

**Islam and Colonialism**  
**Intellectual Responses of Muslims of Northern Nigeria to British Colonial Rule**

By: Muhammad S. Umar

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The academic theme of Islam and colonialism is controversial, vast and inexhaustive. With colonialism almost all over the Muslim world from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the diverse impacts and implications it has on the colonized countries, it is understandable if views differ and diverge. In Africa, Central and Southeast Asia as in most neo-colonial countries of the world, colonial legacies still replete as they endured to the contemporary times. The study of Islam and colonialism in Northern Nigeria is expectedly so partly because of the nature and substance of the British rule between 1897, when Ilorin emirate was conquered and 1960, when the then colonially formed Nigeria got her independence. Northern Nigeria is diverse though dynamic and colorful in terms of its people, culture and socio-material setting. As such, Muhammad S. Umar's narrowing the research to the intellectual responses of the Northern Nigeria Muslims to British colonial rule is a brilliant decision. This is not to say that such a task is a simple one. The outcome of this research engagement is largely a success.

Umar, to our assessments has been able to tackle the most important issues of the focus. The author's success in answering the what, how and when of events of the subject matter makes the study a relevant one. He's employment of other disciplines particularly sociology and political science to study history is multidisciplinary and commendable.

M.S. Umar's sources of reconstruction include but not limited to relevant colonial records; Muslim's discourse on colonialism, particularly treatises in Hausa and Arabic authored by Northern Nigeria Muslims; Hausa songs and musical composition; literary compositions by western educated Muslims and indeed field interviews. Containing six chapters, a glossary of Arabic and Hausa terms, a bibliography which is broken down into three parts and a comprehensive index (19 pages), the book under review covers almost entirely the important themes of the its subject matter. In addition, Professors John Hunwick, Ridger Seesmann and Knut Vikor who edited the work are erudite and current in African and Muslim historiography..

Chapter one discusses the Challenges of British Colonialism and posits that earliest debates among the Northern Nigerian Muslim scholars on the subject of British colonialism was on the challenges posed by the supremacy and superiority of the British military prowess. Indeed, Fredrick J.D Lugard, then a colonel and commander of the West African Frontier Force (WAFF) never hid the fact that the legitimacy of the colonial rule itself was by the British military conquest. The British secured the recognition of its authority by punitive expeditions and ruthless engagements against all those who were considered recalcitrant.

Examples are there of the Battle of Burmi in July 1903 when Sultan Muhammad Attahiru I and a score of others were killed and indeed the exterminative regime against anti colonial Satiru revolts of March 1906. Two observations can easily be made of the outcome of the military style of the British occupation of the Northern Nigeria.

The author elucidated on them: the official economic justification and indeed the intellectual debate among the scholars and emirs as to what should be the attitude of the Muslim people towards the then British incursion. For the first, the author analyzed the major events that led to the conquest of the Sokoto Caliphate and indeed, colonial rule was predicated on right of conquest. For the second, the author conceptualized the orientations of appropriation, containment and surveillance in explaining the Muslim Thinkers' responses to the British challenges from its military onslaught. To further demonstrate the veracity of these broad orientations, the author chose four exhaustive imperatives, for experimentation. These are military, politics, Islamic law and western education. These domains which remain the key functionalities that propel the society, in addition, constituted the core areas in which the British rule was desperate to leave its lasting marks.

To these reviewers, a crucial contribution of the author in this chapter to historical knowledge is his discussion on the relationship between Islam and British colonial rule. Some scholars erroneously believe that the British worked in favor of the spread of Islam and enhancing the status and prestige of the Islamists, Emirs and Islamic scholars. Contrary to this opinion, the British character and actions portrayed a power at war with Islam. This book under review now provide readers with incontrovertible evidences that the British rule in Northern Nigeria as in most colonial Muslim states, adopted four approaches towards Islam. These are appropriation, containment, surveillance and outright antagonism. The application of any one or more of these at anytime of the colonial period depended on the specific interest of the British. In areas like Benue, Kabba and Adamawa provinces of northern Nigeria, the British senior officers like Lugard gave directive to their subordinate political officers to void administrative actions that could help the spread of Islam.

Throughout its period, the British colonial administration in Northern Nigeria was desperate in preserving, in the author's words "the independence of those tribes who had maintained their liberty against Moslem conquerors" (p.33). In applying these variables the British was involved in the gradual modification of the geo-polity of erstwhile Sokoto Caliphate, Sharia law and courts, Quranic schools, appropriation of the Muslim taxes, socio-economic activities like slave manumission and self-redemption, stifling of the Islamic practices as in the case of Mahdiyya and Tijaniyya (pp.35-38) and strict surveillance of some perceived anti-colonial scholars all over the colonial Northern Nigeria and beyond into Saudi-Arabia, Egypt and Sudan where Islamic scholars of Nigeria resided.

