

The African Caliphate:
The Life, Work and Teachings of Shaykh Usman dan
Fodio

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Shaykh Usman dan Fodio

Ibraheem Sulaiman

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By: Ibraheem Sulaiman
Edited by: Abdalhaqq Bewley
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Contents

Foreword	3
Introduction	11
1. Hausaland before Usman dan Fodio	19
The Philosophy of <i>Tajdīd</i>	20
The Philosophy of Law	25
The Timbuktu Tradition	28
2. The Education of Usman dan Fodio	33
The Shaping of a Character	40
3. Raising the Students	47
Intellectual Training	48
Spiritual Training	55
<i>Ṣalāt</i>	56
Fasting	58
Qur'anic Recitation	59
Remembrance of Allah	59
Charity	60
<i>Taṣawwuf</i>	61
4. Building the Community	65
Moral Ideals	65
Knowledge	66
Cognition	67
Repentance	68
<i>Zuhd</i>	69

<i>Ṣabr</i>	70
Diplomacy, Forgiveness and <i>Ḥilm</i>	71
Discipline	72
The Communal Spirit	75
Brotherhood	76
Parent-Child Obligations	78
Family Obligations	80
The New Culture	82
5. Inviting to All that is Good	89
The Philosophy of the Call	89
The Callers	99
The Methodology of the Call	102
6. Reviving the Sunnah	115
Principles of Social Mobilization	116
Errors in Hausa Society	121
Innovations in Faith	122
Innovations in the Practice of the Law	123
Innovations in <i>Iḥsān</i>	127
Advice for the ‘ <i>Ulamā</i> ’	128
7. The Intellectual War	131
Mobilization of the Muslims	131
The Subversive Parties	136
Membership of the Muslim Community	139
Mobilization of the Women	145
8. The Concerns of the <i>Mujaddid</i>	157
9. The Politics of Change	171
The Shehu and the Rulers	172
The Shehu’s Multitudes	176
Factors in the Process of Reviving Islam	179
10. The Ultimate Break	183
The Flight	189
Putting Theory into Practice	191
The <i>Hijrah</i>	191
The Imamate	194

The <i>Jihad</i>	199
11. The Declaration of <i>Jihad</i>	203
Stages of the Struggle	203
The Overthrow of the Decadent Order	205
The Internal Enemy	208
The Start of the <i>Jihad</i>	209
The Laws of War	213
The <i>Jaysh al-Futūḥ</i>	218
The Battle of Tsuntsuwa	218
The Battle of Alwassa	220
The Meeting at Birnin Gada	223
'Abdullahi's Departure from Gwandu	224
The Liberation of Alkalawa	226
12. The Vision of a <i>Mujaddid</i>	227
The Road to the Revival of the Sunnah	227
The Shehu's Vision for the <i>Khilāfah</i>	230
The Moral Foundation of the State	230
The Social Edifice of the State	233
Forestalling Disintegration	238
13. The Triumvirate	243
Principles of Legislation	254
Means of Social Integration	260
Muhammad Bello's Role	264
14. The Shehu's Legacy	269
The Legacy on Policy Making	269
On Legislation and Administration of the Law	271
On the Process of Reviving Islam	273
On the Need for Piety	276
The Shehu Passes Away	276
Achievements of the <i>Mujaddid</i>	277
The Advancement of Women	281
Conclusion	286
The Causes of Success	289
Bibliography	297

THE AFRICAN CALIPHATE

Texts written by ‘Abdullahi dan Fodio	297
Texts written by Shehu Usman dan Fodio	297
Texts written by Muhammad Bello	298
Other Arabic sources	298
Non-Arabic sources	299
Glossary	303

Allah has promised those of you who believe and do right actions that He will make them successors in the land as He made those before them successors and will firmly establish for them their deen, with which He is pleased, and give them, in place of their fear, security. They worship Me, not associating anything with Me. Any who disbelieve after that, such people are deviators.

(Surah an-Nur Ayat 55)

Foreword

OF ALL BELIEFS, ideologies and civilizations, Islam stands out distinct and unique in its resilience. No matter what damage it suffers, no matter what opposition and obstacles it faces, no matter how long the time that passes, it always reasserts itself. Islam has consistently and persistently stood on the side of the weak and oppressed, checked the excesses of the corrupt and strong, and insisted on the establishment of justice, equity and fairness in human society. It has thus offered the weak and the oppressed their only real and lasting hope and presented the corrupt and the unjust with the only real and unflinching curb on their power.

