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THE SOKOTO CALIPHATE

by Murray Last

*Research Fellow in Nigerian History, Northern History Research
Scheme, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria*

This book, based largely on nineteenth century Arabic documents from Sokoto, gives an account in outline of the origins of the Sokoto caliphate and its history up to the coming of the British in 1903. The emphasis is on the maintenance of Dar-al-Islam within the Sokoto hinterland.

The book begins by describing the distinctions which existed in north-western Hausaland between peasants and pastoralists, between Hausa, Fulani and Tuareg, and between established rulers and scholars. The early life of the scholar Uthman b. Fodiye is then described, and the way his Community developed. When fighting finally broke out between the Community and the state of Gobir, the demands of war changed the Community from a scholastic group enjoying popular sympathy to one depending largely on the military strength of Fulani clans. After the war an administration based on Islamic principles was developed. Since the dominant position of some of these clans alienated other peoples in the Community, the policy of the Caliph Muhammad Bello and his successors was to reduce the relative power of the clan leaders by giving territorial commands to men loyal only to the Caliph. This tended to preserve the Islamic nature of the caliphate, and thus strengthened the authority of the Caliph over the outlying emirates.

As an illustration of the government of Sokoto, a history and description of the vizierate is given. The Viziers were instrumental in maintaining the caliphate both within Sokoto and within the wider area of the Sokoto hegemony. As administrators and diplomatists, they supported the Caliph and enforced his decisions, while as scholars of great learning they helped to perpetuate the Islamic ideals on which the caliphate was founded.

Professor Thomas Hodgkin has written of this book, 'It supersedes all that has so far been written on this subject, and corrects . . . innumerable errors and misinterpretations of previous writers. It is a work of scholarship in the best sense of the word, and the pages relating to sources, as well as the bibliography, are invaluable.'



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Cover illustration: an example of the caliph seal of Sokoto c. 1827, from a letter from Muhammed Bello (1817-1837); photograph by the author by kind permission of the owner, the Alkalin Waziri, Sokoto.