



THE CONTRIBUTION OF SOKOTO CALIPHATE TO MUSLIM WOMEN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Sokoto caliphate was established by Sheikh Usman Danfodio (in 1754-1817) and his disciples in Hausa land. There were Muslims and Non-Muslims in the Calliphate. Among the Muslims, there were those who opposed women education in the area. They considered women as commodities to be disposed after being used. But Sheikh Usman Danfodio, as a leader, and his students struggled to change the situation. This led to producing a number of women scholars/writers in the Caliphate. The method used in conducting the research was by using related materials on Sokoto caliphate. These materials include those written on history, Islamic studies, politics, economy as well as personal understanding of the researcher about the topic after reviewing the literature. The research found out that, there is a need for women education in all sectors of life for the progress and development of any nation in the world. The paper recommends that avenue should be provided to ensure women education, as one of the commandments of Islam, for development and peaceful co-existence in the nation. Conclusion recommendation and references were provided at the end of the paper.

Keywords: *Sokoto, caliphate, Muslim, Women, Education, contribution*

Introduction

The paper examines the role played by the Jihad leaders of Sokoto caliphate, in the course of establishing the Sokoto caliphate which came on board in 1805, after many years of intellectual endeavors and fierce battles which took place later on the lands of Gobir and Kebbi. Indiscipline is one of the major causes of failure of a person or public institutions. The Jihad leaders targeted the problems of nudity, fornication adultery and alcoholism because their eradication was the cornerstone of the agenda for the 19th century reform. Alcoholism and indiscriminate intermingling of men and women in markets, streets and social gathering were the main social imbalance addressed by the Jihad leaders/Sokoto caliphate leaders. The indispensable position of women in building a vibrant and productive society is indubitable. It was in recognition of this fundamental fact that, as early as 1786CE, women were allowed to participate in teaching and enlightenment campaign embarked upon by the Sokoto Caliphate leaders. Indeed, it was the first challenges which the Jihad leaders faced especially the overall leader,

Shehu Usman Danfodio, in the course of the Da'awah. In this direction, the paper discusses the contribution of the scholars towards liberating women by considering their education as very necessary.

Emergence of Sokoto Caliphate

The Sokoto caliphate was not established overnight. It came into existence through well designed process which started with intellectual Jihad, and it went through armed struggle which culminated into caliphate with full paraphernalia of the Shariah. In the 19th century, Sheikh Usman Danfodio (1754-1817C.E.) and his disciples founded a Caliphate¹. The Caliphate was known by the time of its establishment and consolidation as an Islamic state. The caliphate comprises almost everything that was associated with an Islamic state in terms of socio-economic and political institution. Various names were coined to describe it by historians, it was called Sokoto Caliphate, the Fulani Empire, the Sokoto Jihad, the Fulani Jihad, the Reform Movement and many others. But among these names Sokoto Caliphate

seems to be the most widely used in describing the state by researchers.² The reason for that may be connected with the town of Sokoto, which was founded by the second Amir al-Muminin Muhammad Bello bin Sheikh Usman Danfodio in 1809, and it was considered as the head-quarter of the vast Caliphate up to our contemporary time³.

Before the British invasion flourished with vigor, Islamic law was the legal system of the people and Arabic language was the official language of the state. The nation's way of life was tailored according to the commandments of Allah (SWT) and the Prophetic traditions. It is very interesting to note that a great number of the works of the scholars of Sokoto caliphate have been recorded and documented in many research institutions and centers both in and outside the country. So also there has been effort towards reviving the works of these scholars through editing, translation and publication. A great number of research institutions and scholars considered this matter as one of their priorities. Thus, the attempt here is to discuss the contribution of this important Caliphate towards educating women in the caliphate.

Social and Religious Customs of Hausa land

Hausa land was located in the central Bilad al-Sudan which consists of black people with variety of languages and cultures. Major languages among them were, Fulani, Banbara, Jolof, Wolof, Mandingo, Hausa⁴ and others.

