



HAUSA-AJAMI POETRY IN THE STUDY OF THE SOKOTO CALIPHATE: THE ANATOMY OF WALLAHI-WALLAHI

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Cite this article:

Muhammad D.S., Bello N., Madawaki A.M. (2023), Hausa-Ajami Poetry in the Study of the Sokoto Caliphate: The Anatomy of Wallahi-Wallahi. African Journal of Culture, History, Religion and Traditions 6(2), 25-34. DOI: 10.52589/AJCHRT-LP4N2G7Z

Manuscript History

Received: 5 Jan 2023

Accepted: 5 Feb 2023

Published: 30 Aug 2023

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ABSTRACT: *One of the important intellectual legacies left by the founding fathers of the Sokoto Caliphate was Hausa Ajami literary tradition through poetry. Poetry has been used by the Sokoto Ulama and their lieutenants as a mechanism through which Islamic knowledge was transmitted to the Muslim community, considering the fact that a large number of Hausa people could not understand Arabic language fluently. In the poem, the Shehu exonerates himself for acting unjustly, and accuses the Habe rulers for advocating political corruption and social injustice, which are contrary to the Islamic Shari'ah. In this paper, an attempt has been made to examine the authorship controversy, reasons for the poem and the lessons learnt from it. It is the position of the paper that the teachings of the poem will play a significant role in reducing the rate of political corruption and social injustice in our societies if put into consideration.*

KEYWORDS: Intellectual, Sokoto Caliphate, Hausa Aami, Ulama, Shari'ah.



INTRODUCTION

The Sokoto Jihad movement, otherwise known as the Jihad of Shehu Usman Danfodiyo, is certainly one of the most widely known Islamic movements in the anal history of the West African sub-region (Augi, 1988). The aftermath of the movement was the establishment of a huge political entity known as the Sokoto Caliphate by the first decade of the 19th century, the greatest ever created in the history of Africa (Maishanu, 2018). Little wonder therefore that scholars in both West Africa and other parts of the world enormously unveiled the extent of the Jihad in terms of its scope and dimension. As argued by Adeleye (1974), the Jihad is a profound political, social, demographic, cultural, religious, economic and intellectual revolution which was in its entirety unprecedented in its scope and intensity in the history of West-central Sudan. Despite the fact that there was an array of ideological debate in an attempt to interpret the foundation upon which the Jihad was executed and the basis of the political appointment after the Jihad, the exponents of the movement stood firmly on their knees and maintained that the Jihad was fully an intellectual movement, looking at the considerable literature written by the Jihad leaders. It is on record that the Shehu and his lieutenants produced over four hundred treatises just to establish the Islamic ideological basis of their actions and responses to the dynamics of change (Bugaje, 2015). In fact, this huge intellectual output makes the Sokoto Caliphate unique in the history of the continent and remains one of its most enduring legacies (ibid).

However, whatever the type of interpretation one may offer to the movement, it is incontrovertible that the movement was basically spearheaded by reputable scholars, the most prominent being the trio of Shehu, his brother Abdullahi and his son, Muhammad Bello. As scholars, after vigorous scrutiny of their society, especially on its un-islamic nature, they directed their intellectual endeavors in different forms (Augi, 1988). Consequent upon this, they engaged themselves in oral preaching tours from one locality to the other, writing Islamic books and pamphlets, composing poems in Arabic, Fulfulde and Hausa languages, and engaging in intellectual debates over issues of law with some of their scholar-colleagues (ibid). This paper therefore examines poetic works of the Jihad leaders with particular reference to *Wallahi-Wallahi*, written by Shehu Usmanu Danfodiyo.

Provenance of the Manuscript

The manuscript is undated, but believed to be written after the execution of the Sokoto Jihad and establishment of the Sokoto town. The text of the poem is in the Sokoto History Bureau Library under the Arabic Archival Manuscript section with reference number: AMSS 4/19/123. The text is not perfectly clean and clear but it is fairly readable.

