

Ottoman – Sokoto Relations during the 19th Century: An untold History

Kerem Duymus¹

¹ Institut für Afrikastudien, Universität Leipzig

Abstract: *Despite the existing gap in the research literature concerning potential connections between the Sokoto Caliphate and Istanbul during the 19th century, recent findings from Ottoman archives in Turkey and Libya reveal a intricate interplay between the Sokoto Caliphate and the Ottoman Empire. Accordingly, this relationship was not only multifaceted but also crucially hinged on the intersection of religious, political, and economic spheres. New evidence indicates that both Sokoto and the Ottomans shared a common perspective on caliphal legitimacy during the early 19th century, and this transformed into political and economic relations in the late century.*

Keywords: Sokoto Caliphate, Ottoman Empire, Sahara, Bornu, Tripoli

Introduction

In the research literature on the Sokoto Caliphate, relations of Sokoto with France or Britain have been long over-researched by Anglo-European historians due to the abundance of traveller accounts written by French and British agents.¹ The dominance of these sources created an impression for the historians to assume no meaningful relations between the Sokoto Caliphate and Islamic states such as Morocco and the Ottoman Empire during the 19th century. This perception solidified with the prevailing narrative that the 19th century was a period of decline for non-European states, portraying African states as passive recipients while European powers were the primary instigators. However, Arabic sources have long challenged this view by illustrating the extensive global interconnectedness of the Islamic world from Senegal to Indonesia during this era and beyond.² A subsequent wave of discoveries emerged with

1 A.A. Boahen, *Britain, the Sahara, and the western Sudan, 1788-1861* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964); A.S. Kanya-Forstner & P.E. Lovejoy, *Pilgrims, interpreters, and agents: French reconnaissance reports on the Sokoto Caliphate and Borno, 1891-1895* (Madison, 1997); A.S. Kanya-Forstner & P.E. Lovejoy, *The Sokoto caliphate and the European powers, 1890-1907* (Stuttgart: Steiner Verlag, 1994).

2 S. U. Balogun, "Arabic intellectualism in West Africa: the role of the Sokoto Caliphate", *Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs Journal*, 6(2) (1985): 394-411; Y.Y. Ibrahim, 'Arabic/Ajami manuscripts: resource for the development of new knowledge', in *Nigeria: proceedings of the National Conference on Exploring Nigeria's Arabic/Ajami Manuscripts* (Kaduna: Ahmadu Bello University, 2010).

the Turkish sources in the Ottoman Archives in Turkey and Libya,³ this article contributes to a larger research project examining Turkish sources concerning Africa in Turkey and Libya, revealing that despite the apparent lack of interaction highlighted by previous historiography, there existed a very intricate and active relationship between the Sokoto Caliphate and the Ottoman Empire throughout the entire 19th century.

Positioning the Caliphate: Sokoto as Third Caliphate (1810s-1840s)

When the tajdid movement of Uthman dan Fodio (d. 1817) turned into a jihad in 1804,⁴ and evolved into an expanding state following year, any debate regarding the position of this new emerging state in the global Islamic world was still premature.⁵ This issue gained urgency only with the demise of Uthman dan Fodio in 1817, prompting Abdullahi dan Fodio (d. 1829) and Muhammad Bello (d. 1837) to articulate their own founding narrative to assert authority over the increasingly complex territories they governed amidst multiple uprisings.⁶

At this juncture, after 1817, both Abdullahi in Gwandu and Bello in Sokoto started to utilize the title of "amir al-muminin," not merely denoting their status as commanders of Muslim communities but also asserting caliphal authority, in an effort to strengthen their power over vast areas.⁷ However, this newly established position was promptly challenged by Ahmad Lobbo (d. 1844) in Hamdallahi, who refused to acknowledge the authority of either Gwandu or Sokoto within his domain, compelling Bello to clarify his caliphal claims more explicitly in light of global Islamic discourse. The core issue in this debate was the legitimate nature of the caliphal authority. Lobbo argued that if Sokoto declares itself as a caliphate under the presence of a caliph in Istanbul, then he could also declare himself as a caliph, alongside

3 K. Duymus, *Afroglobal History of Siyasa in the Central Sudan during the 19th century* (PhD. Thesis, Universität Leipzig, 2024).

4 Prior to 1804, Uthman did not have the intention of establishing a new state, but reforming the society from the inside. However, these efforts ultimately resulted in a military conflict with the Sarkin Gobir. M. Tahir, *Salatin Mayrunu Hulafa Al-Sheikh Uṭman Bin Fudi* (Mayrunu, 2023), 37.

