British Colonialism and Islam in Northern Nigeria: A Case Study of Idomaland, C. 1899-1960

By

Ediba, Isaac Ogbogo, PhD
Associate Professor of Social
And Political History, Department of History
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
Gombe State University
P.M.B. 127, Gombe, Nigeria
+2348166089362, ogbogotransfigure@gmail.com

Abstract

The dominant narrative about the nature of relationship between the British colonialists and Islam in Northern Nigeria seem to portray an unhealthy or hostile scenario between colonialism and Islam. While the European colonialists originated from the West, imbued with Judeo-Christian ideals and cultural preferences; it is generally taken that they were agents of western civilization, partly rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The entrenchment of the Islamic religion in all its dimensions in Northern Nigeria presented a herculean task to the colonialists in their modus operandi, due largely to the fact that the Muslims of the North openly opposed the coming of the British colonialists and the European Christian missionaries. The situation in Idoma land, however, was a complex one, as the opposite was the case, in contrast to what unfolded in the upper north. The initial intent of the British was to ensure the proselyzation of the Idoma people to Islam and not the contrary. Their grand design was to consolidate colonial rule through whatever means. Using the historical method of enquiry, based on primary and secondary sources, this paper investigates this phenomenon and bring to the fore the connection between the British colonialists and Islam in Idoma land.

Introduction

Given that the British colonialists were from Europe whose historical development was partly rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition, there had been scholarly postulations that the colonialists, who were largely Christians, were byproducts of Christianity and, therefore, were at the service of the religion in their grand design to establish *Pax Britanicca* and to consolidate British rule. However, that was not there case as would be argued in this paper.

Evidence at our disposal reveals that the British colonialists, although Europeans, were not Christian missionaries, whose primary role was the advancement of the frontiers of Christianity and, therefore, adopted several concerted efforts in ensuring prosetylization.[1] This is not to mean that, in their dual operations, there were not some areas of convergence.[2] The intention of colonialism was the systematic plunder of the human and material resources of the colonized and the colonial administrators, who were thoroughly secularized, and from a highly liberalized society were interested in consolidating and sustaining the colonial system.

Contrary to widely held propositions, colonialism fostered Islam in the non Muslim areas of northern Nigeria. The concern of the British colonialists was the actualization of their *modus operandi* in line with their mandate. This paper engages in the discourse about the religious question in the context of British colonialism in northern Nigeria with specific emphasis on Idoma land in the period from 1900 to the end of colonial rule. The paper establishes the trajectory of the grand attempt to ensure the Islamization of Idoma land by the colonialists and the historical circumstances surrounding this phenomenon, coupled with the response of the Idoma to the British tactics.

British Colonialism and Islam in Northern Nigeria

During the last years of the nineteenth century, forward looking evangelicals in Europe and America began to be concerned about the lack of missionary activity in the Sudan Belt of Africa. Just after the declaration of the British Protectorate, the Conference of Evangelical Missionary Societies predicted that unless the gospel was brought to the "pagan" people of northern Nigeria within a few years, then they would go over to Islam.[2] In Hausaland, Islam had been reinvigorated and consolidated by the Jihad movement of the nineteenth century. It gradually spread in the rural areas until, at the time of the British conquest, a large part of northern Nigeria was under the banner of the crescent. As this included the ruling class, the educated class and the towns-people, the British had every reason to believe that almost the whole population was Muslim.[3]

However, except in the Yola and Muri areas, Islam did not penetrate south of the river Benue. In the late nineteenth century, it was spreading along the banks of the Niger and Benue. In 1884, Archdeacon Johnson of Lokoja noted that in the last four years, many tribes around Egga on the Niger had been converted to Islam "by means of an active missionary propaganda."[4] At the same time, Crowther noticed a sprinkling of Muslims along the Benue east of Lokoja.[5] By 1900, Islam was the dominant region in northern Nigeria. By 1903, Lugard had succeeded in asserting British authority over this vast area and installing rulers who had 'agreed' to cooperate with his administration. In his famous speech at the

installation of the newly appointed Sultan of Sokoto in March 1903, Lugard promised that his rule would be just and fair and that all men would be free to worship God as they pleased.[6] The Government would not interfere with the Muslim religion. Muslims who were doubtful about recognizing the British conquests, and had earlier mentioned war, were reassured by their learned scholars. The different interpretations placed upon this promise became a source of controversy.