Abdullahi (2016) asserts:

Prior to the advent of the Sokoto Jihad movement, the political economy and religious life of the people in the Hausa land were in shamble and total decay as outlined by the jihad scholars in many places of their writings⁵.

Sheikh Usman Danfodio described the religious condition of Hausa land in which he divided the people of Bilad al-Sudan in

general and Hausa land in particular according to their religious inclinations. In his Book titled *Tamyiz al-Muslimin min al-Kafirin*, the Shaykh identified eight categories of people, these include;

There was a category of people who were claiming to be Muslims but, venerating stones, idols and other things and making sacrifices to them.

There were some Muslims who were interested in learning and listening to the preaching sessions of jihad leaders.

There were Ulama (teachers) who were carrying out their religious injunctions as mentioned by Shaykh Usman. He described them as good Muslim in Hausa land among others.

The Talaba (students) whom he declared as a good and pious Muslims. This category of people was students who sought for knowledge and extended it to others. This means there were scholars even before the coming of Sheikh who engaged themselves in seeking for knowledge and extending it to others.

v- Another category of people by then were those who never accepted Islam. These people were born unbelievers. They were people whom the prominent scholar of West known as al-Maghili had described as having never made any claim to be Muslims throughout their lives.

vi - There were also a category of people who made mockery of Islam and denied some of the injunctions of Islam. Some of them denied the institution of Zakah, sawm, etc. Such people married more than four wives. Sheikh Uthman Danfodio declared this category of people in Hausa land as unbelievers.

Vii- Sheikh Uthman also declared another category of people as disobedient Muslims. They engaged themselves in some evil acts even though they did not utter any word of rejection of Islam. They also disassociate themselves from any act that signifies associating partnership to Allah (SWT) such as venerating stones, trees, animals, Jinns, etc.

viii- The last category of people was those he called *al-Juhhal* (the ignorant).

This category of people comprises the group of people who were Muslims but did not care to seek for knowledge of their religion. Thus the vernal scholars exploit the ignorant by misleading them.

By considering the above mentioned, it clearly shows that since time immemorial, the religion of Islam had been in existence in Hausa land before the advent of Sokoto Jihad movement which gave rise to the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate. It also reveals a glaring fact that there were in existence few good Muslims in Hausa land before the Sokoto Jihad⁶.

Social Reform by Sokoto Caliphate Scholars

On reviving the Sunnah and destroying the innovation, Sheikh Usman Danfodio and his students produced many books and poems during the first thirty years of his teaching and preaching career (1774-1804CES). His book *Ihya'u al-Sunnah* was the first major work written in Arabic language. It appears to have been written at a crucial time after Shaykh Usman Danfadio returned from his tours and settled in Deggel.

Ihya'u al-Sunnah is a text book summary of key area of Islamic life that contains the essence of Sokoto Caliphate leader's mission which needed to be emphasized. For instance, Sheikh Usman Danfodio wrote *Wathiqatu al-Ikhwani* and *Sauq al-Ummati* to confirm and further explain the importance of establishing the traditions of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) as the basic for Islamic lifestyle.⁷ He also wrote *Bayan al-Bida' al-Shaitaniyyah* during that period to expose and vilify the local customs and practices that were contrary to Islam. Another work of primary importance was *Nur al-Bab* which addressed the problems of a broad cross section of society and responded to a variety of questions.

Safeguarding the Integrity of Women in Islam

Many religions and cultures treated women as animals and denied their legal rights, but the Qur'an which is the main source of the Shariah makes provision which stands a remarkable departure from the past.

It also accords both sexes the same inherent dignity and recognizes them jointly, as the trustees of Allah (SWT). The sum total of Islamic teachings is to raise human dignity and honour. It relieves mankind from disgrace and provides high honorable place in human society not only men, it is for both men and women.