5 Indeed, Uthman dan Fodio had to first manage the ongoing jihad before thinking the statue of the state that they can create. Furthermore, the great success of the jihad towards 1810, expanding the control of the movement into an immense area was an unprecedented phenomenon, rendered this newly established political entity a prominent power in the whole *bilad Sudan*. M. Al-Hajj, 'The Meaning of the Sokoto Jihad', in *Studies in the History of the Sokoto Caliphate: The Sokoto Seminar Papers*, ed. Yusufu Bala Usman (Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press, 1979), 17.

6 Abdulkadir Mustafa al-Turudi (dan Tafa), 'Rawḍāt Al-Āfkār', N.N.A., O/AR 1, 1. For instance, in Kano, powerful local families rejected the appointments of new emir by Bello around 1820. M.J. Abda, *Tsarin Musulunica Kano* (Kano: Triumph Publishing Company, 2007), 25. Around 1819, even one of the earlier commander of the jihad movement, Abdulsalam from Adar, openly rebelled against Bello. Muhammadu Bello, 'Sard Al-Kalām', N.N.A., O/AR 1, 8.

7 For Bello, since they are controlling a vast Muslim area, far beyond any other caliphal power, he had right to be bare the title of caliph. Muhammadu Bello, 'Ġawāb Šāfin Li-l-Murīd', N.N.A., O/AR, 12. For Abudllahi, dan Fodio family comes from the very early companions of prophet Muhammed, who were his *amir al-muminin* as being the commander of the armies. In this regard, dan Fodio family has right to have the title of caliph in the sense that they are successor (Ar. Caliph) of these earlier commanders. Abdullahi dan Fodio, 'Kitāb Al-Nasab', N.U.A., Ghana/115/MSX.

Bello.⁸ Bello rebutted Lobbo's claim by asserting that during the initial phase of their jihad, Uthman dan Fodio requested Bello to write a letter to Istanbul to declare their allegiance to the Ottoman caliph residing there. However, Bello countered by suggesting that it would be more appropriate to address Morocco instead, given that the sultan of Morocco belongs to the Quraysh family, whereas the Ottoman sultan has no such lineage. Nonetheless, Uthman persisted in his request, maintaining that Sultan Sulaiman (d. 1566), who had conquered a significant portion of the Islamic world, was recognized as the protector of Muslims and consequently regarded as the legitimate caliph.⁹ While Bello probably contacted with the Ottoman governor Yusuf Pasha (d. 1838) in Tripoli, no letter was sent to Istanbul.¹⁰ Later, Bello maintained there was no necessity for allegiance with Istanbul since directives from there could not reach Sokoto, thereby Bello held right to be a caliph within his domain. In this context, Bello contended that Ahmad Lobbo could not declare himself as a caliph because instructions emanating from Sokoto were directly applicable to them, considering they are in the same land (*bilad Sudan*).¹¹ This legal foundation of the Sokoto Caliphate significantly influenced the relations between the Ottoman Empire and the Sokoto Caliphate till the 1840s, creating a deliberate diplomatic distance from Istanbul for Sokoto.¹²

Ottomans' Perspective on another Caliphate (from 16th century to 1830s)

Interestingly, the debate between Muhammad Bello and Uthman dan Fodio regarding the legitimacy of the Ottoman caliphate was also a question for the Ottomans, as they acknowledged their lack of lineage with the Quraysh family, contrasting from the claims of previous dynasties like the Abbasid or Moroccan. Lütfi Pasha (d. 1563), whose arguments were documented in his text around 1554, provided an official rationale for the Ottomans' caliphal title.¹³ In his text, Lütfi Pasha argues that given the existing sharif lineages from Qurayhs family (Abbasid and Moroccan) were incapable of assuming the caliph title due to their weak power, the Ottoman authority's assumption of the title of caliphate should be viewed as a justifiable exception. Thus, according to him, the Ottoman sultans is recognized as the sole guardian of all Muslims worldwide, their rulership should be validated as caliph.¹⁴ Lütfi Pasha's justification served as the foundational narrative for the Ottomans' viewpoint regarding the concept of caliphate. Consequently, within territories governed by Ottoman rule, there could not be another caliph according to the established principles. However, when Muhammad Bello asserted his caliphal

8 I.F.A.N., Fond Brevié, MS. 7.

9 Muhammadu Bello, 'Ġawāb Šāfin Li-l-Murīd'.

10 A. Bivar, 1959, "Arabic Documents of Northern Nigeria", *Bulletin of School of Oriental and African Studies*, 22(1) (1959): 324-349.