The fact that the missionaries came to the north at the same time as the military caused apprehension to the Emirs who were already unfriendly and suspicious. The Emirs naturally connected the European missionaries with the European government of "the most Christian nation in the world"[7] while the British were very desirous of winning the confidence of the Muslims, which made Tugwell's missionary adventure to Kano in 1903 and his encounter with Emir Aliyu, a huge embarrassment to Lugard. Therefore, the British authorities deemed it prudent to restrict missionary enterprise in the Muslim emirates.[8] As a class conscious authoritarian, Lugard felt that any insult to any European was an insult to all. Lugard had thought that missionary teaching might work towards a premature abolition of class divisions and jeopardize the successful development of "indirect rule".

Against this backdrop, the colonialists urged the missionaries to turn their personnel and resources to the 'pagan' parts where there was enough scope to absorb the energies of all the missions put together without moving into the Muslim heart lands. Given the paucity of resources on the part of the missions, exclusion from the Muslim north therefore meant that their limited resources could all be used in the "pagan" areas where there were to be far greater returns for their efforts.[9]

Quite apart from political expediency or honouring a pledge, there were many English men who thought that Islam was more suitable than Christianity for the people of the north. The famous negro Christian writer Edward Blyden considered that the Muslims of the interior presented a formidable and impenetrable barrier to the flood of alcoholic liquor which, but for them, would sweep across Africa.[10]

E.D. Morel, at the beginning of the twentieth century, considered that Islam was the most effective antidote to any dangers of over-indulgence in drink that might exist.[11] Sir Gilbert Carter thought that Islam was a bulwark against the gin disease. He urged that because of its teaching against alcohol, it should be encouraged. Writers like Blyden and Morel had a genuine respect for Islam. To them, "Islam was a good, second best religion."[12] Bosworth Smith wrote of Africa, …Paganism and Devil- Worship will die out, and that the main part

of the continent, if it cannot become Christian, will become what is next best to it 'Mohammedan'.[13] Many Europeans in northern Nigeria, whilst profession Christianity themselves were never particularly pleased when it was embraced by the "natives" Many Europeans, with their strong race prejudice, do not like the "natives" to have the same religion as the Europeans.[14] The genuine interest and respect for Islam of some Europeans was, perhaps, unconsciously utilized by others as a rationalization of their desire that the "natives" should not be like them.

It is instructive, therefore to note that, in practice, the British colonial policy towards Islam and religion in general, was not a straight-forward issue but was fundamentally determined by their interest. Their policy was therefore a combination of nervousness regarding any Muslim activity of the Madhist type, fear of Islam as an anti European, anti-colonial creed, and an admiration for Islam structural contribution to political centralization and economic progress.[15]

One of the problems that Lugard faced was the administration of the "pagans" of the north. The non-Muslim animistic peoples were usually referred to as "pagans" and they were in every Northern Province and resided in hilly or thickly forested or remote areas. In some parts, the conquest by the jihadist was virtually complete and the "pagans" were subdued and lived under the control of their own petty village or hamlet heads under the suzerainty of Fulani Muslim District heads. In other parts, the conquest was far from complete and the "pagans" were in a continual state of rebellion. In yet other parts, no real attempt was made to subdue them and they were independent. [16]

Idoma land falls into the third group mentioned above. What Lugard did in these different cases was to be of great importance in their subsequent political, social and religious history. Lugard has no resources to politically control these areas. Therefore, 'indirect rule' was to be applied as much as possible. Slave raiding and oppression were to cease but "pagans" under the rule of Fulani emirs were to remain so.[17] British administrative officers learned Hausa but few attempted to learn any of the "pagan" tongues. They understood the Hausa–speaking ruling class better and did not attempt to find "pagan" rulers in those areas claimed by the Emirs.

