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**Characteristics of Nationalism in an
Islamic State**

By

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Introduction

Many scholars, Western and Middle Eastern, believe that traditional Islamic states (i.e. caliphates) are completely incompatible with Western notions of states and nationalism. Further, they believe that this incompatibility serves as the root of the friction between the Middle East and the West. Western scholars believe that the caliphate is backward, non-modern, and threatening to the international community. Islamic scholars often believe that speaking of the caliphate in Western terms (i.e. nationalism) is un-Islamic and denigrating. In this paper, it is held that nationalism is a modern term used to describe an ancient and generally universal phenomenon of arranging a large group of people into a governmental entity. By examining writings regarding the Sokoto Caliphate, this paper will reveal that traditional Islamic states contain many, if not all, of the basic characteristics of nationalism in terms of the Western state.

After creating a synthesis of the leading authorities on nationalism such as Breuilly, Anderson, Smith, Gellner, and Kedourie, it seems necessary to identify several basic characteristics of nationalism. Researchers may look at these characteristics in many different ways and in the present work these characteristics will be enumerated into ten categories as follows:

1. Land and Borders
2. Sovereignty
3. Economy
4. Tradition and Culture (including Modernity and Gender)
5. Language and Literature
6. Religion and/or Secularism
7. Tribalism, Ethnicity, Race
8. Conflict
9. National Institutions (including Government, Judicial System, and Military)
10. Academia (A system to transmit and disseminate 1-9 throughout the nation and abroad.)

This paper will discuss many of the above categories and how Western and Middle Eastern scholars have written volumes about the Sokoto Caliphate, a nineteenth century Islamic state, in terms of the above categories. If this is true, then it can be said that there are more commonalities than differences between Middle Eastern states and Western states. The differences may be merely semantic in many

cases and continued study should be done on these similarities to encourage better understanding between these two cultures.

In the early nineteenth century many Fulani lived in the Hausa state of Gobir (approx. 1809). The Fulani were generally mistreated and oppressed by the remnant ruling house of the Songhai. The major point of contention was excessive taxation and restrictions on practicing Islam as they wished even though Gobir was an Islamic state. The Fulani tribe (Torudbe clan), led by Sheikh Uthman ibn Fudi and his close family members, called the religious followers of Degel and abroad to make the hijra or migration out of Gobir (Bayan Wujub). Yunfa began to fight the emigrants and take the property that they left behind which led to what is commonly referred to as the Fulani Jihad even though he was joined by many Hausa as well (see Wathiqat). The Sokoto faction was victorious in approximately 1814. The Sokoto Caliphate, with many emirates, ruled until 1903 with the British invasion. A large number of the members decided to migrate once again first to Burmi and finally to a settlement on the Nile. The descendants of these emigrants can be found living in a provisional government within the country of Sudan. The descendants of those members of the Sokoto Caliphate that decided not to migrate still live in Sokoto, Nigeria today.

Currently there is a vast amount of literature and research based on the Sokoto Caliphate, its people, conflicts, scholarship and literature, spiritual (Sufi) movement, its military activities, its government, foreign relations, pedagogical system, and gender relations. Most of the works and research that will be discussed comes from the following groups and for obvious reasons:

1. The Ibn Fudi Clan (including clients)
2. Sudanese Scholars and Institutions
3. Nigerian Scholars and Institutions
4. Western Scholars and Institutions
 - a. British
 - b. Canada
 - c. America

Gender Issues and Nationalism

The Ascetic Women are all sanctified
For their piety they have been exalted
They prayed ceaselessly to be delivered from the Fires of Hell
Take this to heart my friends
I have written this poem to assuage my heart.
I remind you how they yearned for God¹

This is an excerpt from the poem entitled *Sufi Women* written by Nana Asma'u. This poem is like a message from a beacon sounded almost 200 years ago. Today's scholars debate about women's status in Islam. Here in an Islamic state, one of the leading scholars is a woman writing religious poetry about Sufi women. Nana Asma'u was also the organizer of the *yan taru* system in Sokoto which was an educational system and network of women scholars recruiting and training other women in order to pass on the scholarly tradition. For scholars today, the Sokoto Caliphate provides an excellent opportunity to explore women's educational opportunities and attitudes toward educating women in an Islamic state.