The rise and fall of nations and civilizations – indeed the entire history of mankind – is nothing but a reflection of this reality, which the future of human society will inevitably continue to reflect. The Most High says:

“If it were not for Allah's driving some people back by means of others, the earth would have been corrupted. But Allah shows favor to all the worlds.” Qur'an 2:249

In *Bilād as-Sudan*, as in other parts of the world, this reality has manifested itself in the rise and fall of states and the series of *jihads* the region was destined to see. In the nineteenth century in particular the region saw a series of *jihads*, prominent among which were those led by Usman dan Fodio in Hausaland, Aḥmadu Labbo in Macina, ‘Umar al-Fūti in Senegambia, Muhammad ‘Abdallah Hassan in

Somalia and Aḥmad al-Mahdi in Nilotic Sudan.

Of these *jihads*, that of Usman dan Fodio was perhaps the most spectacular and far-reaching and the one with the most lasting effect. It brought the various peoples that made up Hausaland into a single polity, unprecedented in scope and complexity, and gave them the security, stability and justice they had lacked under the warring Hausa states. The wave of Islamic revival it triggered reached as far as the shores of the Atlantic to the west and those of the Red Sea to the east, disturbing the geopolitical situation everywhere it went, causing radical socio-economic changes, and building Islamic states of varying sizes and complexity throughout the region of *Bilād as-Sudan*.

Bilād as-Sudan (lit. the countries of the blacks) is the name early Muslim historians gave to the vast region of savanna grassland lying between the Sahara Desert and the dense forest to the south, from the shores of the Atlantic in the west to the Nile Valley in the east. This region has from time immemorial been in constant contact with North Africa, with which it traded its gold and ivory for metal goods, salt, horses, and other such things. Over time a network of routes developed, linking various locations in North Africa to trading centers in *Bilād as-Sudan*. Because of this, trans-Saharan caravans, constantly moving backwards and forwards, became common between the two regions.

When North Africa became Islamized in the seventh century, the trans-Saharan caravans began to bring into *Bilād as-Sudan* not only Mediterranean goods but also, and far more consequentially, the good tidings of Islam. Once the message had reached the caravan destinations, it became largely the job of the indigenous populations to spread it throughout the whole of this vast region. With its universal appeal and superior culture, Islam easily found its way to all parts of the region. Wherever it went, it generated a cultural, societal and political transformation, which saw the rise of such great states as Ghana, Mali, Songhay, Kanem Borno and Darfur Funj. It also developed

centers of learning and a body of students and scholars whose activities furthered Islam in the region.

The obligation on Muslims to go in search of knowledge, the need for them to travel to Makkah (Mecca) for Ḥajj, and their responsibility to teach and spread the message, generated currents of intra-regional traffic and waves of migration that saw a massive integration of this vast region. Within only a few centuries *Bilād as-Sudan* integrated into a single entity with a common intellectual tradition, culture, economy and ideology, and it was this that facilitated, in the early nineteenth century, the spread of the wave of Islamic revival triggered by the *jihad* of Usman dan Fodio in Hausaland.

Hausaland is located in the central *Bilād as-Sudan*, bordering on Kanem Borno to the east and Songhay to the west. At certain periods prior to the *jihad*, it came under the political control of both Songhay and Borno. As the name implies, it is the land of the Hausas. The Hausas were neither an ethnic group nor the only inhabitants of the land. The bulk of inhabitants were believed to have migrated into the region some time before the tenth century from the central Sahara, perhaps due to desiccation or some such natural phenomenon. They settled in the central savanna and mixed with the indigenous people. The result was a multi-ethnic society sharing a common language – Hausa. This heterogeneity further facilitated the absorption of other ethnic groups that arrived subsequently. When the Fulani, for example, reached Hausaland early in the fifteenth century, those who settled in the towns lost not only their nomadic lifestyle but also their native language.

Prior to the spread of Islam into Hausaland, the inhabitants toiled under a variety of pagan beliefs. Though varying in detail from one community to another, these pagan beliefs usually revolved around a high distant god (*ubangiji*), who was not actively connected to everyday life, and was supplemented by a chain of supernatural forces (*iskoki*) directly in touch with men and controlling their

everyday lives. Natural resources such as agricultural land, forests, rivers, iron ore and salt deposits were believed to be in the custody of certain of these *iskoki*. Harmony with the *iskoki* was understood to be essential for a good harvest and for the success of such pursuits as hunting and fishing. Therefore, farmers, hunters and fishermen performed sacrifices and rituals, usually around stones, trees or places believed to be the habitat of the *iskoki*, to maintain harmony and secure their livelihood. Such conditions naturally supported a class of priests (*bokaye*) who acted as intermediaries between them and the people.