In Islam, the welfare of mankind depends upon right thinking and right practice. It is sheer ignorance to degrade the status of women simply because she happens to be a woman while man is considered a heavenly creature simply because he happens to be a man. Islam had explained it in very clear words that human dignity rests upon piety and virtue⁸.

Qur'an asserts:

Whosoever does right whether male or female, and is a believer male or female, and is a believer him, or for her verily We shall quicken with good life and We shall pay them recompense in proportion unto the best of what they used to do (Q16:97)

Islam boldly remonstrated against any injustice and emphasized that life needed both men and women. Women are not created to be derided and kept aside. Like man, a woman also has her purpose and right to exist. And the nature is achieving its aim with the help of both man and woman. Whereas, other religion deprived women of right even to live, Islam granted them right almost at par with men. It also warned that all those who strive to snatch her rights away, will be accountable to Allah on the Day of Judgment.

Allah(SWT) says: (Q19:8-9)

And when the girl child was buried alive, is asked for

what sin she was killed?
(Q81:8-9)

The prophet (SAW) has instructed that women should be favored, the favor which she could not receive even from the so called modern upholds of women's right.

The prophet (SAW) Says:

Allah (SWT) has forbidden you disobedience unto your mothers, refusal to sanction right, accumulation of wealth from all sides and burial of living daughters.⁹

Some religions did not give equal status to man and woman. Therefore, they formulated separate laws for them. But Islam does not make this distinction. In Islam, both man and woman are equal before the law.

Safeguarding the Dignity of Women in Sokoto Caliphate

Women in Sokoto Caliphate were considered as Muslim mothers, wives, sisters and daughters. Though there were women who were not Muslims such as women slaves in Sokoto Caliphate, this does not mean that they were considered as ordinary slaves. Rather they were seen as human beings who should be treated in accordance with the Islamic dictates.

According to Malami (2006):

The position of women in the caliphate (Sokoto caliphate) as opined by Sheikh Usman could best be seen in (one of his books) *Nur-al-Bab*, where he says: They should not be seen as household utensils, which after use are to be seen discarded away". This integrity therefore, should be firmly safeguarded and their dignity be firmly maintained¹⁰.

Sheikh Usman Danfodio drew the attention of his people to the integrity of women in his book tilted *Wathiqat al-Ikhwani*... in which he called on all Muslims to prevent their wives from going out indiscriminately without any necessity for that, and this necessity should be the one that is recognized by Shari'ah. Sheikh Uthman's reason for that is the verse in the Qur'an, where Allah (SWT) says:

And stay quietly in your houses and make not dazzling display like that of the former times, of ignorance (Q33:33)

According to Sheikh Usman Danfodio:

Whosoever does not prevent his wife from going out after the revelation of the above verse has no prayer, fasting, *Zakah*, pilgrimage and that all his religious deeds are null and void and that he has no excuse in the sight of Allah on the Day of Judgment. This is because he neither obeys the commandment of Allah (SWT) nor does he follow the path of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW).¹¹

Women Education in Sokoto Caliphate

In order to attain the egalitarian reform Sheikh Usman Danfodio and his companions envisaged for their people, the women folk must be fully educated and mobilized to be responsible members of the society. In addressing this crucial issue of women education and other rights and privileges, Sheikh Usman wrote *Irshad al-Ikhwani ila ahkami Khuruj al-Niswani* (Guidance for the brother on the legality of women outdoor activities) which was disseminated all over the region of Hausa land with a view to addressing their misunderstanding. It has been observed that, the scholars of Sokoto Caliphate condemned the activities of those husbands who shut their women folk indoors without affording them the opportunity to learn extensively (the affairs of their religion and the world). For example, Sheikh Usman's example with the education of his wives and daughters was very glaring.