Jean Boyd and Beverly Mack worked on the translation and publication of the above poem. Jean Boyd has written other gender related works such as "The Role of Women as 'Agents Religieux' in Sokoto²" and *The Caliph's Sister*³. Whereas the former discusses the role of women as a religious support structure within the nineteenth century Ibn Fudi reform movement, the latter focuses on Nana Asma'u's role as the sister of the second caliph of the Sokoto Caliphate. As the caliph's sister, Nana Asma'u was an advisor, intellectual partner, political supporter, and educational administrator. Beverly Mack however gives us more of a look into the cultural, day-to-day life in *One Woman's Jihad*⁴. Nikki Merritt also gives us her look into the *yan taru* and Nana Asma'u's writings. Merritt demands that Nana Asma'u and the *yan taru* represent a step beyond even the progressive thoughts and goals of the Sokoto Caliphate⁵.

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¹ Jean Boyd and Beverly Mack, *Collected Works of Nana Asma'u, Daughter of Usman 'dan Fodiyo (1793-1864)*. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1997), 73.

² Boyd, Jean and Murray Last. "The Role of Women as 'Agents Religieux' in Sokoto." *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 19, issue 2 (1985): 283-300.

³ Boyd, Jean. *The Caliph's Sister: Nana Asma'u 1793-1865 Teacher, Poet and Islamic Leader*. London: Frank Cass, 1989.

⁴ Mack, Beverly and Jean Boyd. *One Woman's Jihad: Nana Asma'u, Scholar and Scribe*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000.

⁵ Merritt, Nikki. "Nana Asma'u, Her Elegies and the Possibility of 'Insider Alternatives'." *African Languages and Cultures* 7, issue 2 (1994): 91-99.

The recurring theme in these writings and others seems to be a look into Nana Asma'u as a leader and archetype of female scholarship and expression within the Islamic state of Sokoto. Also, all of these authors have relied overwhelmingly on the poetry of Sokoto. It is not expressed by any of the modern scholars or the scholars of Sokoto that other Islamic states share Sokoto's feelings concerning education of women, promotion of their writings, or women's involvement in the political/public sphere. However, the very fact that this discussion is so prevalent in the literature supports the thesis that gender issues arise in Islamic nationalism as passionately as it arises in Western nationalism.

Academia and Nationalism

Whether it is medicine, space exploration, nuclear energy/weapons, or religious sciences, the academic goals and achievements of a nation has been one of the focal points in research and rhetoric. For example, Hoseyn Kazemzadeh boasts in his *Iranshahr* that “[i]n the science of education, the ancient Iranians were very advanced in terms of progress and civilization in comparison with neighboring nations⁶.” In history and in modern times, Islamic states *must* add the *high level of Islamic scholarship* to their list of accomplishments and ongoing activities in order to be accepted and respected among Islamic states. This is also necessary for continued internal support from the *‘ulama*, Islamic courts, and other religious elements. Intellectual scholarship is a subject in which a great number of works may be found in relation to the Sokoto Caliphate and it is impossible to list more than a fraction of those works here.

By far we will find that the overwhelming majority of research done on scholarship in Sokoto has been done on and by members of the Ibn Fudi clan. Indeed, John Hunwick attributes nearly 400 known works to the three founding members of the clan⁷. Very few of these works may be found formally published and must be found in local towns where the texts are copied and passed along. So influential was the family and their works that today several universities in Nigeria are named after one of the three founding members of the Ibn Fudi clan and even now hand copied editions of their works are “paid for by local scholars or businessmen as an act of

⁶ Afshin Marashi, *Nationalizing Iran: Culture, Power, and the State 1870-1940* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 90.

