

Without the Sokoto Caliphate, Would There Ever Have Been a Nigeria?¹

Murray Last

(Professor emeritus, University College, London)

It is a privilege and an honour for me to talk before this gathering about the Caliphate that I have spent most of my life learning about.² A great honour too to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the *Sarkin Musulmi*'s³ appointment, and to offer my sincere congratulations.

You may not have noticed that we can add to these celebrations by also marking today the 250th anniversary of the Shehu's preaching career – he started, aged twenty, in 1188 of the Hijra (1774-5), preaching when he was still a student, says his younger brother Abdullahi.

- 1 Text of the keynote address delivered on 3 November 2016, on the occasion of the celebration for the tenth anniversary of the appointment of the Sultan of Sokoto, Muhammad Sa'ad Abubakar III. Annotated by Andrea Brigaglia.
- 2 For the past five decades, the author has been a leading authority on the history and the anthropology of Islam in northern Nigeria. This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of his masterful monograph, *The Sokoto Caliphate* (London: Longman, 1967; published also in Hausa as *Daular Sakkwato*, transl. by A. M. Bunza and B. B. Usman, Lagos: Ibrash Publication Centre, 2007). On the topic, Murray Last has also authored various influential articles. See, amongst many others (with M.A. Al-Haji), "Attempts at Defining a Muslim in Nineteenth Century Hausaland and Bornu," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 3, 2, 1965, pp. 231-236; "A Note on Attitudes to the Supernatural in the Sokoto Jihad," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 4, 1 (1967): 3-13; "Reform in West Africa – the Jihad Movements of the Nineteenth Century," in *History of West Africa*, edited by J.F.A. Ajayi and Michael Crowder (London: Longman, 1974), v. 2, pp. 1-3; (with Jean Boyd), "The Role of Women as 'Agents Religieux' in Sokoto," *Canadian Journal of African Studies/Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines*, 19, 2 (1985): 283-230; "Contradictions in Creating a Jihadi Capital: Sokoto in the Nineteenth Century and Its Legacy," *African Studies Review*, 56, 2 (2013): 1-20.
- 3 'Commander of the Faithful,' the traditional title for the Sultan of Sokoto.

However, here, given my limited time, I will focus on only four points, to provoke thought. To start with, we must remember that the original ‘caliphate’ that the Shehu and his brother developed was far larger than today’s northern Nigeria: in the West, it extended to Liptako, some four hundred miles west from Birnin Kebbi, beyond today’s Benin and Niger and into Burkina Faso. In short, the Gwandu-governed half of the Caliphate⁴ was huge, if not as dramatic commercially or militarily as the half we are discussing here today, but it too needed structures and institutions for its effective administration.

My first task for you is to ask you to imagine what Nigeria would have been like without the Sokoto Caliphate. What if the Shehu and his *muhājirūn* and *aṣṣār*⁵ had been defeated, and what, if Muhammad Bello had later failed to stem the wars of *ridda* after the death of the Shehu? The answer I suggest is that we would not have had the united ‘nation,’ the sense of nationhood that gradually developed all through the nineteenth century, but instead, a series of petty warring states, with one big but tired empire, Borno;⁶ and all these separate mini-nations, I suggest, in the twentieth century would have been swamped by *direct* colonial rule. For as a vast state and nation, the Caliphate clearly intimidated the incoming *Nasara*⁷ – forcing the British to devise their policy of ‘indirect rule.’ But I would also suggest that the unity – the order, the inter-emirate peace – brought by the Caliphate also helped

4 After successfully establishing his state, the Shehu withdrew from direct political involvement and left the affairs of the newly established state to his brother Abdullahi, who ruled the western and southern segments of the Caliphate from his capital at Gwandu (former capital of Kebbi), and to his son Muhammad Bello, who ruled the eastern and northern half from Sokoto.

5 In the community of Usman Ḍan Fodio, the *muhājirūn* (migrants) were those who had left Degel with the Shehu at the beginning of the jihad, while the *aṣṣār* (helpers) were those who had joined the community later. These terms were, of course, taken from the Prophetic community, where the *muhājirūn* were those who had migrated from Mecca and the *aṣṣār* were the converts from Medina (and later, from other Arab tribes).

