Monsieur Jide Osuntokun

Citer ce document / Cite this document:
doi : 10.3406/cea.1975.2611
http://www.persee.fr/doc/cea_0008-0055_1975_num_15_57_2611

Document généré le 26/06/2017
The entry of the Ottoman Empire into the First World War on the side of the Central powers immediately called into question the loyalty of Muslim subjects of the Allied powers. It was therefore natural for Allied authorities to suspect Turco-German or pan-Islamic agents behind every local opposition. In actual fact the resistance against the Europeans as will be shown, was firmly rooted in the local opposition to either the imposition of European rule or the demands, particularly military service, made on unwilling subjects. This is particularly so in the case of France, and it was the French attempt to force military service on West Africans in the Sudan and the Sahara that led to much political upheaval and military resistance. This general malaise aroused the sentiments among simple people that perhaps the time for the ‘Lord of the age’ or the ‘hidden Imam’ had at last come. The suggestion here is that the French did fear the spread of Mahdism to West Africa where it had a few important votaries like marabout Ahmadou Nienasse and his followers who had believed that the Mahdi was to appear towards the end of 1914.\(^1\) It is clear, of course, that not all the movements presented as Mahdism could be so described, but where it helped to rally opposition to French imposition, this Islamic device was conveniently employed. This threat of using Islam as a weapon against the Allies was well understood by Germany and she consequently exploited her relation with Turkey whenever possible. In West Africa, at this time, much of the military resistance against the Allies took place in French territory; Turco-German agents were usually suspected but in actual fact the opposition to French rule had been building up for some time, the war finally brought it to the surface.

Opposition to French rule generally arose because of French colonial policy of overcentralisation of administration and political power in one place and usually in French hands. Unlike the British, who had cultivated the friendship of important Muslim rulers in neighbouring

---

Nigeria, the French in the Sudan and the Sahara tended to see the Muslim chieftains as obscurantist tyrants who had to be removed; French military weakness had not made the removal of these Muslim sheikh possible before the war, but the bitterness and rancour which these policies had left behind made it certain that, given the opportunity, Muslim leaders of Haut-Sénégal and Niger in particular would revolt. This rather unstable situation was bound to be noticed by France’s African neighbours, particularly the British authorities in Nigeria who became concerned about the situation in areas bordering on Nigeria after the outbreak of the great European war. Constant was the watch on the border since it was perfectly clear Nigeria could not be insulated against any happenings in adjoining areas. It was common knowledge to British colonial administrators that Muslim leaders from Darfur to Sénégal and from Yola to Agades ‘were often united by marital and other ties’. This made it imperative that a revolt in any part of the West African savannah and Saharan belt had to be contained either single-handedly by the French, or jointly by the two Allied powers.

The British by and large were sure of the loyalty of Muslim rulers in Northern Nigeria. Intelligence reports on the state of Muslim opinion in Nigeria had it that Northern Nigerian emirs, while sympathising with the Senussi revolt in Libya and on western frontier of Egypt, were at the same time not prepared to dabble in any movement that might create division and tension within their emirates. Most of these emirs were conservative Muslims, belonging to a different tariqa (Qadriyyah) and they also had a stake in maintaining the status quo imposed by the British under which they had come to enjoy enormous power and wealth. In view of the comfortable position of the Muslim hierarchy in Northern Nigeria, all attempts by the Germans to lure the emirs to their side by circulating pamphlets purporting to emanate from the Sublime Port and asking for an united pan-Islamic front against the Allies failed. The lack of support for the Turks in Northern Nigeria should of course not be confused with the absence of local opposition to or grievances against, the British. Contrary to generally accepted opinions about the political situation in Northern Nigeria during the war, there were in fact significant revolts in this area. There is of course no evidence to suggest that these revolts were inspired by Turco-German agents. Even when insurrections occurred, they were neither widespread nor sufficiently well organised to

2. AOF, carton 150, Haut-Sénégal-Niger, Rapport politique, 1918. Many of these revolts were led by sheikh opposed to the French and pro-French sheikh were assassinated.
4. Ibid.
5. CO 583/39/7842, Arabic letters were found in mosques in Yola, Maiduguri on 29 Jan. 1915, calling for a jihad against the British in the name of the Ottoman sultan.
NIGERIA AND THE INSURGENCY IN FRENCH WEST AFRICA 87

constitute more than a nuisance value to the British. In short, indirect rule was vindicated, in that the important Muslim leaders of Northern Nigeria remained steadfast in their loyalty to the British.