⁷ Hunwick, John. *Arabic Literature of Africa: The Writings of Central Sudanic Africa*. New York: E. J. Brill, 1995.

pietas, or as a statement of their religious and political positioning”⁸. Abdullah ibn Fudi delivers the most detailed accounts of the system, subjects, scholars, and levels of learning in the Sokoto Caliphate. In his *Ida an-Nusuukh*, Abdullah ibn Fudi mentions that he and his brother, Sheikh Uthman ibn Fudi, would almost always study and hand copy any text on the science of *tawheed* that came into their country. He goes on to name nearly 100 books that he and his brother, who was admittedly more learned, memorized. Some of the books contained several volumes. In addition, Abdullah ibn Fudi states in *Ida an-Nusuukh* that he also studied and memorized all of the texts written by his brother, Sheikh Uthman ibn Fudi⁹¹⁰. John Hunwick numbers the works written by Sheikh Uthman at nearly 130 texts¹¹.

Mervyn Hiskett has presented numerous works on this very subject. It is Hiskett who reveals to us the poem used to teach astronomy and knowledge of the solar system¹². Hiskett also looked into Hausa poetry of the period and explains how it is used for educational purposes, historical recordation, and as political media¹³.

Abdullah ibn Fudi and Muhammad Bello ibn Uthman ibn Fudi both wrote many works on medicine. Ismail Abdalla explores Islam and medical practices in the region during this period in his work, *Islam, Medicine, and Practitioners in Northern Nigeria*¹⁴.

We have already discussed Beverly Mack and her work, *One Woman’s Jihad*. The education designs of the *yan taru*, as discussed by Mack, should be discussed in particular here.

Together they disseminated their acquired knowledge among their less-educated sisters in their neighborhoods. Their lessons ranged from instruction in the chapters of the Qur’an, prescribed prayers, and accounts of Sufi women in history, to reports of battle victories, elegies for pious individuals, and a biography of the Prophet

⁸ John Hunwick, *Arabic Literature of Africa: The Writings of Central Sudanic Africa* (New York: E. J. Brill, 1995), 55.

⁹ Ibn Fudi, Abdullah. *Ida an-Nusuukh*. Unpublished Arabic Manuscript, Sokoto, 1812.

¹⁰ *Ida an-Nusuukh* has also been translated in the following work: Hiskett, Mervyn. “Material Relating to the State of Learning Among the Fulani Before Their Jihad.” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 19, no. 3 (1957): 550-578.

¹¹ Hunwick, John. *Arabic Literature of Africa: The Writings of Central Sudanic Africa*. New York: E. J. Brill, 1995.

¹² Hiskett, Mervyn. “The Arab Star-Calendar and Planetary System in Hausa Verse.” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 30, no. 1 (1967): 158-176.

¹³ Hiskett, Mervyn. *A History of Hausa Islamic Verse*. London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1975.

¹⁴ Abdalla, Ismail. *Islam, Medicine, and Practitioners in Northern Nigeria*. Queenston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997.

Muhammad. They also were tutored how to pray. Verse poems composed by [Nana] Asma'u were mnemonic devices for the 'lessons' that conveyed material, as well as the instruments of literacy training; following memorization of the works, students learned to write them and read what they had copied¹⁵.

This curriculum and system is comparable to any education that the men of Sokoto would have received up to the advanced levels of learning. In his *Rawdat al Janaan*, Gidadu ibn Laima mentions ten women who attained spiritual mastery under the tutelage of Sheikh Uthman ibn Fudi. All of this is only proof of the level of Islamic scholarship and mastery within the Sokoto intellectual community. As mentioned before, it is impossible to discuss more than a small sampling of this research. However, it should be evident that religious intellectual scholarship was important in the Sokoto Caliphate. Scholars of the period and up to the present day have written extensively about the academic institutions in Sokoto as well as the level of scholarship as others have of Western states.

Literature and Nationalism

Nationalism is often defined and controlled by its literature. Nationalism literature is written by the citizens, about the nation and its history, voices the national message, originates from within the nation, is written in the national language, and often deals with the national struggle. This is true of Western national literature as well as the national literature of the Islamic state.

Islam and the Arabic language are believed to be part of the source of Western skepticism of Muslims and Islamic states. The fact that Muslim historical writing, or even bureaucratic manuals, were sometimes written using rhyming verse, that much of daily life was punctuated by the utterance of Quranic verses, or that scholars continued to rely on an ancient and highly elaborate set of grammatical rules – all provided evidence for the Europeans that Muslims were concerned with external forms over inner meanings, surfaces rather than depths, a trait colonial observers saw as characteristic of a petrified, stagnant civilization¹⁶.