The poem has three pages size 22 x 17cm written in Hausa *Ajami*, with black ink called *Tawada* (Taddawa) and composed in a stylish fifteen verses with sixty six lines including the *Basmalah*. The pages are unnumbered. It started with *Bismillah Ar-Rahmanir rahim* and ended with *Tammam bi hamdillah*. The color of the paper in which the poem was written is white, which has now turned brown with age. There is equally no marginal commentary in the text.



Authorship Debate

Certainly, and as has been discovered, the most notable distinguishing feature of the Sokoto Jihadists was the range of values of their learning (Dahiru, 1979). Many of their scholarly works are extensive and can be accessed in libraries and archives in various places within West Africa and beyond. Some of these works have been edited and/or translated and many have been used or cited by scholars of different disciplines. However, there is still an enormous volume of those literary works waiting to be digested so as to bring to the fore the extent of the contributions of these learned *ulama*, not only to scholarship in particular, but for the good of the society in general (Minna, 2010).

Authorship anonymity constitutes a major constraint of not only the 17th and 18th centuries Hausa *Ajami* poems, but also the 20th century ones. There are cases of several anonymous Hausa *ajami* pamphlets in which the names are withheld. In so many instances, those literary works were deliberately produced unnamed by their original authors. *Taqwa* and the fear of getting involved in *riya* might be the reasons why those scholars refuse to openly claim authorship for some of their intellectual works. In fact, this philosophy of *taqwa* imbibed by those neo-classical scholars helped in no small measure in doing away with intellectual plagiarism.

However, considering the authorship of the poem in question, there was an array of ideological debate. The point of argument was on the origin of the poem itself, whether it was written in Fulfulde or Hausa *ajami*. There is no doubt that the popular poem was composed by the Shehu himself, but some contended that it was written in Fulfulde *ajami* not Hausa and was later translated by his daughter Nana Asma'u. The exponents of this view explained that at the very period the poem was composed by the Shehu, he was not fluent in Hausa language. To them, one cannot write on the language he is not versed in. They therefore argued that significant numbers of Shehu's *ajami* literary works were written in Fulfulde not Hausa.

Notwithstanding, other scholars vehemently rejected the above assertion and maintained that the poem was composed and written in Hausa by the Shehu himself. In defense, the apologists of this view reacted that the Shehu was fluent in Hausa long before the outbreak of the Jihad, that is to say, during the preaching tours. Though they did not completely reject the rumor of the Shehu's non-fluency in Hausa, they asserted that the Sheikh broke the silence of the existing rumor by writing the said poem in Hausa.

Another bone of contention about the poem was the arbitrary use of the phrase *Wallahi-Wallahi* which comes after the end of each verse, which appeared severally—about fifteen times in the poem. To them, this falls within the category of what is known as *Ayman al-talaq*. They held the opinion that the Sheikh as a learned person, who is fully aware of the effect and consequences of *ayman al-dalaq*, will not be swearing arbitrarily like that on a baseless account. However, others looked at it from a different perspective. Their opposite submission was that the frequent use of the phrase did not fall within the said category, taking into cognizance that it was in written form not spoken form and secondly, the Sheikh wanted to pass an important message to his *Ummah*. That is also enough to tell people how Islam generally rejected injustice among people, especially among the leading authorities.

However, after undergoing the poem's authorship debate, the research has the following observations. From the outset, the idea of Shehu's non-fluency was found defective. This is on



the account that the Sokoto *Ulama* were generally known to be polyglots and had acquired vast fluency in different languages and dialects. In particular, Shehu was characterized as a multi-lingual who mastered not only Hausa but other languages like Tamashek, and Zarma which he hugely used during his preaching enterprise (Dahiru, 1979).