The situation in French territories adjoining Nigeria was markedly different from the relative political calm in Nigeria. Even before the outbreak of hostilities in Europe, the French had had to continue pacification campaigns in some areas in Chad and Niger which had remained indifferent to, and independent of, French control. When war broke out, the French were prepared for any eventuality. The border between Libya and French Sahara was constantly patrolled because it was known that Turco-German agents were sneaking into French Sahara in the neighbourhood of Southern Tunisia. To make matters worse, marabouts in Haut-Sénégal–Niger were using the pretext of war to spread their influence to undermine French control. H. Clozel, the Governor General of French West Africa, in reaction to the situation, proclaimed a state of siege and gave military officers power to deal summarily with any revolt. As a protective measure, the Governor General called on all Muslim notables to publicly declare their allegiance to the French and those who were considered unreliable were interned at Port-Étienne, in Mauritania.

This precaution did not prevent people from revolting. At the end of 1914 some villages in the districts (cercles) of Koutiala and Dedougou—a centre of the bend of the Niger—were in open rebellion. Their example was followed by their compatriots in Bamako district in February 1915. By the end of 1915 the rebellion had spread to Bobo-Dioulasso and, later, to the areas inhabited by the Tuareg in Timbuctoo district—particularly to Dori, Gao and Gourma. A French battalion under Colonel Molard took the field against these people and fighting continued until 1916. Up till this time there were no important Senusi leading these rebels. The movement was home-grown and based generally on the reaction to French recruitment intensif. The situation, although bad enough, was still something the French could take care of single-handedly.

Two events, the Italian evacuation of the Tripoli hinterland and the intervention of Senusi chieftains in the fighting in French Sahara altered the whole situation. Added to this was the irresponsible way in which the French were forcing their African subjects for military service in Europe. With the withdrawal and defeat of the Italians by the Senusi

11. Michael Crowder wrote that these rebellions were instigated by ‘chiefs from Tripolitania preaching holy war in Niger at German instigation’. This I think is wrong. See Bulletin de l’IFAN 30 (1) (Jan. 1968): 234.
in 1916, the Senusi seized their weapons and some got into the hands of the insurgents in French Sahara.\textsuperscript{12} The French recruitment, in particular, produced a moral and political crisis all over the wide expanse of the Sudan, with consequent alteration of attitudes to European domination. In a place like Kano, which was so closely connected with Tripoli commercially, anti-imperialist views were being openly ventilated. People in Northern Nigeria were heard saying: 'Here have these Nasara [Christians] been for twenty years preaching and legislating against slavery and they themselves are slave-raiding our villages and taking our children to fight for them.'\textsuperscript{13} The French, by their compulsory military service, completely alienated local Muslim leaders. Some Nigerian Muslim leaders in Kano began to criticise the French because of their genocidal brutality in suppressing rebellion in Niger. All these happenings in the French Sudan and Sahara reverberated throughout Northern Nigeria because of the historic and cordial relations existing between Sokoto, Katsina, Kano, Bornu and such places as Agades, Bilma and Tawa (Taoua) affected by the rebellion. British officials in Nigeria began to fear that it was only a matter of time before the whole insurgent movement against the French turned into anti-European religious fanaticism.