In theory, Lugard did not wish, however, to create the impression that the British were partners of the Fulani in the islamization of "pagans", but in practice, it can hardly be doubted that the practice of placing large numbers of "pagans" under Fulani District heads and supporting the authority of these by the powers of government when and where necessary, led to any extension of Islam.[18] The colonial government attacked several points

in connection with the old religion and Muslim merchants, under colonial rule, do what they wanted, as they travelled around. The 'pagan' headmen tended to start wearing Muslim dress, especially when they were called into meetings at the District headquarters and this donning of the garb of the Muslim often proved one of the first step to Islam.[19]

There were sufficiently large groups of "pagans" in Sokoto, Kano and Katsina provinces to warrant massive tours of the devout Premier of Northern Nigeria, Sir Ahmadu Bello, accompanied by Ministers, Emirs and others to secure their conversion to Islam under British rule, and *Pax Britannica* certainly accelerated the spread of Islam.[20]

Land, People and Society of Idoma

Idoma land is located in the southern valley of the Benue river and occupies a continuous stretch of territory extending from the southern banks of the Benue river to the borders of Abakaliki and Nsukka in the south. On the west, it has boundaries with Igala land, on the east with Tiv land and on the south east with Ogoja land.[21] it occupies an area of about four thousand, six hundred and eight square kilometers. Lying in the southern part of the Central Nigerian area, the greater portion of Idoma land is covered by dry savannah as generally found in the southern valley of the Benue river. The natural vegetation was probably once tropical rain forest as the relics of tropical forest still survive mainly along the stream and river course and in the southern parts.[22]

The most important single occupation of the inhabitants is farming. Subsidiary occupations include hunting, fishing pottery, cloth-mat-basket weaving, iron smelting and blacksmithing. Idoma land is located in the transitional zone between the tropical forest and savannah land and this condition makes it a potential region for the production of both root and tree crops as well as grains.[23]

The people of Idoma land are of four main groups namely the Idoma, the Igede, the Ufia and the Akweya. The ancestors of the Idoma are said to have lived in the upper Benue and the lower Gongola valleys. Before 1500 A.D., due to unstable social and political conditions in the upper Benue region, the ancestors of modern Idoma migrated from the area east of Wukari and moved along the Benue.[24] Some groups reached Igala land before they finally moved into Idoma land.

British Colonial Conquest and Establishment of Colonial Rule in Idomaland

The military subjugation of Idoma land by the British was facilitated by the west African frontiers force, predicated on the use of force and commanded by highly trained military forces from the metropole. The typology of violence perpetrated in Idoma land was

sanctioned, financed and sustained by the imperialist state. British military activities in Idoma land commenced in 1899 when, capitalization on the age long hostility between the Idoma and the *Abakpa*-Hausa traders, the British initiated the systematic penetration and occupation of Idoma land, characterized by the wanton show of brutal force which eventually undermined the people's protracted resistance.[25]

From 1899 to 1928, evidence abounds about the systematic and organized killings of the Idoma by forces of the British. With the eventual establishment of colonial rule in Idoma land, no serious efforts were made to study the social and political systems of the Idoma. The area was included in what the British called "the primitive pagan societies."[26] The British had a wrong notion of the people and even described them as barbaric, ill-tempered, intransigent, and of low intelligence, and that the Idoma were probably the most difficult in the northern provinces.[27]

It is instructive to note that the Idoma stood resolute amidst the barrage and intensity of military offensive, official prejudice and contempt by the colonialists. They had their peculier political and social systems which were reflective of their history, heritage and the overall dynamics that had produced them. The Idoma had a rich culture and believed in the existence of a supreme God whom they refer to as *Owoicho* (God in the sky). The ancestors (Alekwu) and the land (Aje) occupy important positions in Idoma indigenous religion which exerted probably the greatest influence in the life and thinking of the people.[28]

British Colonialism and Islam in Idoma Land

The British proceeded to impose "indirect rule" on the Idoma people. People most of whom were Muslims from other places, were made to rule the inhabitants of Idoma land, until about 1921 when the British realized their mistake.[29] In the first approach, because it was assumed that the non Muslim areas were of a low level of political development and had no allegiance to a paramount chief, it was imperative to centralize authority in a recognized chief. The second approach involved the imposition of alien personnel and concepts of justice and administration as well as the Hausa language. The third approach entailed upholding the claims of an Emir over non Muslim areas lying within or adjacent to his emirate or the placing of non Muslims under a nearby emirate.[30]