¹⁵ Beverly Mack and Jean Boyd, *One Woman's Jihad: Nana Asma'u, Scholar and Scribe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 11-12.

¹⁶ Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 15.

Hirschkind sums up some of the Western opinions of Islamic literature. However, let us simply focus on the literature of Sokoto rather than how it is perceived by later colonizers.

Most of the researchers and writers of and about the Sokoto Caliphate write on the Arabic nature of these writings from Northwest Africa. John Hunwick of Northwestern University is the most active of these researchers. He facilitates the travel of many students to Nigeria year after year in order to search out, collect, copy, restore, and catalogue the writings of the Sokoto Caliphate. He is the editor of *Arabic Literature of Africa*, a four volume set each dealing with a different region of Africa. Each volume is nearly 700 pages indexing all of the Arabic works of the various regions identifying their authors, date of authorship, authenticity, current location if available, and other bibliographical information. Hunwick's discussion of Arabic writings in the region may be found in "The Arabic Literary Tradition of Nigeria"¹⁷. In this work, Hunwick discusses some of the interesting works that have been found and translated. Some of these works have immense political implications. Hunwick also uses these works to discuss the level of Arabic proficiency, penmanship, writing materials, types of paper used, and methods of written communication. Similarly, C. E. J. Whitting writes his "Extracts from an Arabic History of Sokoto"¹⁸. In this work Whitting translates a vivid account of the harsh years following the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate when some of the Hausa emirates revolted. Later, Whitting translates the voluminous work by Muhammad Bello ibn Uthman ibn Fudi entitled *Infaq al Maysur*¹⁹ in which the author presents a scholarly research into the entire region from the earliest records of the Sokoto scholars up to the authors time period. This work is intellectually and scholastically impressive even by today's Western collegiate research standards. Finally the reader's attention must be turned toward A. D. H. Bivar. Bivar writes a number of works on this subject and he also works with the illustrious Mervyn Hiskett in works such as "The Arabic Literature of Nigeria to

¹⁷ Hunwick, John. "The Arabic Literary Tradition of Nigeria." *Research in African Literatures* 28, no. 3 (Autumn 1997): 210-223.

¹⁸ Whitting, C.E.J. *Extracts from an Arabic History of Sokoto*. London: African Affairs, Oxford University Press 47, no. 188 (Jul., 1948): 160-169.

¹⁹ Bello, Muhammad. *Infaku'l Maisuri*. Translated by C. E. J. Whitting. London: Luzac & Company, 1957.

1804: A Provisional Account”²⁰. Admittedly, Bivar and Hiskett discuss writings before and up to the founding of the Sokoto Caliphate. The importance here is that the Sokoto authors wrote before the found of the Caliphate. They especially wrote works explaining why tensions of war were mounting and why Muslims were obligated to side with the Ibn Fudi Clan. Also, Bivar writes an outstanding work entitled “Arabic Documents of Northern Nigeria”²¹. In this work, Bivar present reproductions and translations of several official documents from the region including documents originating from the Sokoto Caliphate. One of the documents is official correspondence between the second caliph of the Caliphate, Muhammad Bello, to Yusuf Karamaanli (an Ottoman Pasha or governor over Tripoli). The letter witnesses allegiance, friendship, and material support between the two states. In summary, authors in the Sokoto Caliphate wrote poetry, scholarly texts, and official communications in Arabic language. There is no doubt that this was at least partly to establish themselves as an Islamic state rather than a secular state which is evidence of national self-determination and a national official language.

Judicial Institutions and Nationalism

The role of judicial institution as it pertains to nationalism is as important in Islamic states as it is in Western states. In *For Better, For Worse*, Hanan Kholoussy discusses the Islamic legal system in Egypt, judicial reform, judicial legislation and administration, and the role of the judicial system in Personal Status Law in early twentieth century Egypt²². The judicial institution of a nation plays an amazing role in determining rights, constitutionality, sovereignty, legality of war, and even right to rule. The judicial system in Sokoto played the same role and shaped the Sokoto Caliphate in a most distinct way.

