

# The British Conquest and Resistance of Sokoto Caliphate, 1897-1903: Crisis, Conflicts and Resistance

Mohammed S. Audu, Osuala, Uzoma S.  
Department of History & International Studies, Federal University Lokoja, Kogi State.

## Abstract

The contact the Africans had with the Europeans dated back to the 9<sup>th</sup> century, However, the European presence and penetration did not take place until the late 15<sup>th</sup> and the first-half of the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries respectively. The exploration was pioneered by the Dutch and the Portuguese and the British dominated the period. By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the presence of the Europeans had started to gain momentum and thus threats to African kingdoms as well as chiefdoms. It was the situation that posed threats to the Sokoto Caliphate established by the Jihad of Uthman Dan Fodio in 1804. The British conquest and the peoples' resistance is the thrust of the paper. It examines the weighty issues that surrounded the conquest of one of the most organised caliphate in the Western Sudan. The academic paper is presented in historical methodology adopting the interpretative approach.

**Keywords:** British, Conquest, Resistance, Sokoto Caliphate.

## Introduction

Between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries contact had been established between West Africa and Western Europe as a result of the success of the Portuguese in pioneering the sea routes around the western bulge of the Sahara. With news of commercial opportunities, other Europeans (English, French and the Dutch) began to do regular business on West African waters. The development of plantation economies in the tropical lands of the Americas led to a steadily increasing demand for African labour, hence many Africans were shipped across the Atlantic. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the effort to abolish export of slaves was in progress, hence the gradual introduction of the 'legitimate trade'. During this period also, various European powers were undergoing industrial revolutions in their home countries. The need for expansion and acquisition of raw materials for industrial production became paramount equally. The abundance of these raw materials in tropical Africa increased the tempo for the struggle to secure a place in the 'Sun' (Africa).

Before this time, the various European powers had already concluded arrangements for colonization of their specific areas of influence in the eighty odd years since the abolition of slave trade, by way of treaties, threat of war or war. Accordingly, the Berlin Conference of 1884-5 was merely an international recognition of these various colonizing European powers to move ahead. The gun-fire for the start of a race which two of the participants, France and Britain, had already been in training was the spark that was needed to set ablaze the powder keg situation. France was quick to resort to armed column in her areas of influence – Saint Luis, Dakar, Niger, Dahomey and Cameroun. Britain on the other hand, was still reluctant to take up arms. When she eventually did, between 1896 and 1900, it was a question of time, as Ashanti, Yorubaland, Benin, and Northern Nigeria (Sokoto Caliphate inclusive) fell prey to the attacks. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to see among other things the British interest in the area referred to as Sokoto Caliphate, the crises and conflicts that ensued, the resistance put up by the people and the eventual conquest of the caliphate.

The old Northern Nigeria, as well as certain areas in present-day Niger Republic, was the scene of a violent and decisive revolution at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The movement known variously as the Sokoto, the Fulani and the Uthman Dan Fodio Jihad marked a crucial turning point unprecedented in the history of the area. Over the ruins of the numerous polities of these vast areas of about 250,000sq miles, is established a new political organization – the Sokoto Caliphate – based primarily on Islamic law and values. Hausaland was the main theatre of the Sokoto revolution which had effects on the peoples of the Western and Central Sudan from the Senegal in the West to Lake Chad in the East and from the Sahel in the North to the borders of the tropical rain forests in the South. All these areas of polities where the Jihad existed and spread constituted the area known as the Sokoto Caliphate.

This paper discusses why and how the Caliphate met its enemy's (the British) challenge the way it did and the Caliphate's vehement resistance and the antagonism of the masses to British occupation. The last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century may be described as a "decade of trouble" for Sokoto Caliphate. This decade witnessed a decisive change in British policy towards the Sokoto Caliphate. Before this time, contacts between the Caliphate and the Europeans were few and infrequent. These contacts were established by European travelers, all of whom were practically British citizens or other nationals sponsored by the British government. Consequently when the scramble for territories in Africa began, British influence was among the most dominant in the Caliphate. Relations between the Caliphate and Europeans during this period of sporadic contacts were mainly commercial.