6 The oldest but declining Islamic political entity in the region, Borno controlled the north-eastern part of today’s Nigeria and had come into conflict with Sokoto.

7 Hausa for ‘Christians.’ The term was used to refer to the Europeans during the early colonial rule.

stimulate a wider, stronger economy: indeed, with the extended grain trade, the Caliphate's first fifty years experienced no famines at all. Finally, without the Caliphate, we would not have had the cosmopolitan intellectual culture and widespread literacy – with books and poetry, with popular Qadiri and Tijani Sufism, and with crypto-communities deep in the countryside performing their own forms of radical Islam. The Caliphate drew in notable scholars from abroad, making it an intellectual platform of great repute. Without the Caliphate, who would have come? What Islamic texts would we have had to read? Would old Borno at Birni Ngazargamu⁸ have been able to revive, to reform Islam, throughout the region?

My second task for you is to ask you to cast your minds back to the very first Caliphate – to *al-khulafā' al-rāshidūn* – as indeed the Shehu did 210 years ago, this very month, when he was finishing his great work, *Bayān wujūb al-hijra*.⁹ In the last five chapters in that book on how to conduct a proper jihad, he ends by describing the humility and the shunning of material wealth that all five Caliphs showed in office. But he also describes their deaths: of the first five, as you all know, three were murdered, one was forced to give up his office, and only one, Abū Bakr, died in office of an illness.

Our caliphate, here in Sokoto with our local *muhājirūn* and *anṣār*, was therefore really exceptional: not a single caliph was assassinated; only one was killed in battle (and that against invading *Nasara*). Not a single Waziri was murdered or executed. Above all, there was no civil war:

8 Ngazargamu (in today's Yobe State) was the capital of Borno from the mid-1400s to 1809, when it was destroyed during the war with the Sokoto Caliphate. The rulers of Borno moved their capital closer to the Lake Chad, to Kukawa, in today's Borno State. The capital of modern Borno State, Maiduguri (Yerwa), was established by the British in 1907.

9 For an English translation of this important text, in which the Shehu explains the reasons for the migration of his community from Degel due to the persecution of the king of Gobir, and defines the programmatic lines of his future jihad, see Usman Dan Fodio, *Bayan Wujub al-Hijra 'ala l-'ibad*, translated by Fathi H. El-Masri, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979. See also Muhammad K. Masud, "Shehu Usuman Dan Fodio's Restatement of the Doctrine of Hijrah," *Islamic Studies* (Islamabad), 1, 5 (1986): 59-77.

Gwandu never fought Sokoto, never tried to declare itself independent, despite some anger strongly felt there.¹⁰

So my third question to you is this: how was such unity, such harmony, such a lack of power-hungriness laced with violence established as the political habit of our Caliphate? I look forward to hearing your answers, but one dimension of the Caliph's I think needs mentioning, in part because the political scientists and even historians do not discuss it – and that is, the *baraka* (or charisma) associated from the time of the Shehu onwards both with the office of Caliph and sometimes with the holder himself after several years in office, often living in Muhammad Bello's own personal, private house which the colonials were to re-label a 'palace.' The Shehu's *baraka* was specifically mentioned at the time by Gobirawa¹¹ who tried to fight him; they said they were literally unable to raise their arms against the Shehu. But in the twentieth century too, the Caliph's *baraka* could be made quite extraordinarily clear, for example when the *Sarkin Musulmi* Abubakar III (rul 1938-1988) came back from the very first *'umra* that a Sokoto caliph had ever made: thousands upon thousands came out everywhere, even in Kano, to welcome him home. With the Caliph back, there was no *tashin duniya*, no imminent end to the world. By contrast, the *Sardauna*,¹² all-powerful though he was, never attracted that same sense of awe, at least not in Sokoto in my experience.

My fourth and final point is one that I think underlines how different was the Caliphate when it is compared to those other successful states that we label as empires. Yet also underlined here, is the importance of *baraka* and a sense of nationhood in securing stability, even throughout

10 After the death of Usman 'Dan Fodio in 1817, his brother Abdullahi expected to succeed him as *Amir al-mu'minin*, and objected the succession of 'Dan Fodio's favourite son, Muhammad Bello. In previous years, Abdullahi had already expressed his disgust at the way in which the religious legitimacy of the Caliphate was being eroded by growing worldly concerns.