Unequivocally, it has been a tradition in Hausa land that women were taking care of some services at home in which some people considered these services as compulsory on women, Sheikh Usman declared in his book *Nur al-Bab* and *wathiqatu al-Ikhwani*:

The domestic services rendered by women in terms of cooking, provision of

firewood, grinding, fetching water and labor in the farm were not imposed upon them by the Shari'ah.¹²

According to Bunza:

Sheikh Usman Danfodio tirelessly fought for the economy Social, and emancipation of women through ensuring their rights to ownership of property, inheriting of estate of the deceased relatives and husband and opening educational opportunities.¹³

Through the effort of the Sokoto Caliphate scholars, women in the Caliphate were emancipated and appropriately placed as equal partners in progress, in the realization of the Islamic ideals. Indeed, the mobilization of women program headed by Nana Asma'u as well as the spread of education and emergence of women scholars in the caliphate were to be observed. From the scholarly comments and the contributions by Nana Asma'u and other women, the caliphate did not only create opportunities for women in juristic and spiritual sphere, but also some administrative ethos such as military expeditions and other related issues in the governance of the society.

In Sheikh Usman Danfodio's book *Tanbih al-Ikhwani ila jawaz* he (Sheikh Usman Danfodio) went to the great length to show the permissibility in Islamic law for woman to come out for seeking knowledge, if their husband could not give them the proper education, himself and the place of living which is free from mixing of men and women. He also advocates the idea of setting aside a special time for the women and children to be able to speak directly to the scholars without the presence of men. This was the practice of Prophet Muhammad (SAW).

The scholars of Sokoto caliphate not only encouraged participation of woman in spiritual aspects of life, but even with regard to mundane issues, for example they encouraged woman to learn how to do business transaction according to Islamic principles and how to conduct themselves in the market place. Kani quoted Sheikh Utman Danfodio saying:

If women do not have knowledge about these affairs (Business) and they cannot find learned people to take this place most of the time. The answer is that; it is incumbent on women to strive to gain knowledge about these affairs in the same way that it is incumbent upon her to know about her religious duties.¹⁴

In his *Irshad Ikhwani ila al-Ahkami ila khuruj al-Niswani*, Sheikh Usman Danfodio emphasized the necessity of women going out from their homes to seek knowledge of the obligatory duties of their religion.

The Sokoto Caliphate leaders advocated for women education and at the same time emphasized women rights in accordance with Islamic injunctions. Some of these works includes, *Irshad ahl al-Tafrit was al-Ifrat*, *Tanbih ala jawazi ittikhazi majalis li Ta'alim al-Niswani*, *Wathiqatu al-Ikhwani li Tabyini dalil wujub ittiba'i al-Kitab wa al-Sunnah*, *Irshad al-Ikwani ila al-ahkam khuruj al-Niswani* and *Wathiqatu al Jawabi ala su'al dalil min al-khuruj al-Niswani*, all the above mentioned were written by Sheikh Usman Danfodio, the leader of Sokoto Caliphate. The issue of women education and women rights did not cease at the formative period but continued to be debated upon up till this period.

As mentioned earlier in Hausa land, there were category of people who were not concerned about learning their religion as well as teaching their wives. They were opposed to educating their wives, this was due to their ignorance about the real teachings of Islam. Islam had made the search for knowledge obligatory upon every individual whether male or female.

Kani (1405AH) affirms that:

It seemed that some people were strongly opposed to women being educated at the time. The evidence of this is what Shaykh Usman says

In his book, *Tanbih al-ikhwani ala jawazi ittikhazi al-majalis...*¹⁵

In the book, Shaykh Usman Danfodio indicated that, the reason for writing the book was to justify to some brothers, who

opposed the attendance of women to his preaching assembly, that it is permissible.