Islam spread into Hausaland as a result of the trans-regional movement of scholars and traders. This is popularly thought to have occurred at some time in the fourteenth century. Available historical evidence, however, suggests that Islam reached Hausaland much earlier than this and that it was not limited to one direction or to one group. The ancestors of Usman dan Fodio, for example, moved into Hausaland in the fifteenth century under the leadership of Musa Jokollo and settled in the Hausa State of Gobir.

Working day and night, collectively and individually, formally and informally, these assorted indigenous groups carried the message of Islam throughout the length and breadth of Hausaland. As it had in other parts of *Bilād as-Sudan*, in Hausaland too Islam transformed the socio-economic and political structures, boosting the economy and paving the way for the emergence of numerous independent Hausa states such as Kano, Zaria, Katsina, Gobir, Kebbi, Zamfara and Daura. With the spread of literacy and the accompanying flow of Islamic literature, Hausaland became increasingly incorporated into the wider Islamic fraternity, with its people becoming well informed about Islamic thought and ideas and about the history, geography, politics and economy of the known world. Eventually, Islam emerged as a political force in the latter part of the fifteenth century, bringing changes in the political leadership of some major Hausa states.

These developments were particularly notable in Zaria, Kano and Katsina, which at that time formed the core axis of Hausaland. The leadership of these states in that period is still remembered for the bold changes they effected in their administrations to make them conform to Islamic standards. In Kano, for example, Muhammad Rumfa invited Shaykh Muhammad al-Maghili, a North African Muslim jurist of international repute, to advise him on administering an Islamic government. Al-Maghili's visit to Kano was of great significance to the process of Islamization in Hausaland, for his books and religious rulings (*fatwās*) gained wide circulation. One of his books, *Taj ad-Dīn Fī Mā 'Ala-l-Mulūk*, described as a comprehensive treatise on government, seemed to have been highly influential throughout Hausaland.

As Islam gained strength in Hausaland, its significance as a pilgrimage route and center of learning increased. By the sixteenth century, the reputations of some Hausa state capitals as centers of Islamic learning – Kano and Katsina in particular – were already high enough to attract many Muslim scholars and students. The Ḥajj, serving as a permanent link with the rest of the Muslim world and a source of continuous flow of Islamic thought and ideas, further reinforced the intellectual development of Hausaland. In due course, an educational system with a clearly defined curriculum and methodology was fashioned along the lines of Sankore University of Timbuktu, from which it seemed to have received its greatest impetus.

However, the Moroccan invasion of Songhay at the end of the sixteenth century, with its attendant seizure of Timbuktu, weakened that intellectual impetus and upset the political stability of Hausaland, because the power of Songhay had kept some of the leaders of the Hausa states in check. With the rise of another axis of power in Hausaland, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw the almost equally powerful Hausa states engaged in continuous and devastating interstate warfare without a clear winner

emerging. Quite naturally, the security, economy and learning of Hausaland were affected by this situation.

Though learning continued, even in these difficult circumstances when movement was restricted, there were many obstacles to the spread of knowledge. Entrenched in warfare and desperate for victory, rulers in Hausaland were willing to go to any lengths to win battles, even if it meant violating the limits set by Islam. Political leadership gradually degenerated into tyranny and corruption resulting in injustice, oppression and misery for most of the people. The consequent materialism and permissiveness gave the receding paganism a chance to resurface and some Muslims started once more to mix Islamic practices with traditional pagan rituals.

Muslim scholars, who form the backbone of any Muslim society, were also affected by the pervading decadence. Some gave support to the tyrannical order by joining the rulers, whereas others withdrew into silence, leaving only a few courageous scholars to raise objections and to point accusing fingers at the tyranny and corruption around them. One of the few, who dared to raise his voice and who in fact organized a *jihad*, was Shaykh Jibril ibn 'Umar, with whom Usman dan Fodio studied and from whom he may have acquired his fervor to revive Islam and to restore the Sunnah. It was out of this rising tide of discontent on the one hand and expectation on the other that Usman dan Fodio emerged. How Usman responded to this challenging situation is precisely what this book is about.

Because this work has been produced outside of a conventional scholastic environment, it is blessedly free from those pointless academic technicalities for which universities today are so well known. The imaginative capacity, analytic insight and unique style of the author give the reader a rich and profound account of the great phenomenon that is the Sokoto *jihad*. By drawing on the rich intellectual inheritance of the Sokoto *khilāfah*, and relying on the original Arabic works of the Sokoto *jihad* leaders and

their contemporaries, the author has rescued the reader from the distortions, misconceptions and fabrications, which permeate the works of European scholars and their heirs.

For almost a century, the Muslim mind has been under the sway of imperialism, especially as manifested in its educational institutions. Muslim history has been distorted and all access to the true message of Islam has been denied. The Muslim personality has been under persistent attack and the Muslim mind fed entirely on euro-centric thoughts and ideas. