducted between the two leaderships of Sokoto under Muhammad Bello and Bomo under al-Kanemi, is still eluding even the so-called civilized European nations; let alone the imitators of the European statecraft like Nigeria. Even before the coming of al-Kanemi into the affairs of Borno and his disputations and dialogue with Sultan Muhammad Bello, Malam Mustafa Goni was already a critic of Shehu and the level respect and tolerance to criticism for the betterment of the system and community was exhibited between them. That may well be the foundation of the slogan of some early Nigerian politicians- *Siyasa ba da gaba ba*, meaning, 'politics without bitterness.

### **Relevance to the Nigerian State**

Adopting the Sokoto example by the Nigerian state could go along way in curbing the prevalent political assassinations against opposition in order to eliminate the dissenting voices, which is almost pushing the country to anarchy. The use of thugs and hooligans in maiming and manhandling of people from opposition parties, critics of governments policies, or even colleagues who may threaten their continuity in office, can be addressed through imitation of the Sokoto example.

The essence of rule of law and justice is to ensure that no person no matter how highly placed, such as president, Governor, or other political leaders should enjoy any concession or special treatment before justice. The example of the Sokoto Caliphate in this direction can illuminate the way forward for Nigeria, where the some political office holders are (above the law) exempted from facing justice in case of committing crime while in office under the so-called 'Immunity' provision in the Constitution. A serving president i.e the Caliph of Sokoto Aliyu Babba was tried by the leading jurists in Sokoto against some allegations labeled against him. He reigned as the Sultan of Sokoto from 1842-1859, was the son of Sultan Muhammad Bello and grandson the Shehu Usmanu Danfodiyo, however was invited to the Shehu mosque in Sokoto for some charges.

Some of these charges included, failure to lead and command the army himself in some expedition for territorial defense of the Caliphate as required of his office and tradition of his predecessors. He had neglected the repairs and general maintenance of the Mosques in Sokoto, and failed to disburse funds from the treasury to cater for the need of the poor in the Caliphate. The implication of this was that it may lead to his removal from office if found guilty. Immediately, the Caliph appeared in person, defended himself against all the charges, and was acquitted by the jurists. According to Kyari Tijjani, Caliph Aliyu Babba improved his general conduct in office consequent upon that escaped impeachment from office.

### **Suggestions**

1. Against the background of what the European invaders would want the Nigerian people to believe various ethnic and tribal entities had evolved a kind of mechanism or devices to check the negative impact of ethnicity among them. It is a fallacy and unhistorical to portray the Nigerian peoples as warring factions each at the throat of another.
2. The indigene /settler was something unknown during the time, so Nigerians should utilize their genuine history to build a viable nation they can be proud of through the example of the Sokoto Caliphate.
3. Due religious toleration according to Jimada, there were Nupe, Hausa, or Fulani Muslims co-opted as advisers to the Obi of Onitsha as well as in Places like in Agbor and Bonny.

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