The first document to give rise to major trouble between the then governing Gobir State and the Ibn Fudi faction is the *Bayan Wujub al Hijra*²³. This document is a legal discussion of what types of situations, such as oppression, makes it allowable or obligatory for Muslims to immigrate away from the oppressive situation. The level

²⁰ Bivar, A.D.H. *The Arabic Literature of Nigeria to 1804: A Provisional Account*. London: Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London 22, no. 1/3 (1959): 324-349.

²¹ Bivar, A.D.H. *Arabic Documents of Northern Nigeria*. London: Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London 25, no. 1/3 (1962): 104-148.

²² Kholoussy, Hanan. *For Better, For Worse: The Marriage Crisis That Made Modern Egypt*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010.

²³ Ibn Fudi, Uthman. *Bayan Wujub al-Hijra ‘ala l-‘Ibad*. Translated by Fathi el-Masri. Khartoum: Khartoum University Press (and Oxford University Press), 1978.

of scholarship was at such a level among the Muslims of the region that Sheikh Uthman was able to write this legal discussion to be disseminated among the masses or at least their local religious leaders. The next important document during this revolutionary period leading up to war is the *Wathiqat*, which has been referred to as the “Sokoto Caliphate version of the Declaration of Independence”. In this *Wathiqat*, or Manifesto as it is often translated, Sheikh Uthman delineates 27 points. Points one through sixteen explain the things that are obligatory on an Islamic state (the ruling Gobir state claimed its authority to rule under *shari’ah* law). Points seventeen through twenty-five describes those actions which are illegal for an Islamic state to commit. Point twenty-six explains that war against an oppressive state is obligatory and twenty-seven explains that it is lawful to seize property during this war. It is obvious that this document is an extremely detailed legal outline for declaring war against an unjust and oppressive government. Finally, we find that Hiskett has translated yet another work from one of the Ibn Fudi clan, *Kitab al Farq*²⁴. This work discusses the law in relation to government, administration, and ethics. The author gives detailed examples of the wrongdoings among the contemporary governments and supports his conclusions with rulings from Islamic law.

To further discuss research into the judicial institutions in the region, Mansour Mansour writes *The Maliki School of Law: Spread and Domination in North and West Africa, 8th to 14th Centuries C.E.*²⁵ This is a marvelous text outlining the spread of the Maliki legal school of influence throughout Islamic Africa. One of the greatest legal works of the later Sokoto period is the *Risalat wa Nasehat*²⁶. During the early 1900’s, European troops started to make their way inland toward the Sokoto Caliphate. Scholars and leaders were of a mixed opinion as to how to respond. Qadi Modibo Abdullahi Bellel was a chief justice in the region at the time. He authored the *Risalat wa Nasehat* as an amicus brief for the Caliph and his advisors. In this brief, Qadi Modibo explained that he saw three options which were to sign a truce, wage war, or to immigrate. Qadi Modibo went on to explain that the terms of the truce were unacceptable by the standards of Islamic law. Also, to wage a war against an

²⁴ Hiskett, Mervyn. *Kitab al-Farq*: “A Work on the Habe Kingdoms Attributed to Uthman dan Fodio.” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 23, no. 3 (1960): 558-579.

²⁵ Mansour, Mansour. *The Maliki School of Law: Spread and Domination in North and West Africa 8th to 14th Centuries C.E.* San Francisco: Austin & Winfield Pub., 1995.

²⁶ Shareef, Muhammad. *Zaman ‘n-Nasaara: African Muslim Resistance to European Colonialism.* Fairfield: Sankore, 1998. (Containing a translation of *Risalat wa Nasehat*)

enemy with such a military and technological advantage would unjustly waste the lives of the Muslims and was therefore legally unacceptable according to the *shari'ah*. This only left the option of immigrating to a distant land of safety and letting the British troops have the land of Sokoto. As anyone can see, this was an amazingly lucid legal analysis. Thousands of inhabitants from the Sokoto Caliphate began to migrate toward Sudan based on this advice and the order of the Caliph. The judicial offices and system in Sokoto was clearly as influential in the national efforts of Sokoto as the judicial systems of the West.