The situation became much more serious when the local grievances were channelled into religious opposition to European powers by the militant Senusiyyah of Sayyid Ahmad Al-Sharif Al-Kabir (the Grand Senusi). Senusi emissaries began crossing into Northern Nigeria from Wadai and Niger with the possible intention of enlisting local support.\textsuperscript{14} The British were not unduly worried because they knew that there were not many Senusi in Northern Nigeria although they had a few cells in Kano and Bornu emirates.\textsuperscript{15} What however remained a riddle was the loyalty of returning pilgrims from Mecca. The great number of these pilgrims made constant check on their activities impracticable. The magnitude of the problem can be grasped when it is realised that, between 1913 and 1918, 20,601 pilgrims left Northern Nigeria for Mecca and, within that period, 24,633 returned,\textsuperscript{16} so that many who returned after being away for some years, might have been converted by Senusi on their way back. Most of these returning pilgrims, it was believed, must have come in contact with leaders of Fellata (Fulani, Hausa, Kanuri) colonies in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. The British particularly feared the influence which Mai Wurno, the ambitious ex-emir of Missau and son of

\textsuperscript{12} Augustin BERNARD, 'Le Sahara fran\c{c}ais pendant la Guerre', \textit{Renseignements coloniaux}, Jan. 1920: 3.
\textsuperscript{13} CO 583/63/14785, H. R. Palmer to Lugard, 2 Mar. 1917.
\textsuperscript{14} WO 158/517, Lugard to Dobell, 25 Jan. 1916.
Sarkin Musulmin Attahiru I, who was then resident in the Sudan, might have on the returning pilgrims. In view of this vulnerability of British Nigeria to Islamic intrigue, British authorities watched with concern any religious movement in the Northern and Northeastern areas of Nigeria. As a precaution against infiltration of agents of the Senusi or Turkey into Nigeria, troops were stationed on the frontier between Nigeria and Chad in February 1916. The British also supplied guns and thousands of rounds of ammunition to the French who were busy putting down one insurrection after another in Chad. The rebellion in Chad was particularly serious and French occupation was actually put in doubt when local opposition forces were joined by those of the Senusi and Ali Dinar—the sultan of Darfur.17 This turn of events posed a serious threat to neighbouring Bornu, and Lugard committed his government to helping the French by promising military intervention, should the situation get worse.18 Luckily for Nigeria the situation improved slightly towards the end of 1916 following the death of Ali Dinar. The situation was, of course, still not very clear and stable. The home government felt normal conditions had returned and Nigerian forces, at home kept until then, were ordered to proceed to East Africa. Lugard was left with a completely disorganised body of men, consisting mainly of those unfit to go to East Africa. The only exception to this disorganised force were three units of the Nigeria Regiment based in Sokoto, Maiduguri and Dikwa in newly occupied Cameroons. The infantry companies at Birnin Kebbi, Katagum and Nafada were seriously depleted and there were no troops at all in Kano. The troops in the south were engaged in military patrol in Yorubaland which was the scene of serious rebellion in 1916.

This was the delicate military situation and disposition of troops in Nigeria when, in December 1916, Lugard was informed by the Governor General of French West Africa, that French Sahara had been invaded by the Senusi from the north.19 The French immediately asked for help in transporting troops coming in from Dakar and Conakry.20 The French also requested military help, pointedly telling Lugard that it was in his interest to stop the Senusi before they got to Nigeria.21 While this contact between the French and the British continued Islamic insurgency spread across the whole of French Sudan and the Sahara. The forces of the Senusi under Sheikh Abdul Salaam and the Targi chief Ahmad Muhammad ben Kaossen—‘the servant of the Grand Sanusi and Governor of the Fezzan’—, pressed down on French forts in the desert. They were joined by Oulliminden and Bellah Tuareg and later the sultan of Agades deserted the French and made common cause with his co-

religionists. The Senusi having consolidated their hold on Agades began marching on Tawa and Madawa (Madaoua). The French commandant at the latter station claimed the Senusi were on their way to Sokoto! The Governor General in Dakar raised another spectre when he suggested the Senusi might go to the Cameroons via Bornu with the object of allowing the Germans to re-open the war there.

Lugard reacted to this extraordinary situation by declaring a state of emergency on 3rd January 1917. Troops were pushed to the frontier, all able-bodied British officers were called up and light motor cars commandeered for use on Zaria-Sokoto and Kano-Katsina roads. Lugard even suggested that some guns should be sent to the frontier areas to arm ‘reliable natives’. He was later persuaded that such an act would be unwise and that such armed men might later desert and join fellow Muslim insurgents. The Governor General later cabled the Governor of Sierra Leone asking him to dispatch all available troops to Nigeria.