In Idoma land, between 1900 to 1920, the second approach was adopted. During this period, Muslims of different categories (most of whom included Hausa, Nupe, Igbira, Yoruba etc) who came to Idoma land were arbitrarily imposed on the people as rulers. Evidence points to the fact that the alien Muslim District heads, while administering

Muslim justice and carrying out tax assessment, were also at the service of Islam by ensuring proselytization in whatever form possible. To this, V.G Okwu posited that:

> The British administration lamented that the Idoma had not yet began to embrace the Muslim faith. The solution they proposed for the problem created by the imposition of this alien District heads, was that Hausa speaking Idoma should be found to replace them. This preoccupation with the grandeur of the emirates meant that there was no genuine effort made during this experimental stage to discover original solutions to the problems arising out of their attempt to establish an administration in Idoma land even after the system of alien District heads was dropped in 1921.[32]

Further attempts to place parts of the northern Idoma Districts under Muslim rulers at Loko after 1900 proved unsuccessful. The attempt to impose Muslim institution and District heads and to subordinates part of northern Idoma land to the authority of Muslim rulers, north of the Benue, earned the British administration the suspicion and hostility of the Idoma. Unlike the British indirect ruke system, leaders were not given ultimate power amongst the Idoma. In the precolonial political organization of the people, there was a balance between power and authority on the one hand and service and accountability on the other. Ultimate power was reposed on the people and office holding was predicated, by and large, on proven merit.[33] The problem with the British imposed system was that all the organs of government were fused together in such a way that to subtract one of the organs from the rest means the abrupt destruction of the whole system. The British were obviously fascinated with the emirate system and as such, made frantic efforts to rule the Idoma through a class of 'aliens' as District heads during the first two decades of the twentieth century.

The British felt that by accepting Islam, the Idoma people, whom they derogatively termed as "primitive savages", would be brought under the grip of development. In addition, they lamented the fact that the Idoma had not began to embrace the Muslim faith, which it thought would do the people who were basically 'pagans' lot of good.[34] The Idoma people rejected the emirate style political system, especially the imposition of alien District heads and by so doing, rejected the spiritual arm too at the initial stage. The British, on their part, dismissed these attitudes as manifestations of the Idoma predilection for anarchy and therefore, the people must be taught a lesson they wont forget in a hurry. It is instructive to note that, despite Lugard's obsession with Islam, especially in the context of the realities of colonial rule as it relates to the non Muslim areas throughout the northern provinces; he

however believed that Christianity produced a higher material civilization than Islam, even though, he was not a practicing church man.[35]

Evolution and Development of Islam in Idomaland

The history of Islam in Idoma land cannot be unconnected with the activities of the Hausa traders from the upper north who came to Idoma land in search of economic trees which they traded with agents of the Royal Niger Company. However, there is no available record of conversion to Islam in Idoma land during this period. Available record indicates the deep seated hostility between the Idoma and the Abakpa (Hausa) traders due to their propensity for cutting down economic trees in many Idoma villages such a in Odugbeho, Aku, Adoka, Onyagedde, Ugboju, Ainu etc.[36] The Idoma resistance to this act of economic sabotage met bloody reprisals from the British forces, whose economic interest the Abakpa traders were serving. Given the enormity of the violence perpetrated against the Idoma in the ensuing military patrols embarked upon by British forces, it was most unlikely that the Idoma embraced Islam before the end of the nineteenth century.

The hostility of the Idoma towards the British commercial agents were two fold. In the first place, the Hausa traders, aside not paying anything to the locals for collecting rubber from their territory; their rather careless method of collecting the sap often killed the rubber trees.[37] Secondly, the British commercial agents, the *Abakpa*, reminded the Idoma, especially those of the northern and central Districts of the Horse war (*Efu'onya*) which was the Shehu Usman Danfodio Jihad of the nineteenth century. Idoma land was not part of the caliphal authority established by the Jihad and Islam was not spread in the territory through its instrumentality. It was, however, in the first decade of the twentieth century, with the establishment of colonial rule, that Muslims came into Idoma land, as appointed chiefs, entrusted with the responsibilities of administering Muslim justice system as well as assessing and collecting taxes.

