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Sheikh 'Uthman Dan Fodio is one of the most influential Islamic scholars in the history of Islam in West Africa. He was both; a Mujahid (fighter for the sake of Islam) and Mujadid (reformer) of the place what is historically known as the Sokoto Khalifate of West Africa.

Sheikh Uthman Dan Fodio is little known, although he was a scholar of great learning who fought for the sake of Islam at his time and established what could be called a khilafah in central Africa.

Sheikh Uthman was born at Maratta, a town in the Hausa state of Gobir, on 29th Safar 1168 AH / Sunday 15th December 1754. His father Muhammad Fodio was a well known scholar at his time in Gobir, a descendant of the Torankawa Fulani and heir to a long Islamic tradition of learning. Coming from an intellectual family Uthman had two advantages: access to one of the best instructions and a social status in a society full of respect for learning. He learnt the Qur'an and then proceeded to study Fiqh (Islamic law) and Arabic language. He then proceeded, this time under the supervision of scholars renowned in their respective fields, many of whom turned out to be his uncles, to under take advanced studies, where the curriculum is heavy and the influence of the teachers great. Here he studied Tafsir (explanation of the Holy Qur'an), Hadith (sayings of Prophet Mohammad 'PBUH', Sirah (life of Prophet Mohammad 'PBUH'), Fiqh, Arabic Language, Mathematics and Astronomy. His childhood was totally dedicated to learning, fitting like some of his contemporaries into an already institutionalised system of education in his society. Sheikh Uthman studied quite a variety of subjects.

He received a thorough grounding in these fields and before reaching twenty he had already written his first work in his mother tongue, reflecting not only the early intellectual maturity but also a propensity for literary out put. By the time he was twenty he had formerly finished the basic texts for advanced studies and free to pursue a career.

Sheikh Uthman's teachers not only imparted knowledge, but also as was usual in this system of education, influenced him majorly.

However this did not prevent disagreement on certain issues. However disagreeing with his scholars never affected in any way the Sheikh's respect for them. As Sheikh 'Uthman advanced his knowledge, and entered his early adulthood, his piety and extreme simplicity, exceptional intellectual ability and charismatic personality began to attract disciples from his society.

Sheikh Uthman was deeply worried about the violations of the Islamic Shari'a (God's Commands), the neglect of the Prophet's Sunnah at that time.

The more he read the more he seemed to find this state of affairs unacceptable. The situation was not for want of teachers, indeed there were many, but the teachers had kept themselves in their ivory towers making their knowledge available only for very few who cared to come. There were teachers who instead of correcting the ordinary people, were in fact making fortunes out of their ignorance. They were often convinced by rulers to perpetuate all manners of injustices. So by the time Sheikh Uthman was through with formal studies and became a man of his own he had already decided to devote his time to educating the public the basics of the Islamic religion. He was soon to be joined by his brother Abdullah and later on his son Muhammad Bello.

Convinced of his role in reforming his society and educating ignorant people, Sheikh Uthman devoted his time, effort, and his entire life to teaching, preaching and writing. The content and method of his preaching were geared towards achieving the desired targets.

Sheikh Uthman, who was keen to change his society, studied its problems and came up with a strategy that was most fitting for the circumstances at that time. What seemed to have taken the Sheikh's immediate concern was the ignorance of the masses concerning Islam despite the presence of many scholars.

Local customs and beliefs were mixed up with Islamic teachings.

Later in the company of his disciples Sheikh Uthman started traveling to different countries to spread the teachings of Islam and deliver his message. With Degel as his base, Sheikh Uthman and his group traveled to other towns in Gobir teaching and preaching with remarkable success. As 'Abdullah himself reported in his Tazyin al-Waraqah:

"Then we rose up with the Shaykh helping him in his mission work for religion. He traveled for that purpose to the east and to the west, calling the people to the religion of Allah by his preaching in different languages and destroying customs contrary to Muslim law. Some of the people from surrounding countries came to him and entered his community while we were in his country which had become famous through him."

The result, as 'Abdullah reported, was that people started to respond positively to Sheikh Uthman's preaching in large numbers and some started coming to him in groups after his return to Degel.

However, the difference between the content and method of his da'wah (calling for Islam) and those of other scholars was still not vivid. Now that the difference and impact of Shaykh Uthman's method had begun to manifest itself, opposition started. Many scholars began to oppose the Sheikh and accused him of such things as hypocrisy, sedition, hearsay and misleading the common people.

Neither was the opposition unexpected nor was the Sheikh unaware of the problems his preachings would raise. The Sheikh decided to start writing, arguing scholars-

where he excelled them and always emerged victorious - and attacking the rigid among them who had created the problems the Sheikh was trying to solve.

In this process alone, the Sheikh was reported by Muhammad Bello (his son) to have written over fifty books.

Foremost in the Sheikh's attack were those corrupt scholars most of whom were associated with the ruler's court, who in their efforts to maintain the established order and protect their vested interest, justified political corruption, immorality and all sorts of evils on the grounds that these were customs and tradition. Making this point clear the Sheikh said:

"Among their misconceptions is that some of them (i.e. the scholars) tolerate unworthy customs on the grounds of the sayings which are widespread in the lands, that the custom of a land is Sunnah. But this is falsehood and confusion according to the consensus opinion, because a custom should not be tolerated if it contradicts the Sunnah (of the Prophet)".

Sheikh Uthman Dan Fodio's most important work is said to be his *Ihya al Sunnah Wa Ikhmad al Bida*, in which he reportedly said:

"Let the critic of this book know that my aim in it is the revival of the Sunnah of the holy Prophet Mohammad (PBUH)".

Sheikh Uthman, among other things, commanded his pupils to teach their wives and children. All the women of his household were educated. Foremost among them was Nana Asma'u - who is well known role model, a Muslim woman scholar and poet. As well as maintaining the household, she played an important part in reforming the society as well.

By 1810 Sheikh Uthman had created a vast empire, to be administered by emirs in accordance with Qur'anic law. High standards of public morality replaced the corruption of the Hausa states and widespread education was achieved.

In 1815 Sheikh Uthman retired, appointing his son Mohamed Bello his successor and suzerain over all the emirates. Bello had built the city of Sokoto, of which he became the sultan, and he considerably extended the empire, establishing control of west Bornu and pushing down into the Yoruba Empire of Oyo.

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