In addition, one important thing observed by this research was the tradition of those scholars of mentioning their names categorically in any *takhmis* they offered in any particular work. Such has been the tradition of Abdullahi Fodiyo, Isah Autan Kware and Nana Asma'u, to mention but a few. Nana, in particular, did mention that the popular *Tabbat Hakikah* was written in Fulfulde by Shehu in 1812 and was twenty years later translated into Hausa, and later, her brother Isah did the *takhmis*. Nana absolutely mentioned that in the last verse of the poem (v. 49). *Wakar Gewaye* was another poem composed by Nana in Fulfulde, but after her death, was translated into Hausa by her brother Isah. In addition, in *Godaben Gaskiya* (The Path of Truth), Nana stated in verse 125 that Shehu was the one who composed the poem and she translated it into Hausa. More so, the popular poem *Labaran Shehu* (The Story of Shehu) was written in Fulfulde *ajami* by Nana but translated into Hausa *ajami* by her brother, Isah without *takhmis*. This was clearly stated in verse 92 of the poem.

Nevertheless, in this poem (*Wallahi Wallahi*), Nana Asma'u neither claimed the translation of the poem into Hausa nor did she attribute the *takhmis* to herself. The non-inclusion of the poem in Jean Boyd and Mack's work is also another signal that Nana might have had no helping hand in the translation of the work. The claim is not in any way arguing that all Nana's literary works were presented or discussed therein, but it is beyond denial that the work contained greater part of her works. With this therefore, a work of this magnitude (the poem) is not expected to be neglected or omitted.

Furthermore, the most convincing evidence to support the claim that it was Shehu who originally composed the poem into Hausa is that up till today, no Fulfulde version of the poem has ever been produced to support the claim that it was Nana who translated the work into Hausa. In a nutshell, considering the aforementioned points, it is the position of this paper that the poem was written in Hausa by Shehu himself. If there was anything done by his daughter, Nana, it was the *takhmis*, which she did not even state.

The Reasons

Although the primary objective behind the production of this particular poem is one but along the line, the Sheikh explicitly delivered several important admonishments therein. The most striking intent was for the Sheikh to exonerate himself from the accusation leveled against him by some of his *jama'a* for forcefully confiscating their lands in the process of establishing the new Sokoto town immediately after the Jihad. Dissatisfied with this, the Sheikh publically distanced himself from this baseless claim which he categorically stated in verse four of the poem.

In a related development, the Sheikh used the avenue to condemn to a large extent the political corruption, injustice, extortion, the illegal confiscation of masses' lands, and their forceful conscription into forced labor by the ten authorities. All these according to him indicate a total display of injustice being perpetrated by the leading authorities. He explained that the purpose of justice is to provide fair treatment to each individual without exception, in regard to their personal rights, according to the Islamic *Shari'ah*. Therefore, the cardinal objective of *Shari'ah*



at any given time is the total purification of the society, which will in turn ensure an aggregate display of justice, humanism, lawful material possession, and economic equilibrium irrespective of societal social strata.

More so, Shehu vehemently preached against indolence, which he viewed as a nerve centre of societal dysfunction. He argued that idleness gives birth to envy, discomfort, fraud, lying and almost every other evil work. The sluggard resorts to preying on the properties of others.

Wallahi-Wallahi: I swear by Allah – I swear by Allah

Language of Origin: Hausa Ajami

Source of Text: Sokoto State History Bureau

The name, “*Wallahi-Wallahi*,” which literally connotes ‘I swear by Allah – I swear by Allah,’ was derived from the end of the first verse, which continued to appear at the end of each verse. The poem is an expression of Shehu’s sadness on some Muslims who chose to remain in palaces, and their various acts of misconduct. The work equally contained a strong warning on the then authorities particularly on the application of justice and protection of human rights with particular reference to masses and orphans, vis-a-vis the confiscation of their land and enslavement. The Shehu also urges the Muslim communities to seek Islamic knowledge and strict adherence to the Prophetic *Sunnah*.

The English version of the poem was also the personal effort of the researcher.