British commercial establishment began with the founding of the Inland Commercial Company in 1833 and the expedition which that company sent to the Niger-Benue confluence in that year. Thenceforth, British

enterprise within the Caliphate was confined to the Niger-Benue waterways. Nupe Emirate became the main base of British activities. By the 1870's, the proliferation of the British companies which engaged in cut-throat competition had degenerated into a commercial war. This marked the beginning of a new phase in the relations between the Europeans and the Caliphate. This phase equally characterized the age of the European's attempt to establish political control over the Caliphate. Rather than diminish, the gulf between the two sides progressively widened in subsequent years until it ended in a military clash. It was this development that ensued between the British on the one hand and the Caliphate in the period 1897 to 1903. Resistance as put forward by the Caliphate towards British conquest could be seen as active or passive-active confrontation in the sense of military confrontation and passive in the form of non-military confrontation.

### **Nupe Emirate: Conquest and Resistance**

Nupe Emirate became the base of British activities during this period of study. By 1897, the activities of the British have become so pronounced that Nupe was conquered by the British. The British involvement in Nupe Emirate could be traced to the activities of the Royal Niger Company in the Niger-Benue confluence. By 1895, the Royal Niger Company assisted the Emir of Nupe to evacuate the military posts of the French in Borgu and Bida. Ironically, the Company did the 'gesture' to make way for its establishment of military posts in the areas of Jebba and Bajibo. This was a clear manifestation of the violation of the existing agreements between the Emir of Nupe and the Royal Niger Company. Therefore, war became imminent. Both sides only needed time to mobilize their forces.

All the Nupe African pilots and canoe men working on ships and in the Royal Niger Company were commanded by the Emir, Abubakar, to leave the company's service making sure that the company became paralyzed. This was to serve as a temporary measure of show of resentment to the British move. The Emir continued to re-enforce his forces as the British move to occupy his territory became more glaring. A force of an estimate of 10,000 men was put forward by the Emir in this direction. The hostility of Nupe Emirate to the British had been touched off by West African Frontiers Force survey parties sent to explore the region. The parties of Rt. Cols. Marland, Cole and Lt. Monchmason encountered considerable opposition from many villages and towns on their way. They therefore had to use Nupe which stationed a "marauding" force on their territory against the British ready to attack the W.A.F.F. station at Wushishi. With the British forces advanced by O'Neil and some troops, they started guerrilla warfare against Kontagora and Bida, defeating their patrols in many skirmishes. With the return of the W.A.F.F. troops from Ashanti, a full scale attack by the British on Nupe Emirate, Kontagora and Bida was undertaken early in 1901.

A total of ten officers, three non-commissioned officers (NCO's), 323 other ranks, 3 maxim guns and two 75 mm guns were at the disposal of the British. The Emirate forces numbering about 10,000 were armed mostly with arrows and Dane guns. The emirate army charged fearlessly when the British replied with volley. Finally the issue was resolved in favour of the British.

### **Ilorin Emirate: Conquest and Resistance**

It would be recalled that Ilorin polity during the closing years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed an increase in the power of the Baloguns and the degenerations of the emirs to mere puppets. The support given by the white men to the Emir to buttress his waning power divided authority in the Emirate by widening the gap between the Emir and his Balogun. The Baloguns, who enjoyed popular followership, became naturally identified with opposition to the influence of the whiten man. In fact, Ilorin was ill-placed to resist external attacks. The resistance to British occupation in the area took the form of simmering discontent and unrest which rendered the position of the British very precarious down to 1903. The Emir, Suleiman, appreciative of the boost of his power derived from British backing, accepted Lugard's proclamation with gratitude.

By 1900, the gulf between the Emir and the Baloguns became widespread. The Baloguns began to gather more strength in their bid to resist the British. Balogun Ajikobi and Balogun Alanamu unsuccessfully attempted to throw the resident and ten Civil Police officers out of the town in September 1900. Because of the strong resistance of Ilorin, Umar, the deposed and exiled Emir of Bauchi, was brought to Ilorin. By January 1903, a letter came from the Sarkin Musulumi (Sultan) urging Ilorin to create disturbance to divert attention from Sokoto. During this time, W.A.F.F. from Lagos had already arrived because of the unrest. The Emir who was pro-British then refused the order. Fear of British reprisal facilitated occupation of Ilorin.