11 'Compilation of Atiqu', Private Collection of Mamma Haidara [Bamako, Mali], 34023.

12 See: M.T.M. Minna, 2013, "'Non Alignment': Sokoto's Foreign Policy under Sultan Muhammad Bello", in *Life and Ideas of Sultan Muhammad Bello*, ed. Centre of Islamic Studies Sokoto (Sokoto, Usmanu Danfodio University Press, 2013)

13 H. Yavuz, *Osmanlı Devleti ve İslamiyet*, (İstanbul, İz Yayıncılık, 1991), 73-110.

14 Lütfi Pasha, 'Halasu'l-Ümme fi Marifeti'l-Eimme'. Süleymaniye Kütüphanesi, Ayasofya Bölümü, no. 2877.

authority in Sokoto, a region distant from Ottoman control during the 1810s, it would have been deemed acceptable for the Ottoman Empire. Yet, with the French colonial invasion of Algeria in 1830—owing to the Ottomans' inability to prevent this and their subsequent failure to reclaim Algeria—a widespread narrative emerged across the Maghreb questioning the Ottoman Empire's status as the most powerful authority within the Muslim world. This absence of power led many local scholars in the Maghreb to question or openly challenge the legitimacy of the Ottoman caliphate, effectively undermining the Ottomans' claims based on their historical and political stature.¹⁵ In response to this unexpected development, the Ottoman Empire significantly revised its stance on the issue of caliphal legitimacy. Following the 1830s, they embarked on an extensive endeavour to bolster their influence across the Islamic world, from Bahia in Brazil to Jinan in China.¹⁶ This expansion included increasing interest and involvement in Hausaland as a means to strengthen their initial political and caliphal authority within that region. As a result, by the 1830s, the Ottomans were no longer inclined to acknowledge any further caliphate claims within the Islamic world.

Kano and Katsina as sphere of the Ottoman influence (1840s-1870s)

While Tripoli was under Ottoman control since 1551, during the 18th century, it was governed by the Qaramanli dynasty on behalf of Istanbul.¹⁷ However, following a civil war within this dynasty, direct Ottoman control was reasserted in 1835, with governors subsequently appointed from Istanbul.¹⁸ Around the 1840s, the Ottoman Empire had solidified its hold over the entire region after series of local rebellions.¹⁹ Specifically, the acquisition of Murzuq, the capital of the Fezzan region, marked an opening for Istanbul into the Sahara.²⁰ Already in 1844, the Ottomans dispatched their first envoy to Borno to seek Shehu Umar al-Kanemi's (d. 1881) voluntary acceptance of Ottoman rule.²¹ Notably, the rulers of Ghat, Tibesti, and Kawar independently sought Ottoman control before even being prompted by Ottoman demands.²² As a result, in 1850, a significant portion of the Sahara came under Ottoman control. In line with their strategic objectives, the Ottomans resolved to bolster both their diplomatic engagements and economic ties with southern territories. In 1853, two Ottoman envoys from Murzuq were dispatched to Borno and Kano to negotiate a trade agreement. Notably, Sayyid Ali, the Ottoman

15 'Nağāh al-ummah fī tā'ī al-ā'imma', Süleymaniye Kütüphanesi, Esad Efendi Koleksiyonu, no. 1856; 'Al-Sa'yū al-Mahmūd fī nizām al-ğadīd', Süleymaniye Kütüphanesi, Esad Efendi Koleksiyonu, no. 2363.

16 V. Engin, *II. Abdülhamid ve Dış Politika* (İstanbul: Yeditepe Yayınevi, 2005)

17 A.E. Taş, "Garp Ocaklarında Birliğin Bozulması: 18. Yüzyılda Cezayir-Tunus-Trablusgarp İlişkileri", *İnsan ve Toplum Bilimleri Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 9(2) (2020): 1065–1091.

18 Celal Tefvik Karasapan "Libya, Trablusgarp, Bingazi ve Fizan", (Ankara, 1960).

19 M.S. Meshal, *Savratu Guma al-Mahmudi fi al-Cabali al-Garbi Libiya 1835-1838* (Cairo: Dar al-Nahdat al-Arabiyya, 1991), 5.