English Version

Source of Translation: Researcher’s Effort

1. We are indeed bestowed with a huge portion, a right path, *da'iyallahi*.
We should know the Shari’a law from Allah,
Likewise the Jihad and victory from Allah,
O you Muslims proclaimed *Alhamdulillah*,
We are indeed given a tremendous gift, I swear by Allah – I swear by Allah.
2. Some are certainly in this world full of hanker,
They live in palace for worldly gaining,
They discard religion, deviate from the right path and
Concentrate on worldly desire,
Whoever becomes a Muslim and concentrates only on world desire,
In this earth, what a pity, he has really fallen from his high status,
I swear by Allah.



3. Whoever gives any official position for the sake of *dubu*
In order to persistently pester the masses to give him money,
They (masses) will certainly await him there, where the money is absent,
I surely gave you thousands and more thousands of evidence
I received no piece of land in any such way, I swear by Allah, I swear by Allah.
4. For the fear of masses, orphans, I dispensed justice,
Eating of their wealth, blood and infringing their
Self-respect I dispensed justice,
Permission and prohibition of Allah, I dispensed justice,
I received nothing on this land contrary to God's justice,
Except based on Shari'a, I swear by Allah, I swear by Allah.
5. He who overtakes the land of a poor person and confiscates the land,
He persistently indulges in associating partner with Allah,
And profligacy on earth,
They extort and oppress in order to cultivate land,
Whoever takes away a piece of land to cultivate,
In this world, he has surely committed a horrible offence, I swear by Allah.
6. They are forced to cultivate and pay farm land tax, by this circumstances,
Ram for the completion of the Qur'an and *layya*
They do present at this circumstances, they erect walls and rooms by this
circumstance,
Whoever takes away a piece of land by this circumstances,
The knife of the devil has undoubtedly slaughtered him, I swear by Allah.
7. I possessed neither slaves nor *lihidda* (quit)
talk less of erecting a town,
I possessed not a single ridge talk less of erecting a town,
I overtake no one, but it was the authorities,
They have overtaken you for the sake of their lavishness, I swear by Allah.



8. You should be careful about their land, for you to know,
You should be careful about their children, for you to know,
You should be careful of their properties, for you to know,
There is much poison on their farmlands, for you to know,
There is a severe humiliation on their farm lands, I swear by Allah.
9. Whoever seizes their domain, for you to know,
Whoever seizes the gateway of their land, for you to know,
Whoever seizes their properties, for you to know
Whoever seizes their farmlands, for you to know
He indeed committed his own *diban*, I swear by Allah.
10. By the time it was seized, for you to know,
By the time it was cleared, for you to know,
The country that unbelievers were conquered, for you to know,
By the time there is *fajju* on their farmlands, for you to know,
Whoever leaves them, certainly he followed our command, I swear by Allah.
11. He constructs temporary shed, fence and await,
But all in vain to be destroyed
Someone will cultivate and to put cattle to destroy his farm produce,
And someone has no privilege to ask his relatives to cultivate for him,
Or to ridicule people's personality for his own benefit
You should say it all that they refused to adhere to our command, I swear by God.
12. Whoever contends the throne with Sarki, I am not involved,
Whoever engages in enmity with the Almighty, I am not involved
I do not attend the palace, therefore I will not enter into
All thanks be to Allah, everybody hears I entered not,
On all issues related to the throne, I swear by Allah, I swear by Allah.



13. Whoever loves God the Almighty should keep on praying and love others exceedingly,

Whoever loves God the Almighty should seek for knowledge and know it vastly

Whoever loves Allah the superior, He too loves him, therefore love Him immensely,

The Sunnah of Prophet is really the right path adhered to if firmly,

Whoever follows it, surely he benefited, I swear by God.

Lessons

In general, Islam admonishes human beings to always arbitrate every matter with justice and remove every bias in upholding justice even if it requires taking a stance against one's own interest. Thus, Islam was built upon two important pillars: warding off evil and bringing goodness in the society. Within this magnitude of upholding the good and condemning evil acts known as *Amr bil ma'aruf wannahyi anil munkar*, injustice against humanity was totally rejected in both the Qur'an and the prophetic traditions. Qur'an 4:40 stated that:

Verily Allah does not do even an atom's weight of injustice. If there is any god (done), He doubleth it, and gives from His own presence a great reward

In addition, in one of the *Hadith al-qudus*, the prophet (S.A.W.) quotes God as saying, 'O my servants, I have forbidden injustice upon myself and have made it forbidden amongst you, so do not commit injustice.'