Meanwhile the situation had deteriorated by the middle of January 1917. The Senusi pressure was so great that Captain Faulque de Jonquières, the French Commandant in Zinder, hastily asked for reinforcements of Nigerian troops to support the French forces operating in the neighbourhood of Tawa, Maradi and Madawa. Two British military columns later moved into French territory. One left Kano under Colonel Coles and was made up of two mounted infantry companies with two Maxim guns. This force arrived in Tassawa on the 19th of January. Another column under Captain Randall left Sokoto for Madawa. This force was made up of 65 infantrymen, 85 mounted troops and 2 Maxims. Troops were brought from the Southern provinces of Nigeria and were concentrated in Zaria, Kaduna and Lokoja in case they might be needed. The Nigerian troops relieved the French garrisons in the towns near the Nigerian border, thus liberating troops for the relief of Agades. French reinforcements continued to arrive in Lagos and were speedily dispatched to Kano by rail and then to Zinder on foot. The greatest problem encountered was the movement of troops from the Nigerian border to French territory. Motor traffic, except for a short distance from Sokoto, was almost useless because of the sandy nature of the waterless country. By the middle of January 1917 the French had about 2 000 additional tirailleurs, 8 machine-guns, 6 artillery guns, 394 camelry, 169 mounted guns and 17 tons of war material, most of which was made possible by

23. CO 583/55/6243, Lugard to Colonial Office, 10 Jan. 1917.
the co-operation of British administration in Nigeria. With this abundant war material, the French were able to fortify their positions in Niaméy, Bilma, Nguimi Filingue and Tawa and to move on to Agades, the centre of the resistance.

Agades was relieved on March 3, 1917 by troops under Colonel Mourin. Muhammad ben Kaossen however moved to Air and managed to remain at large until the end of the war. By this time, the Senussi movement was losing much of its force. The leadership had been split towards the end of 1916 with Sayyid Muhammad Idris, the cousin of Sayyid Ahmad Al-Sharif—the Grand Senussi being recognised as the emir of Cyrenaica whilst the Grand Senussi became merely the head of a religious order.27 Thus political and religious factions were created following which the Grand Senussi left the Libyan hinterland never to return until his death in Medina, in 1933. His cousin Muhammad Idris reached a modus vivendi with Italy and the Allies in 1917 by which the status quo was preserved at least until after the war, with the Italians controlling the coastal towns and the Senussi the hinterland of Libya. This accord was however not completely respected by the more fiery Senussi who felt they owed no allegiance to Idris. They continued fighting but with diminishing effectiveness because of lack of arms and ammunition. The Oulliminden Tuareg front against the French suffered the same fate as the Senussi. Their leader Fahirun was killed and a collaborationist chief called Ag-Korakor was installed in his stead in 1917.28 The new emir of Cyrenaica began to co-operate with the French around the same time by sending emissaries to Chad and other areas bordering on Nigeria asking for co-operation and peace with the Allies.29 In spite of this co-operation by Idris Al-Sanusi, Muhammad ben Kaossen and another Senussi chief, Muhammad Erbemi, continued the struggle against the Allies until 1919 when the latter was captured by the British in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan.30 By this time the movement had ceased to present a serious threat to the British and the French.

Throughout the period of the fighting, the only time Nigeria was ‘threatened’ by the presence of ‘enemy’ subjects on her territory was in February to March 1917. During this period armed Tuareg ‘Camer-men’ fled to Nigeria and remained in Hadeija and some other towns near the border. The local chiefs were warned not to encourage or give them support. The British could not expel them because of the fear of provoking sympathetic support from their Nigerian co-religionists. Fur-

29. AEF, Affaires politiques (Tchad), carton 338, dossier 2, Rapport trimestriel, 1er trim. 1917. M. Merlin said Idris Al-Sanusi assured him through his emissaries that ‘il est toujours animé d’intentions pacifiques vis-à-vis des Français et des Alliés’.
thermore the government was actually incapable of forcing them out of the country since most of the Nigerian troops who could have been used for this purpose were still bogged down in the desert. The British claimed they allowed them to stay on humanitarian grounds since it was understood that the French were adopting extremely drastic measures which appeared to be little short of extermination; however, when about 1,000 hostile Tuareg concentrated near Nguru in Northern Nigeria, an Anglo-French force was used to disperse them.