Some examples of these alien Muslim District heads should suffice here to illustrate this point. In Agatu District, one Moma (Nupe) a Muslim was appointed in 1910 but was too old to be a success. He was succeeded by a Hausa man called Umaru who in turn was succeeded by Agbiye, an Igbiraman. Isa followed Agbiye in Agatu, which currently has more Muslims than any other Districts in Idoma land. In Adoka, one Auta, a Hausa fellow was also appointed a District head in 1911 but was almost immediately dismissed and succeeded by Idu, an Idoma. In Icho, one Adaji, an Igbiraman was appointed District head and was succeeded by Abu, an ex-messenger and a Hausa.[38]

This system of alien Muslim District headship did not completely achieve the long time objective for which it was meant, given its inherent incompatibility with the Idoma traditional system of government and religion. Naturally, the people resisted this system and so serious was this resistance that it crystallized into a constant source of embarrassment for the British administration who later abolished it in 1921.[39]

An oral informant reiterated that one Mallam Madugu was the first Muslim missionary who arrived Idoma land in 1928 during the Ogbulokor rebellion.[40] He was said to be an Islamic cleric and scholar and arrived Agatu from Loko. Mallam Madugu eventually settled in the migrant quarters of Otukpo, made up of the Yoruba, Nupe, and Igala people. It was at this spot that the Hausa quarters also developed. The first mosque in Idoma land was built by one Mallam Dahiru, a Nupe man while the first Imam to operate in Idoma land was Mallam Bulyaminu.[41] The mosque was said to have been constructed using guinea corn sticks. One Kasimu eventually succeeded Bulyaminu as the Imam in Otukpo, before Mallam Garba took over. Garba was succeeded by Mallam Baba, before Mallam Mamman took over.

According to oral tradition, Islam spread to Idoma land from the Nasarawa axis. Muslim clerics and scholars came from Loko, then moved to Agatu before settling in Otukpo, the most important Idoma town.[42] It was from Agatu that Islam spread to Otukpo, Adoka, Onyagedde, Ugboju, Utonkon, etc. One method of propagating Islam adopted by the early Muslim clerics and scholars in Idoma land was through the distribution of materials and food items. Rice, yams, plastic plates, spoons etc, were freely distributed to local in Agatu Utonkon, Adum, Ochekwu, Igede, Okpoga, up to 1960 and even beyond.[43]

In addition, fund raising were organized and monies were donated to support families of those who converted. These donations mainly came from the far north, intended to further the cause of Islam. Some children of those who converted to Islam were taken to Kano and other far northern towns.

However, an informant observed that some of the Islamic clerics in Idoma land allegedly misappropriated some of the donations and did not use them for the purpose intended, thereby, affecting the rate of proselytization to Islam in Idomaland.[44]

Conclusion

This paper has established the trajectory of the attempt by the British colonialists to islamize Idoma land, as a deliberate colonial policy. Given that the British contemptuously placed the Idoma in the group of "primitive pagans" and "savages" who were in a low

state of development; embracing Islam was therefore considered as a recipe for the development of the inhabitants, under the pretext of the indirect rule system. Alien Muslim District heads were imposed on the Idoma to further the cause of colonial rule and administer Muslim justice system which was in contrast with the people's political and religious system.

The paper further argued that the British colonialists do not want the people they regarded as "barbaric" and "primitive" to be Christians, given the racial and discriminative tendencies of colonialism. Therefore, accepting Islam was considered the best option, geared towards 'liberating the natives' from the Shackles of "paganism". It was purely a matter of colonial convenience and political expediency than the good of the Idoma people. The Idoma rejection of the British tactics was reflective of their desire to preserve their heritage. The paper further discussed the evolution and spread of Islam in Idoma land as well as the methods used in propagating the religion in Idoma land.

Endnotes

E.A Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria: A Political and Social Analysis,* Ibadan: Longman, 1966.

F. Lugard, "Report on the Amalgamation of Northern and Southern Nigeria and Administration, 1912-1919." P 187

Annual Report of Northern Nigeria, 1902 p. 98

E.A Ayandele, "The Missionary Factor in Northern Nigeria, 1870-1914" in J.H.S.N Vol 3 No. 3 (December,1966) p 505

M.A Al-Hajj "The Mahdist Tradition in Northern Nigeria", Ph.D Thesis, A.B.U 1973, pp 160-164, and J. Tringham, Islam in West Africa, Oxfort: Schon Clarendon Press, 1959.