In another place Kani posits:

In his work, Ibn Fodio (Sheikh Usman Danfodio) came out strongly to criticize some people whom he designated as the devil among mankind. This group (of people) rejected the ideas of the attendance of women to the Sheikh's assembly. To condemn their stand, he drew analogy between the permission given to women to go the Makkah for the performance of hajj and their coming out for learning.¹⁶

The views of Shaykh Usman on the status of women must be analyzed within the context of his society and his education as an Islamic scholar. His stress on education even at the expense of the authority of the husband in the home was a radical departure from the practice of the *Ulama'* of his times.

Although Islam had entered Hausa land centuries before the real consciousness of Islamic teachings with regard to knowledge about the rules of separation between men and women, it had not been widespread among Muslims. The Sheikh's call for the education of women and improvements in the relationship between men and women was revolutionary, in the sense that it would bring about change in what the people had been accustomed to his call for veiling, travelling in groups or protected parties of women at hajj was not new, but in conformity with the early practices of Islam.

In this respect, it could be said that the efforts of the Sokoto Caliphate in changing the condition of women in Hausa land brought about radical change and enlightenment among the women.

The impact of Sokoto Caliphate scholars on Women Education

Although the freedom of movement must have been seriously curtailed by this call for controlled activity, the quality of life and level of education among women were developed. A number of highly educated women were seen throughout the Sokoto Caliphate's educational system.

According to Hakim (195:1995)

Jean Boyd listed forty-eight known women scholars in Sheikh's time, six of these scholars have Poetry that still survives. They include, Nana Asma'u the daughter of Shaykh, her sister Hadiza, Fatima, Hafsatu, Safiya, Maryam and their cousin Ai'sha.¹⁷

It could be actually argued that an upsurge of women's scholarship took place during the period Nana Asma'u established women's educational organizations in villages and helped to train women to disseminate Islamic teachings throughout Hausaland.¹⁸ She produced treatises and poetry in three languages; Arabic Fulfulde and Hausa.¹⁹ Her interest includes, health, education, Shariah and Bori, history, Eschatology, politics and theology etc. In 1860 CE, she wrote a twenty-four verses poem in Hausa, on Bori called Rokon Ruwa. The following are some of the verses:

V.21. Do not go where there is immoral (Bori) drumming for men and women, mix together on these occasions²⁰

On women and education, Asma'u wrote in Fulfulde poem called Sonnore Hawwa'u (1860CE) V.9. like rituals, ablution, prayer, alms, Hajj, the fast, all of which are obligatory for Muslim adults.²¹

After the death of Sultan Muhammad Bello, Nana Asma'u became one of the senior scholars of the Caliphate. Amirs (Emirs) used to come for her advice. Jean Boyd described Nana Asma'u as one of the prominent scholars who contributed a lot to the development of Islam in Sokoto Caliphate; she concluded:

Asma'u was by far the most prolific writer and influential woman to have emerged in the Western Sudan during the nineteenth century, what is more, her influence carried over into the world of men. Her voice was the traditional one of women; she was so kind... her charity was thousand fold. But she carries it where decisions were made.²²

It is a fact that Sokoto Caliphate was established on the foundation of scholarship and one of the duties of the caliphate



according to Abdullahi Ibn Fodio was to promote education through the establishment of centers of learning and supporting teachers and students. It seems women, probably more than men, shouldered this responsibility after the establishment of the Caliphate.

According to Kaura (2016):

Here we also find Asma'u at the centre through her laudable project of *yantaru*. In one of her poetic composition, she emphasized the right of women education as daughters and wives and insisted that a woman can go out of her matrimonial home in order to have education against the directives of her husband if he fails to educate her.²³

It is from this point of view we can appreciate her effort in mobilizing women also revolutionizing education not only for men but for women as well. It is on record that while the males were busy running the Caliphate, Asma'u and other learned women were busy on the frontiers of education which had the potential of making the citizens well enlightened which assisted greatly in simplifying the process of governance in the caliphate.