The British colonial forces did a splendid job in the Sahara. They were mostly used in patrol work especially between Gangara in the East through Tarkass to the north of Giddan Al-Mokhtar in the west. They were also used to garrison important military outposts such as El-Hassan and Guidambado. They took part in operations in the country north and east of Tawa and Madawa. The Nigerian troops remained on French soil until May 18, 1917 when they were withdrawn because the situation was by then under control—in the immediate neighbourhood of Nigeria at least.

Lugard went on a tour of Northern Nigeria during the crisis, since it was felt his presence would have both moral and political effect in the area. The tour was also undertaken to impress the sultan of Sokoto who was rumoured to be in sympathy with the Senus. In spite of the common danger facing both France and Britain during the crisis, the antagonism which had bedevilled Anglo-French relations throughout the war surfaced again. Although relations remained cordial and correct on the surface, day to day contact was beset by mutual suspicion and unnecessary jealousies. First of all, Nigeria’s military aid was accepted grudgingly by Colonel Mourin, the senior French Commandant, who told M. Clozel the Governor General of French West Africa, that he did not want foreign troops on French soil. The French also refused to discuss seriously the use of British aeroplanes because the French did not want Africans to be impressed by British technology.

Nigeria did manage to come out of this potentially serious crisis with the loyalty of the Muslim leaders to the British government remaining firm. The French however demurred that this loyalty was exaggerated since they claimed some of the Muslim dignitaries in Nigeria aided the rebels. They mentioned in particular that according to information in their possession, the sultan of Sokoto was constantly in touch with Muhammad ben Kaossen and had promised the latter co-operation if the Senus could enter Sokoto. This accusation was investigated but no

33. CO 583/55/10750, Lugard to Colonial Office, 7 Feb. 1917.
35. CO 583/56/13087, Strachey’s minute, 14 Mar. 1917.
evidence turned up which could have incriminated the sultan, but the suspicion cast over his character led Lugard to order a closer watch on his activities. As a climax to the whole episode on the northern frontier, the new French Governor General at Dakar, J. Carde, suggested to Lugard that they should embark on building a railway link between Zinder and Kano. The plan apparently fell through when the British suggested French concessions in the Cameroons as a quid pro quo for the railway line. Throughout the war period the British did manage to maintain their hold on Northern Nigeria, in spite of some disruptions from within and the much more serious threats from without. The steadfastness in the loyalty of the emirs revealed essential alliance between the Northern Nigerian ruling class and British overlordship.

In conclusion, the Islamic revolt was caused by the French lack of imagination, especially in military conscription of unwilling and hardy desert people. French hold on these territories before the war was not effective and the desert people had been largely living under their own chiefs until the demands of France on them broke the peace. While the pan-Islamic element of the revolt is very important, the ability to revolt and sustain it was rooted in the peoples’ unwillingness to accept the French yoke. The British involvement in the whole episode, apart from arising from the understanding that the Allies owed it to themselves to co-operate against their enemies, was motivated by self interest—keeping insurgents and their agents from disturbing and threatening the British hold on their Islamic territories in West Africa in general, and Nigeria in particular.

J. Osuntokun — L'administration coloniale du Nigeria et l'insurrection musulmane en AOF, 1914-1918. L'alliance turco-allemande a soulevé des craintes quant au loyalisme des sujets coloniaux musulmans des Alliés. Les rébellions des musulmans d'Afrique occidentale contre la conscription ont, en conséquence, été attribuées à l'action d'agents turcs et allemands, provoquant une réaction disproportionnée des autorités coloniales. La rébellion, en 1916, des Touareg Oulliminden, en liaison avec la campagne senusi dans la région d'Agades créa une situation sérieuse, menant à la formation d'un front saharien confié au général Laper-rine. La crainte, apparemment peu fondée, de la part de l'administration nigériane de voir les populations islamisées du Nord se joindre à leurs coreligionnaires d'AOF conduisit, en dépit de l'hostilité traditionnelle entre les deux administrations, à une coopération militaire qui joua un rôle important dans la pacification.