Chapter two discusses the various Responses to the challenges of British Military Superiority. In their responses to the British military might and exploits, the Muslims of Northern Nigeria employed strategies which included avoidance, submission, confrontation and alliance. The choice of any of these options, to the author were determined by interplays of factors which included the internal situations in the various emirates, the influence of the Ulama class on the ruling emirs, relations with non-Muslim neighbors or subjects and the personal disposition of the individual emir concerned.

The author goes ahead to discuss each type of the responses with specific case studies and illustrations. What is more illuminating here is the presentation of various discourses and intellectual arguments that preceded each of the decisions and positions. For example after expounding on the character disposition of Sultan Abdal-Rahman S. Abubakar Atiq from that of Sultan Attahiru I in their reactions towards the British occupation of the Caliphate, the author discusses in some detail the external proof and Islamic sources and evidences advanced by each group to support either the avoidance of the British, relating with them or outright *Hijra* from the colonial onslaught. Each argument was presented by the author in sound perspectives, good narratives and clear analysis within the context, content and form each took.

While the *sufi* scholars rationalized the British conquest and the superiority of its material well-being through the rubric of *Zuhd asceticism* which conjures the world as characterized by *fitna*, trials and agonies, other classical scholars conceptualized the British occupation of the caliphate and the challenges such posed from the angle of illusory of the world and its transient material culture.

In chapter three, M.S. Umar discusses the “Emir’s Responses to the Political Challenges of Colonialism”. Three categories of people are identifiable. The First category is made up of the Emirs, installed by the British after the military defeat of the Caliphate and their scholars. They provided the intellectual justification of surrendering to the British as propounded by the then Waziri of Sokoto, Muhammadu Buhari.

In particular, Emir Muhammadu Dikko of Katsina who, the author used as a case study, conceptualized Islam and colonialism into different spheres. Islam is for the religion, relationship with the Almighty Allah in serving Him and preparing to meet Him in the Hereafter while British colonialism represented the world, the material mundane axis that could be employed to better the socio-economic well being of the people. The second category contained personalities who felt that Islam and colonialism cannot co-exist on a common ground. Emir Aliyu dan Sidi of Zazzau provided the intellectual ingredients. Through his allegorical poems, mainly in Hausa, dan Sidi saw colonialism as a reversal of the natural order of things, an antithesis to the growth of Allah’s order of the world. Though he was dethroned by the British largely for disloyalty, Aliyu dan Sidi was able to use his proverbial and idiomatic expressions to explain the antithetical worldview and general phenomenon of the British colonialism in Northern Nigeria.

Outside these two conceptions and explanation of what should be the relationship between the emirs and scholar with the British colonial administration is the middle course position. In this vein, service to the British should be seen as a necessity to maintain the peace but particularly the faith and practices of Islam by Muslims. Outward acceptance of appointment as Emirs, Judges, Tax Collectors and indeed involvement in duties to serve the people, though under the tutelage of British Christians, should be seen and construed as necessary evils for the pious ones. In other words, Abubakar S Ahmad whose works are extensively used by the author to explain this school of thought believed that the justification for Muslim’s association with the British was fear and necessity. As such A.S. Ahmad conceded that although preferable, it was no longer feasible to embark on *hijra* partly because of the presence of the British everywhere, the safety of Muslim lives and faith and the decisiveness of the British military prowess and obvious superiority. The scholar therefore contended that it was islamically legal to associate with the British though not out of love and friendship but for reason of necessity, dissimulation, and fear (p.114).

Chapter four on the “Ulama Responses to Normative and Legal Challenges of Colonialism” commences by a comprehensive definition, role and importance of the Ulama to a Muslim community. As people knowledgeable in various aspects of Islam as in Qur’an exegetis, hadith, history of Islam, theology and logic, Arabic language and literature, Islamic law and local History (p.162), the Ulama have been the primary religious authorities in Islamic societies, officiating in the public rituals of Islam, instructing Muslims in Islamic religious precepts, and articulating, interpreting and administering Islamic laws (p.159). They had enjoyed considerable influence and social prestige within the Muslim communities of Northern Nigeria. With the jihad of Shehu Uthman Dan Fodio of 1804, the Ulama were not just whispers behind the throne, they had powers. In addition they had traveled far both for seeking specialized knowledge and as merchants and craftsmen. They had served as teachers, letter-writers, legal draftsmen and notary public, record keepers of business transactions and of course as religious specialists (p.163). The defeat of all the Muslim societies of Northern Nigeria posed a greater challenge to the group.

Indeed the Muslims which the Ulama were guides and guardians did not win a single battle against the British. And not only did the British route oppositions in Sokoto, Bauchi, Hadejia and other areas, they went ahead to introduce a new alien order in all sectors of the society. This posed series of challenges to the Ulama.

These challenges and the various manners in which the Ulama responded in discourses and actions are the core issues of examination in this chapter. Indeed to M.S Umar, challenges are not limited to the above alone; challenges of colonialism on Ulama also included the competition that colonialism introduced against the Ulama's specialized expertise. Particularly, the introduction of western education challenged the monopoly of the Ulama over literacy, along with the important role of literacy in gaining access to governmental positions, economic resources and social prestige. British colonial appropriation of the emirates, Sharia courts and their claim to superior scholarship challenged the Ulama. Marshalling several views and practical illustrations, M.S Umar examines and discusses the various views of scholars on these challenges.