S.A Crowther and J.F Schem, A Journal of an Expedition of the Niger in 1941, London, 1842. p 99

E.A. Ayandele, The Missionary Impact pp. 121-122

W.J Charles, the Making of Northern Nigeria, London, 1916 p 261

R.W Miller, Have we Failed in Nigeria? London, 1947 p 82

Edward Blyden, Christianity, Islam, and the Negro Race, Edinburgh, 1967

E.D Morel, Nigeria: Its People's and Problems, London, 1912, p 260

Edward Blyden, Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race....

Bosworth Smith, Mohammed and Mohammedinism, lectures Delivered at the Royal Institution of Great Brirain, 1874 qouted in Ogbu Kalu, *The Nigeria Story, Ibadan*: Daystar press, 1978 p. 52

Golfried Simon, *The Progress and Arrest of Islam in Sumantra,* London, 1912, p 30

Ismail R. Furuqi, *The Essence of Islamic Civilization, the International Institute of Islamic Thought,* London 2013.

Lugard, "Report on the Amalgamation of Northern....."

Ogbu Kalu, *The Nigerian Story*, Ibadan: Daystar press 1978, p 56

1í. Ogbu Kalu, *The Nigerian Story*.....p 58

Margery perham, *Native Administration in Nigeria*, London, 1937, pp 131-132

Ogbu Kalu, *The Nigerian Story*.....p 58

R.K Udo, *Geographical Regions of Nigeria,* London: Heinemann, 1970

V.G Okwu, "Idoma land under Colonial Rule, 1900-1950," History Departmental Niger-Benue Seminar, A.B.U Zaria, 1973, pp 4-10

Markprov AR/Rep/P/2 Annual Report Benue Province from 1926-1940 Captain P.F.M Smith, 1926-1940 and Capt. D.F Health, 1939.

Erim O. Erim, " A Precolonial History of the Idoma of Central Nigeria" Ph.D thesis, Dalhousie University, 1977, p. 47

V.G Okwu "Idoma land under Colonial Rule.....

Ballard J.A "Pagan Administration and Political Development in Northern Nigeria, in Savannah, vol 1 No 1., A.B.U Zaria press, 1978

Makprov, AR/Rep/P/2 Annual Report Benue Province from 1926-1940 by Captain P.F.M Smith, NAK

Interview with Hyacinth Ajegba, C. 80, Farmer, at Otukpo town, 2/7/2011.

Ode George, "The Impact of British Colonialism on the People of Idoma Division, 1908-1950" Unpublished M.A Dissertation, A.B.U Zaria, 1981

V.G Okwu, "Idoma land under Colonial Rule, 1900-1950", Postgraduate Seminar, A.B.U Zaria 1973

V.G Okwu, "Establishment of Colonial Administration in Idoma Land, History Departmental Seminar, A.B.U Zaria, 1973

V.G Okwu, "The Establishment of Colonial Administration in Idoma Land..."

Adakole Ochai " The Historical Evolution of Otukpo: Migration and Reunification Up to 1930", Unpublished B.A project Dept of History, A.B.U Zaria 1972 pp. 10-14

V.G Okwu,"The Establishment of Colonial Administration in Idoma land.....

Lugard, Dual Mandate in Tropical Africa, Edinburgh, 1919

Ode George "Idoma land under the British Administration: Some Reflections on the Nature and Effects of the Colonial Policy, 1908-1950, A.B.U Post Graduate Seminar, 1979

V.G Okwu "The Establishment of Colonial Administration in Idoma land...."

V.G Okwu "the Establishment of Colonial Administration in Idoma land....."

Ode George "Idoma land under the British Administration....."

Interview with one Mohammed Yakub, C 65 years, Islamic Teacher, Hausa Quarters, Otukpo, 29/12/201

1. Interview with Mohammad Yakub….
2. Adakole Ochai, "The Historical Evolution of Otukpo....."
3. Interview with Sule Adogie, 60 years, Farmer, Hausa Quarters, Otukpo, 20/12/2012
4. Interview with Bello Jae, 67 yrs, Traditional Doctor, Otukfo town, 30/12/2012