11 The Hausas of Gobir, who fought against the Shehu and his polity.

12 Sir Ahmadu Bello (d. 1966), *sardauna* (a traditional title) of Sokoto. He was the leader of the NPC (Northern Peoples' Congress) and the Premier of the regional government of Northern Nigeria, 1960-1966. The most powerful politician in northern Nigeria during the First Republic, he was assassinated in a military coup.

the Caliphate's colonial period. For the Caliphate was not built upon huge, professional armies. Nor did the Shehu himself ever fight. Indeed in the jihad, its forces were small, usually split up into units of around seventy men, and in some of the successful raids that Muhammad Bello describes in his *Infāq al-maysūr*,¹³ as few as five men he says were involved. Actual numbers, then, were tiny. Once the jihad was over, the Caliphate was not a military state, with permanent barracks, a Sandhurst, a Ministry of War, let alone a permanent professional army organised into proud regiments. Indeed, one of its most militarily active, key commanders during the jihad, the Shehu's brother Abdullahi, simply went back to writing *tafsīr* and doing administration. Similarly, week after week the very scholarly Muhammad Bello used to call on the *jama'a* at Friday prayer as their Caliph to come out the next morning with enough food for just a five-day long campaign against the '*yan tawaye* (rebels) in the woods around Sokoto. Admittedly, by the mid-nineteenth century the *Sarkin Musulmi* had created a small professional force of his own, one able to do swift raids over night; and one year later had a private squad of gunmen. And always there might also be an annual collective autumn or spring raid to be taken out, more as a demonstration of political discipline than as a decisive military operation. But the Caliph never took himself, let alone an army, outside the immediate Sokoto/Zamfara region: if such a distant, pan-Caliphal task was necessary, he delegated it to one of his officials.

What I am suggesting here is that the core of the Caliphate was sustained in relative peace by other factors than sheer military force – though the same cannot be said of its peripheral emirates on the frontier, where raids were the norm. There were not even major slave revolts – individual slaves might escape but a mass rising seems never to have occurred. Indeed, if a major brigand in Hausaland wanted to raise a significant army of his own, he turned not to disaffected young Hausa or

13 Written by the son and successor of Shehu Usman 'Dan Fodio, *Infāq al-maysūr* is the most important coeval source of information on the history of the early Caliphate. See Muhammad Bello, *Infāq al-maysūr fi ta'rīkh bilād al-Takrūr*, ed. Bahija al-Shādhilī, Rabat: Université Muhammad V-Souissi, 1996.

Fulani, not even to slaves, but to groups outside like the Keri-keri,¹⁴ as did the very successful bandit leader Haruna when he decided, in November 1885, to seize with his force the town of Gora¹⁵ and its inhabitants on the main road between Kano and Zaria. In short, perhaps a deep, basic reluctance-to-be-violent, alongside a pervasive *tsoron Allah* (fear of God), seems to have become almost the norm at the grass roots among the various peoples within the core Caliphate. Fighting had ceased to be a way of life; belligerence was for others – or so it had seemed before a series of horrible civil wars, in Mafara,¹⁶ then in Kano and in Bauchi, suddenly showed what had until then been held in check.

In conclusion, then, I suggest that the Caliphate as an institution in northern Nigeria is, and has been, an extraordinary phenomenon – it has strengths which we need to understand, not as political scientists but as Nigerians. For without the Caliphate, I suggest, Nigeria might never have existed: it would have been more like a northern Ghana, a northern Cote d'Ivoire, a Burkina Faso or a Mali. So for us all, celebrating the Caliphate and recognising its crucial importance is truly a great pleasure.

14 Karekare (also known as Keri-keri) is an ethnic group that speaks a Chadic language and is located between the borders of today's states of Bauchi and Yobe, in north-eastern Nigeria.

15 A Hausa town in today's Kano State, northern Nigeria.

16 A town in today's Zamfara State, north-western Nigeria.