The subtle but passive resistance in Ilorin was typical of the attitude of other Emirates over and above whatever military resistance they could exhibit. To the British, Ilorin resistance was more virulent than military confrontation which they could deal with. Commenting on the danger of underground resistance in Ilorin, Dyer, the Resident, wrote "I am obliged to confess that at one time, I was afraid that my first appointment under your Excellency would have been a failure and that I would have been forced to report my inability to keep the town in order or even remain in Ilorin".

### **Adamawa: Conquest and Resistance**

Aside other Emirates, Adamawa was already feeling the pangs of European conquest. The Germans, determined to occupy  $\frac{7}{8}$  of the Emirate (her share) in 1898-99 sent forces against Tibati. The reigning Lamido, Amalamu, was taken prisoner and a relation of his was installed. In the event, Zubeiru, the Emir of Yola had an encounter with the British attempting to protect Yola from threats of Rabih. The British went ahead and established commercial interests in the area. Zubeiru resisted this move by the British. In Yola those who stood for resistance ultimately prevailed over those who upheld surrender. Zubeiru of course belonged to the resisting group.

Yola's hostility towards the British continued until the Emir forced the Royal Niger Company (RNC) at Yola to pull down its flag and quit the station. Zubeiru's stand was that the British presence in the region should be curtailed. The Emir realizing this new development, threatened to drive the British army to the river. Yola's force attacked the British troops, but could not beat a retreat as they equally resumed firing shells. However, Yola was overrun.

### **Kano Emirate: Conquest and Resistance**

After the occupation of Zaria, the British invaded and occupied Kano. Unlike Zaria where there was little or no resistance, Kano gave a strong resistance. Her preparations for war were getting across to Fredrick Lord Lugard. The city started rebuilding her walls; the erections of her strong gates were completed. Towns in the Emirate, acting on instructions from Kano, similarly rebuilt their walls and re-dug the trenches surrounding them. Kano procured large quantities of arms from Tripoli merchants and run-away W.A.F.F. soldiers. The Arabs in Kano were equally ready to help the Emir in putting up resistance in the event of an attack.

Lugard decided to attack Kano realizing that it had become an enemy. Lugard wrote 'the lives of the men who are to the best of their ability doing the Emir's work here and honestly working for the good of these people would not be safe...'. Lugard was right but the Emir was equally right. They were enemies, each anxious to protect his interest. In fact the welcome given to Magajin Keffi, at Kano was an excuse for war. As the British war fever increased, the Emir of Kano became relentless in his hostility. By 1902 he had made a proclamation forbidding caravans of traders from leaving Kano for the Southern Emirates as usual. He saw this move as a possible avenue for Northern Emirate Military Confederation which might turn out to be disastrous to the British officers. Armed with a lot of weapons, Lugard decided to advance against Kano in the early years of 1903 with 24 officers, 12 N.C.O's, 2 medical officers and 722 rank and file made up of 550 foot, 71 artillery men and 101 mounted infantry with four 75mm guns and four maxim guns.

As part of Kano's war plan, the Chief of Gaya, a town on the Zaria-Kano road, and all the head men of the towns had been instructed to resist European advance at Bebeji. These villages which had been fortified with a view to holding up the British advance were deserted at the approach of the British force led by Col. Morland. The mounted infantry in February 1903 exchanged shots with a Kano scouting patrol at a distance of 800 yards from the formidable walls. The walls had been marvelously constructed (30 to 50ft high) with a ditch running around them. The gates were a set of massive entrance towers about 50ft long and so tortuous that they could not be easily reached by shell fire. All these were aimed at resisting the British conquest of Sokoto Caliphate.

The walls were reported to be strongly held by Kano soldiers as the British approached. With a series of gun fire, the gate and the wall could not be properly breached by gun fire as the entrance and the wall proved impervious to the gun fire of the British troops. The British forces later turned to the gate of the West i.e. Kabuga gate, where after a series of attacks, a breach was made in the gate. This broke the strong resistance hitherto posed by Kano. The British conquest of Kano became glaring as the Kano soldiers withdrew from the walls and fled. With estimated fighting force of Kano as 800 cavalry and 5,000 foot infantries, a lot of casualties were recorded.