One unambiguous conclusion that can be drawn from the author's analysis in this chapter is that almost all the Ulama in Northern Nigeria whether employed or not by the colonial administration held that colonialism, decadent as it was, did threaten Islam, its norms, practices and worldview. This is a very important finding. It goes against the usual stereo type. Though the manners of reactions were different, the Ulama considered colonialism as deficient socio-morally and religiously.

In chapter five, the author concentrates his searchlight on the Muslim intellectual's responses to the ideological challenges of colonialism especially as manifested in western education. The chapter, titled *Western Educated Muslim Elites Responses to the Ideological Challenges of Colonialism*, is important in some ways. It is crucial in understanding the origin of the world view and the current dilemma of the western educated Muslim elites who inherited power from the colonialists beginning from 1945. It is also important in understanding the transitional linkages between Muslims intellectual responses to colonialism during the period which the author coins as the "high moon" and "twilight" of the colonial period. To Muslim intellectuals and researchers on Islamic history and political science, the chapter needs to be read towards grasping and understanding the historical base and origin of the current ratings and political activities (or inactivities) of western educated Muslim of Northern Nigeria extracts and to a remarkable degree, western Nigeria.

Relying heavily on Bello Kagara's *Gandoki*, Abubakar Tafawa Belewa's *Shaihu Umar* and Abubakar Imam's *Ruwan Bagaja*, the author shows that the western educated Muslim elite stands apart, though not entirely from the Emirs and Ulama on views of relation to be maintained with the colonial administration. With a refreshing study and conceptualized re-interpretation, M.S Umar's analyses of the above mentioned works and others authored by western educated Muslim scholars on colonialism and colonial Northern Nigeria gives readers a new sense of discourse, understanding and meaning in the subject of Islam and colonialism.

As expected, authors of the Euro-centric Lugardian discourses like Lugard, Lovejoy, Hogendorn, Temple, Meek, Hogben and Shaw articulate the ideological justification of the imposition of British colonialism within the framework of ending the perpetual warfare, slave raiding, depopulating pagan communities and consequent endemic insecurity that characterized pre-colonial Northern Nigeria under the 'ineffectual rule of the "Fulani"'. The discourses of the western educated Muslim intellectuals contradicted this assertion and went ahead to eulogize the characters of the jihad past and berate moral decadence that were latent in British colonial conquest and colonial rule.

Generally speaking, M.S Umar's work on the Intellectual Responses of Muslims of Northern Nigeria to British Colonial rule to a large extent achieves its objectives. The work discusses the various dynamics, themes and currents that are imperative to the subject matter. The areas of military, politics, Islamic law and western education have been well identified for analyses and have been adequately treated. More so, responses of the most important segments of the Muslim society of Northern Nigeria have been largely articulated and documented using salient relevant sources hitherto unknown. M.S Umar has given all sections of the Northern Nigeria who are stakeholders in the socio-political reengineering of the society a new understanding, meaning and sense of history of the colonial past.

Outside this, the work has presented the 'true' events of the period it covers and their justifications. In doing this, the author to our minds, has satisfied generally known research system. He adopts chronological sequence and thematic approach in his presentation.

Though the author introduces new perspectives to historical sources with his usage of Hausa verses, poems, treaties, songs, proverbs, but over usage and wild reliance on them as sources of historical reconstruction can be misleading since meanings could be imputed by interpreters just to make a sense out of them. While *Wakar Nasara*, Samaila Dan Yakubu Nasame (Sama)'s songs and poems and their likes are straightforward in meaning, those of Aliyu dan Sidi and Bello Kagara are complex and allusive often requiring extra poetry knowledge and personal touch to understand. This explains in part why the interpretations and understanding of their meanings are as varied as there are different scholars.

In addition, having numerous sources and marshalling several tools for reconstruction is a strong point to a research work of this type. But the same source of strength can be source of weakness. The weakness of this work lies in the numerous sources which are used sparingly. This in some areas prevents the author from indepth analyses based and domesticated conclusion. There is no doubt that juxtaposition of sources and in fact multidisciplinary use of sources have assisted this work to attain a high level of credibility, they have also created boredom, monotony, complex phraseology and clumsiness of position and judgment.

To these reviewers, the section on Introduction is too long and voluminous. It has taken on many issues, and all in detailed forms which are nevertheless discussed in some of the main chapters. As a result, some events look repetitive when they are in fact original. However, outside these observations which do not in any way diminish the contribution of the work, the author has done a great service to all segments of the society. Scholars on Islam and Colonialism all over the world but particularly of Northern Nigeria will remain indebted to this work in terms of its wide coverage and array of sources consulted. It needs to be read by all: scholars of History, Political Science, Sociology, especially of Islam, Anthropology and Islamic studies. It is recommended for policy markers, administrators, missionaries and research students and fellows of Humanities and Social Sciences. It is also recommended to research institutions, libraries and documentation centres.