One of the legacies left behind by the Sokoto poets of the Jihad era was the social criticism in poetry. The society was systematically mirrored in it while nameless individuals or actors or even their bad (unislamic) practices were completely denounced. With this, the Sheikh used the poem as an instrument for criticizing the society especially those in the position of authority.

Therefore, looking at the content of the poem, there are huge important lessons to learn. In the first place, it became clear that people, who are vested with certain responsibilities, are subject to a series of accusations whether right or wrong. It is therefore left to them to find a proper mechanism for self defense. Within this sphere too, the right to freedom of expression is equally guaranteed. This is glaringly seen where individuals or groups of people are to articulate their opinion, ideas or grievances without fear of retaliation, molestation or any legal action against them from the existing authorities. This explains that the caliphate leadership allowed people to discuss exchange and debate ideas. The poem also teaches that indolence or the factor of idleness is not tenable in Islam. Society is therefore vehemently urged to struggle hard for their livelihood in accordance with Islamic injunction.

More importantly, as the concept of justice in Islam is rooted in God's divine nature, injustice is therefore a deviation from justice and violation of truth. In relation to this, extortion, political corruption, illegal confiscation of masses' lands and their conscription into forced labor are strongly forbidden in Islam and declared as a total display of injustice. In short, the contemporary leadership has a great lesson to learn from the poem.



CONCLUSION

In spite of the robust ideological argument on the original authorship of the poem, it is apparent that one of the legacies left by the Sokoto Jihadists was the social criticism syndrome through poetry in both Hausa and Fulfulde *ajami* writing practice. By and large, the Sheikh through the poem hugely mirrored his community where different actors, especially the political class and their un-Islamic cultures and practices were openly attacked and condemned. More importantly, the society was strongly urged to imbibe the culture of following the commandments of Allah and footsteps of His blessed messenger. There is a clear indication that the Shehu uses the poem as a tool for criticizing some leaders along the line in the spirit of enjoying good and forbidding evil, better known as *Amr bil ma'aruf wannahyi anil munkar* as ordained in the glorious Qur'an that 'there should be a community among you who will command people for good and forbid evil.' This is what in aggregate the poem contained.

In a nutshell, one can arguably assert that among the many intellectual contributions of the Shehu and his lieutenants was the application of poems in their literary works having realized the relevance of the mechanism in their religious revivalism within the Hausaland.

Notes

1. Some scholars debate extensively that the Jihad movement was fundamentally racially motivated, a tussle between the Fulani race and the Hausa race, and later between the Hausa/Fulani and the non-Muslims. Others also maintained that the economic considerations are the driving forces behind the Jihad rather than the religious motives. For more details, see H.M. Maishanu, op cit.
2. A locally prepared ink through a mixture of charcoal, Arabic gum and water.
3. It is a prayer formula and phrase recited before each chapter of the glorious Qur'an with the exception of *Surah Al-Taubah* (chapter nine).
4. The Arabic word *taqwa* means forbearance, fear and abstinence. It is also an Islamic term for being conscious and cognizant of Allah.
5. Linguistically, the word is rooted from the Arabic word '*ra'aa*', which means to see, to behold or to view. However, technically, it means 'to perform acts which are pleasing to Allah, with the intention of pleasing other than Allah.
6. *Da'iyallahi* is referring to a call from Allah.
7. *l-Hamdu Lillahi*, to proclaim thanks to Allah
8. *Dubu* in this context is referring to any amount of money, big or small collected illegally.
9. *Layya*, A sacrifice observed by Muslims at the 10th day of every month of *Muharram* annually.
10. *Diban*. It is an act of taking away something from other people.



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