### **Sokoto Emirate: Conquest and Resistance**

The conquest of the Southern Emirate had further reduced the Caliphate's potential for resistance. The real resistance and the defeat of the Caliphate would only be well understood after the fall of Sokoto. Obviously, occupation of Sokoto had been the ultimate goal of the British from the outset. The Royal Niger Company had attempted to install a Resident here. Equally, throughout the first-half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the reports getting to Lugard from interior about Kano and Sokoto served as pointers in his mind that a British advance on the Northern Emirate was imperative and to be undertaken with the least possible delay.

Sokoto authority witnessed with apprehension the rivalry between the French and the Royal Niger Company in Borgu, Yauri and Nupeland in 1894-95. When the Company mounted its aggressive offensive-first against Bida and Ilorin in 1897, the Caliph would only send letters to the riverine Emirs asking them to expel the company from their territories. Underlying the passive nature of the Caliph's hostility towards the Royal Niger Company in 1897, there was equally, the French's threat by the establishment of military posts close to Gwandu

at Karim Illo and Gwamba. Finally, Goldie played up the fact that even though the Royal Niger Company invaded and defeated Bida and Ilorin, it neither replaced the local ruling dynasties nor stationed its troops in the capitals of those Emirates.

By 1898, the Royal Niger Company had set a force towards Sokoto under the guise of helping the Sarkin Musulumi (Sultan) against the French. But the real aim of the Company was to establish an advanced military post near Sokoto and to get the Caliph to accept a British Resident in his capital. When tension mounted, the Sultan sent the Emir of Kontagora (at the head of a force of 7,000 horseman) to tell the British forces to go back or be attacked. By August 1898, the Company had established another military post at Illo. But the Caliph objected to it. The Sarkin Yawuri equally supported him. When the Royal Niger Company found the situation in Yelwa untenable, the military post was abandoned in September 1898. Shortly afterwards, the people of Illo in a popular uprising annihilated the whole of Illo garrison.

The Sultan, Abdurrahman, never relaxed his hostility and resistance towards the British. By 1900, he had formally suspended relations between himself and the Royal Niger Company. With the suspension, Lugard sent his "Proclamation" to the Sultan. He rejected the British pretensions to sovereignty over the Caliphate and warned the British messenger to bring no more messages from them. By February 27, 1903, the British forces had converged in Kaura-Namoda. During this time, Sultan Attahiru was on throne. He tabled the matter of the impending British attack. There was the question of migration or peril as put by M.A. Al-Hajji. The Sultan and some of his men agreed from the abode of the infidels. No sooner had they started preparation, than the British forces came knocking. The Sultan caught unawares had to lead his people to put up resistance in the face of the combatant British troops.

The British army with a strength of 25 officers 5 N.C.O.'s, 2 medical officers and one medical N.C.O., 68 gunners, 656 rank and file, 400 carriers, 4 maxims and four 75mm guns, marched towards Sokoto en-routes Argungu, Shagari and Sokoto. Skirmishes took place between the patrol scouts of Sokoto and the British forces. Sokoto warriors were armed with spears, arrows and Dane guns. The Caliph commanded the front with Ibrahim, Sarkin Rabah and Muhammed Maiturare on the left and right flanks respectively. As the war progressed, the superior weapons of the British forces outweighed those of Sokoto forces; hence, the defeat of the latter.

Emirates like Bauchi, Gombe and Zaria were equally conquered but the processes of these conquests were incomparable to Emirates like Kano and Sokoto in terms of resistance. The three Emirates of Bauchi, Gombe and Zaria, showed little or no resistance to British conquest. This does not suggest however that they did not resist per se but that the type of resistance put up was passive. This may be borne out of the fact that previously conquered Emirates, irrespective of their hostile resistance towards British conquest, still fell prey to the foreign power. Therefore, to resist the British then was futile.

## Conclusion

The comparative ease with which Sokoto Caliphate fell to the British is understandable, judging from the hurried preparations of these Emirates to meet their enemy. The superior weapons of the enemy plus the experience the British forces had acquired before that war rendered the efforts of the Sokoto Caliphate forces futile. One could also note a case of fatal tactical blunder on the part of the Caliphate army in their bid to resist the British onslaught instead of the Emirate fighting behind the city walls and trenches that surrounded them.

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