The Sokoto Caliphate emerged from the tajdid process which was led by Shehu Usman Dan Fodio (1754-1817). The process of the revolution, however, started in 1774, when Shehu Usman was about twenty years old, and it culminated in the establishment of dar al Islam, generally known as the Sokoto Caliphate, around 1803. Shehu Usman's death in 1817 brought to an end the revolutionary phase in the history of the Caliphate. It heralded a new phase which covered a period of twenty years, from 1817 to 1837. It is in that phase that the Caliphate was nurtured into an Islamic state and a centre of gravity for Islam in West Africa and beyond. The author is concerned mainly with the ideals that nourished the Caliphate, enabling it to grow from the city-state of Gobir into a West African super-state.

The Shehu had an ardent desire to ensure the survival of the Caliphate and for that he fought very hard. The first principle nurtured by Shehu Usman is the absolute sanctity of the institution of the Caliph. The Shehu did not leave anyone in doubt as to the kind of state he wanted the Sokoto Caliphate to be. It was characterised by a dar al Islam which would approximate, as is humanly possible, the Khilafat al-Rashidah, run by the upright Caliphs.

The impact of the Sokoto Revolution throughout Bilad al-Sudan was profound and far reaching. The meteoric rise of the Caliphate was in itself a spectacular phenomenon, the like of which had not occurred before. Within three decades, the Caliphate comprised about thirty emirates and numerous sub-emirates, and extended over an area of approximately one hundred and fifty thousand square miles. The Caliphate's strategy of political and cultural integration of the various communities and nations into the dar al-Islam helped to shift the balance of power in the region in favour of Islam for the first time in several centuries. The Sokoto Revolution had the effect of releasing the social energy latent in Muslim communities, creating in the process a tidal wave of revolution which swept across the whole of Bilad al-Sudan and which transformed irrevocably its political and social landscapes.

What meaning can we give to this extra-ordinary wave of Islamization in West Africa? First, we can see the phenomenon as the triumph of piety and knowledge over moral decadence and pervasive ignorance. The revolutionary process centred on discipline and knowledge and thus aimed at effecting a moral and intellectual revolution in the new communities that were raised. The larger community, hemmed in by decay and stagnation, was no match for the energy and self-confidence of the emergent new order.

Secondly, we can see the phenomenon as involving a profound reaction to a universal state of corruption and oppression. There is no doubt that most of the rulers that were swept away by the revolutions were either genuinely inept, being pagan or syncretics, or blatantly oppressive.
Nor can there be doubts about the fact that most of the people who rallied to the cause of Islam were the dispossessed—slaves, oppressed and weak tribes, women and those at the bottom of the social ladder.

Thirdly, the phenomenon can be seen as the release of the moral and intellectual energy latent in the Muslim Ummah. This energy had been suppressed by the dead weight of pagan or at least secular rule which the Muslims had had to endure for many decades. It was a humiliating experience, one that was later transformed into social anger. This anger on its part, fuelled the emerging revolutionary processes. The resultant force—once intellectual, moral and social—became explosive and domineering, sweeping away all in its way: governments, states, empires. It was Islam's response to tyranny and false systems, and the awakening of Muslims to their moral responsibilities. It may be said that this energy is latent in all Muslim communities, in all ages; Muslims today in all regions of the world can perform the same feat if only they raise themselves to the level of moral and intellectual heights which Islam requires.

The whole conception of state is built on the premise that an Islamic dispensation begins with the hijrah, which as a moral, intellectual and physical withdrawal from the domain of evil, cancels all excuses to return to pre-Islamic habits and methods of government. Hijrah imposes on the Islamic community the obligations to do justice, uphold the shariah and keep a safe distance from all practices and policies that are known to be repugnant to Islam. Hijrah also imposes on Muslims the obligation to befriend all other Muslims and enter into solidarity with them, and to abhor friendship with unbelieving powers in opposition to Islam.

Muhammad Bello believes that government's foremost obligation is to God, whose religion it must preserve, whose law it must uphold, whose set limits it must not transgress. Rulers must be "free from worldly desires", and not be infatuated with the desire to be in power. Upright government maintains security, acquires funds to promote human welfare and to prosecute the Jihad. In other words, Islamic government is established "so that the interest of religion may be guaranteed, and the entire harmony of the world likewise". In this scheme, however, people must not be allowed to jostle and hustle for public offices as if it were a booty, thereby increasing the risk of placing government into the wrong hands.

Government must necessarily be flexible, "given to kindness, more inclined to forgiveness than to anger". It must give liberally to those in need, and treat the people with tolerance. Similarly, government must possess courage and deal with problems resolutely. Above all, it must have the "steady support of its employees and the people." If it lacks generosity and fails to spend money on "fulfilling the legitimate needs of the people", people might be inclined to do without the government.

It is the function of the government to orient the general public towards justice, to raise the moral tone of society as a whole. If people treat one another unjustly, then inevitably, they will have to endure an unjust government, since it is the practice of Allah to impose oppressors on oppressors, as a punishment for their conduct. And more important, government must provide public amenities, develop the economy, keep the rural population "in prosperity", undertake urbanization projects, maintain markets and roads.
Finally, it is part of good government to be lenient in respect of restrictive laws. In political matters, it is necessary for the government to be liberal, tolerating. It should treat leaders of people and their noble ones with respect.

In the end, the author considers Caliph Mohammad Bello's views on history. Nations, he implied, are built on knowledge and commitment to fundamental moral values: as such, the first cardinal rule in the transformation of society is that those who strive for a new order from the ruins of the existing one must themselves be a true embodiment of the best traditions of knowledge and piety. In addition, each of these scholars must possess "a noble and patient character, to enable him to deal with the people in an appropriate manner. When ignorant men lead an Islamic movement, nothing but disaster must be expected".

Then of course, there must be a community dedicated to a nobler society. The Jamā’ah remained the model of Islamic movement for Muhammad Bello. This movement, was a microcosm of mankind, containing all the elements of human strength as well as weaknesses: it embraced in its ranks people of immense knowledge as well as the ignorant; men of piety as well as the most uncouth; the rich and the poor, the strong and the weak — all kinds of people, all levels of society, all stages of morality. No one was despised — neither the poor for his poverty, the profligate for his moral failures, the rich for his riches, nor the weak for his weakness; they were all one, a community.

To conclude: This book is recommended for historians of Africa and Islam and for those studying the development of government in all its context — political, social, intellectual and moral. It charts the political and intellectual development of a strong Islamic government.

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