As a result of the effort made by Sokoto caliphate on educating women; Kaura (2016) opined that:

What should however be emphasized here is that efforts were made by women scholars to raise well educated and groomed students who would continue with the tradition after they have left in order to ensure continuity of a struggle to sustain the caliphate. Smooth transition must have taken place from one generation to another at least up to the time the caliphate was taken over by the British colonialists will source remnant evidence found even today in some parts of the Sokoto metropolis²⁴ and some outlying towns and villages where the tradition of Modibbo²⁵ still exists

Early generation of Sokoto Caliphate especially women folk, was imbued with moral rectitude. From constant teaching, preaching and writings of the Sokoto Caliphate leaders, they emphasized adoption

of praiseworthy attributes such as, uprightness, integrity, honesty, self-sacrificing, self-denial and piety among others. Indeed, these attitudes made a lasting impression on the subsequent leadership of Sokoto Caliphate which was characterized by the above mentioned praiseworthy attributes by virtue of good upbringing and training which they received from parents and society especially mothers.

On the other side, Suleiman (1985) said about Muhammad Bello, the son and student of Sheikh Usman Danfodio's concern about women education that:

He wanted the women of the Caliphate to go out in search of Knowledge, not stopping until they had made themselves eminent among scholars. He wanted them as Sheikhs, jurists, and scholars, from whose feet men and women alike learn. He wanted them on the *mimbar* addressing gathering of Muslims. He wanted women to seek their own livelihood and insist on being given only lawful and wholesome from their husband.²⁶

The Relevance of Sokoto Caliphate's Ideas to the Contemporary Muslim Women

Islam is a religion of relevance to all places as well as periods. There are a lot of verses in Qur'an which directed seeking for knowledge, among them:

Allah (SWT) says:

Say: Are those who know equal to those who know not? It is only men of understanding who will remember. (Q39:09)

Prophet Muhammad (SAW) also in many ahadith directed seeking for knowledge for the well-being of the Muslim Ummah in this World and in hereafter. The directive is not restricted to men only, but also women among the traditions:

'Seeking for knowledge is obligatory upon Muslims male and female'²⁷

In another tradition indicating the importance of educating female child, Prophet Muhammad (SAW) says:

Whosoever has three daughters or three sisters in his family, he trains them and

takes care of them properly will enter Paradise²⁸

It was as the result of the above mentioned that Sokoto Caliphate leaders considered education of women as one of the most important things to do in the Caliphate. As mentioned, effort has been put in place by preaching, writing and teaching. As a result, the effort yielded a meaningful result by producing a number of women scholars in the caliphate. And the impact of this struggle is in existence up till today. Thus, it is not surprising that caliphs at the center, Emirs in emirates exhibited higher quality of leadership which enhanced justice and security all over the Caliphate, such that foreign European explorers were marveled by the kind of security they found in the Caliphate. It will not be far from the truth if one says the major architect of this kind of human leadership was women.

Thus, any time we consider educating women as important in all section of life, all the problems we are facing will be minimized. These include social, economy, political and religion. Once you educate women, you educate a number of people, and while educating a man means educating just one person in the society.

Conclusion

In the concluding remark of the paper, indeed the effort made by the Sokoto Caliphate to educate the entire people of the Caliphate in general and the women in particular yielded a meaningful result by producing many women scholars in the caliphate who authored many books in Islamic studies and in other fields of study, as a result some of them became advisors to some Emirs in the Caliphate.

Recommendations:

After all the discussion, the paper with regard to contribution of the Sokoto Caliphate to women education, the paper wishes to recommend the following:

Muslims should consider seeking for knowledge as obligatory especially the

knowledge concerning their religion on both males and females.

The contemporary Nigerian Muslim women should take from the exemplary attitude shown by the Sokoto caliphate women in giving their maximum contribution towards the development of their religion as well as their country.

Any nation which neglects educating its women folk may face problems from different perspectives: economic, social, political and religious.

Muslim women should try as much as possible to seek not only religious education, but also other fields of western education.

Endnotes

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