Conflict and Nationalism

One of the most pervasive aspects of nationalism for Western states as well as Islamic states is the aspect of conflict. The states often have to endure conflict to gain freedom, independence, human rights, a homeland, or to fight of foreign domination. Sokoto Caliphate was no different. The already mentioned *Infaq al Maysur*²⁷ details some of the battle accounts of the Sokoto revolution. Also, Abdullahi ibn Fudi writes a detailed history using poetry from the period in an almost bibliographic fashion. In his *Tazyin al- Waraqat*²⁸, Abdullahi ibn Fudi details battles, preparations, morale, camp sites, losses, and support structure. The eloquence of this text is unparalleled and Sheikh Abdullah establishes himself as one of the leading Arabists of the age. Another excellent work in the field is entitled “A Note on the Ethnic Interpretation of the Fulani Jihad²⁹” by Marilyn Waldman. Waldman not only looks at the outbreak of war but the interpretations of this jihad as an ethnic struggle. Waldman concludes that this was not an ethnic struggle but rather a struggle against oppression in which many of the Hausa people sided with the Fulani and there is no evidence of the reverse.

Of course we have the typical military history writings on the Sokoto revolution written by Western writers such as Joseph Smalldone. Smalldone writes *Warfare in the Sokoto Caliphate*³⁰ in which he outlines battles, strategies, and

²⁷ Bello, Muhammad. *Infaku'l Maisuri*. Translated by C. E. J. Whitting. London: Luzac & Company, 1957.

²⁸ Ibn Fudi, Abdullah. *Tazyin al Waraqat*. Translated by Mervyn Hiskett. Ibadan (Nigeria): Ibadan University Press, 1963.

²⁹ Waldman, Marilyn Robinson. “A Note on the Ethnic Interpretation of the Fulani Jihad.” *Journal of the International African Institute* 36, no. 3 (July 1966): 286-291.

³⁰ Smalldone, Joseph. *Warfare in the Sokoto Caliphate*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

outcomes. The most popular works of this nature are by Mervyn Hiskett, H. A. S. Johnston, and Murray Last. Hiskett writes the *Sword of Truth*³¹ which is also one of the titles of the founder and first caliph of the founder, Sheikh Uthman ibn Fudi. Johnston writes *The Fulani Empire of Sokoto*³² which is probably the most widely read text on the subject. Murray Last writes *The Sokoto Caliphate*³³ which is often cited and published in the same year and Johnston's work. The corpus of conflict literature on the Sokoto Caliphate early in its foundation and late near its decline is extensive. The body of work shows that scholars from the period, late scholars, Western and Islamic scholars all saw the need to research and report on the conflict between the Sokoto factions and the ruling Gobir/Hausa state as well as the twentieth century British colonizers. In all of these writings, the readers will find a steady theme of the Sokoto warriors being guided by the *shari'ah* rules of war, a belief that their cause was ordained by God, and a nationalistic identification between the soldiers and the Sokoto Caliphate.

The purpose of this paper was not to fully define and review the question of "what is nationalism". Neither was the purpose to give an exhaustive bibliographic analysis of Sokoto literature. The purpose of the work is to determine whether an Islamic state can be placed within the framework of the Western notion of nationalism according to its major themes. In this paper we have looked at the themes of gender, academia, literature, judicial institutions and conflict as they are dealt with in the Sokoto Caliphate by the scholars of the caliphate and successive Western scholars. All of the writers have written about the Sokoto Caliphate in these nationalistic terms which confirms that Islamic states should be dealt with by intellectuals on a similar basis and in terms of their commonalities. The cooperation between Western and Middle Eastern scholars has already increased in recent years. Let's hope that mutual respect and impartial research will help to improve that cooperation.

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³¹ Hiskett, Mervyn. *The Sword of Truth: The Life and Times of the Shehu Usman dan Fodio*. Evanston (Illinois): Northwestern University Press, 1994.

³² Johnston, H. A. S. *The Fulani Empire of Sokoto*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967.

³³ Last, Murray. *The Sokoto Caliphate*. London: Longman, 1967.

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