20 A. Kavas, (2018). *Osmanlı'nın merkezi Afrika'ya açılan kapısı: Fizan sancağı* (İstanbul: Alelmas Yayıncılık, 2018).

21 D.M.T.L, uncategorized, dated as 1844.

22 For more details see: K. Duymus, "1850-1910 Arası Osmanlı'nın Sahra Politikaları", *Tarih Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 43(77) (2024): 363-390.

envoy who arrived at Kano in the same year, signed a trade agreement with Emir Osumanu dan Dabo (d. 1855) of Kano.²³ Following this pact, Sayyid Ali was granted residency in Kano as the representative of Ottoman merchants from the north, making the city a focal point for Ottoman interest in the region. For instance, by the end of 1853, Sayyid Ali reported to the Ottomans about rumours suggesting an impending invasion of Kano by Borno. In response, Ottoman officers in Murzuq and Tripoli began planning to prevent such an incursion, given Kano's significance as a trade hub for Ottoman merchants.²⁴ However, this alleged invasion never materialized due to ongoing civil strife within Bornu in 1854.

Subsequent years have seen a persistent evolution in economic interactions between the Ottomans and Kano. Particularly, during the 1860s, Emir Abdullahi Maje Karofi's (d. 1883) active engagement in trans-Saharan trade further bolstered the Ottoman presence within the city of Kano.²⁵ As these relations grew, the Ottoman authorities sought not only to expand their sphere of influence but also strengthen their direct control. The acceptance of Ottoman rule by Shehu Umar al-Kanemi in Borno in 1869 marked a significant step,²⁶ as in 1873, the Ottoman representative in Borno was tasked to conduct diplomatic relations with Katsina and Kano with the aim of securing similar voluntary recognition from them.²⁷ It is noteworthy that there had been no established direct communication channels with Sokoto at this time. Furthermore, the Ottoman authorities were aware of the fact that both Katsina and Kano were under the rule of Sokoto. Their strategic objective was that if these cities could peacefully and voluntarily accept Ottoman rule, it would not only lead to their inclusion within Ottoman authority but also prevent conflicts with Sokoto. However, the emir of Katsina, Ibrahim dan Bello (d. 1882) and Kano, Abdullahi Maje Karofi, expressed a desire for exclusively good trade relations with the Ottomans without any further political engagement or military assistance. After five years, in 1878, the new Ottoman governor of Tripoli, Mehmed Sabri Pasha (d. 1879) once again personally addressed Abdullahi Maje Karofi in Kano and Ibrahim dan Bello in Katsina, expressing a promise of military support from the Ottoman Empire to deter plundering raids targeting trade caravans between the northern and southern regions.²⁸ Both Emirs again favoured maintaining solely trade relations with the Ottomans without seeking additional political ties or military.

Failing Efforts to bring the Sokoto Caliphate under the Ottoman rule (1880s-1899)

In the 1880s, the Ottomans finally decided to engage Sokoto in direct diplomacy. In 1882, an Ottoman envoy from Murzuq was dispatched to Sokoto to establish a direct diplomatic relationship and negotiate

23 D.M.T.L., Tijarat, dated as 1853.

24 D.M.T.L., uncategorized, dated as 1853.

25 J.G.T.M., uncategorized, a letter dated as 1858.

26 D.M.T.L., uncategorized, dated as 1869.

27 D.M.T.L., uncategorized, dated as 1873.

28 Sadık El-Müeyyed, *Afrika Sahra-Yı Kebiri'nde Seyahat* (İstanbul: Çamlıca Basım Yayın, 2010), 149.

a trade treaty. The envoy returned with favourable results, including the caliph of Sokoto, Umaru bin Ali's (d.1891) signature on the agreement.²⁹ In 1885, Shehu Ashimi (d. 1893) of Borno contacted Umaru bin Ali in Sokoto to convince him to accept the Ottoman rule in Sokoto as he did in Borno. Consequently, in the same year, Umaru bin Ali dispatched a commission from Sokoto to Istanbul seeking negotiation for an Ottoman rule in Sokoto.³⁰ This commission received with great ceremony at Ghat, the border city of the Ottoman Empire. Nevertheless, while en route to Murzuq from Ghat, the commissioners were assassinated by a small French-backed rebel faction in 1886.³¹ This tragic incident had a profound impact on the diplomatic ties between Sokoto and Istanbul. Given the Ottoman Empire's perceived fragility, unable even to safeguard its own cities, Sokoto halted all plans for an Ottoman rule.

In subsequent years, the Ottomans found themselves increasingly concerned about the growing Mahdist movement in Sudan encroaching into Wadai, which became an important sultanate for the Ottomans due to the new trade route between Abeche and Benghazi in the late 19th century. Still, around 1891, an Ottoman envoy was sent to the south with the goal of communicating with the rulers including sultans of Baghirmi, Mandara, Wadai, and Agadez as well as the caliph of Sokoto, regarding recognition of Ottoman caliph and potential advantages of the Ottoman rule for them. In his 4 years of mission in the *bilad Sudan*, the Ottoman envoy initiated a new diplomatic relation with the caliph of Sokoto, Abdur Rahman Atiku (d. 1902). Following the efforts of the envoy, Abdur Rahman Atiku showed desire for new negotiations of a possible Ottoman rule in Sokoto, prompting the envoy to directly write to the Ottoman sultan, Abdülhamit II (d. 1918) about this news.³² However, the fall of Borno to Rabih's control in 1893 once again highlighted the Ottomans' inability to defend their territories, creating a weak image in Sokoto, thus once again leading to the cancel of the negotiations. Despite the Ottoman plans for a new diplomatic campaign in 1896 aimed at establishing Ottoman rule over the Sokoto Caliphate, escalating threats from an Italian invasion in Tripoli compelled Istanbul to abandon this initiative and concentrate more on safeguarding their coastal areas in Tirpoli.³³

As colonial expansion by France and Britain intensified in the Sudan region during subsequent years, the Ottoman Empire endeavoured to safeguard the territories it controlled, including Borno (which was under Rabih's occupation), Baghirmi, and Wadai, through diplomatic means. In 1899, the Ottomans formally communicated with France and Britain, declaring that these territories (Borno, Baghirmi, and Wadai) are integral parts of the Ottoman rule, expressly excluding any possibility of French or British invasions. Given the Ottoman Empire's inability to establish its rule over the Sokoto Caliphate, Sokoto was omitted from this diplomatic correspondence.³⁴ Consequently, after 1899, the Ottoman Empire

29 D.M.T.L., uncategorized, dated as 1882.

30 B.O.A. Yıldız Esas Evrakı, 122/121.

31 J.G.T.M., uncategorized, dated as 1886.

32 B.O.A., Yıldız Perakende Evrakı Arzuhal Jurnal, 13/56, 2-4.

33 B.O.A., Sadaret Mektubî Kalemi Umum Vilayetler Evrakı, 35/88.

34 B.O.A., Hariciye Nezareti Hukuk Müşavirliği İstişare Odası Evrakı, 520/249.

abandoned all plans aimed at extending governance over the Sokoto Caliphate. Soon, Britain began their colonial invasion of the Sokoto Caliphate.

Conclusion

During the 19th century, the relations between the Ottomans and Sokoto were complexly interwoven across religion, politics, and economy. Several key factors and historical events significantly influenced the evolution of these ties. In the early 19th century, both Sokoto and the Ottomans shared a similar perspective on caliphal legitimacy, fostering a mutual indirect recognition that was distant yet significant. However, the French invasion of Algeria in 1830 dramatically altered Ottoman stances, compelling them to seek deeper connections with the Sokoto Caliphate. Between 1840s and 1880s, Emirs of Kano and Katsina established close economic and diplomatic relations with the Ottoman Empire, encouraging the Ottomans to think of a possible Ottoman rule in the whole Sokoto Caliphate. From 1880 to 1899, the Ottoman Empire endeavored to establish peaceful relations with Sokoto, aiming to convince them to accept Ottoman rule voluntarily, as they always did in the whole Sahara and bilad Sudan. These efforts were severely thwarted by various tragic incidents, such as the assassination of a Sokoto commissioner at Ghat by French-backed rebels and the fall of Bornu to Rabih's control. Ultimately, when colonial forces from France and Britain started to encroach upon the Sokoto Caliphate in the late 19th century, the Ottomans had no further time to secure Sokoto under Ottoman rule to avoid the impending colonial invasion, as they were already struggling to counter a possible colonial invasion of Tripoli by Italian. As a result, following 1899, the Ottoman Empire prioritized protecting Wadai and the Sahara against French and British incursions, and Tripoli against Italian invasion, thus losing contact with Sokoto.

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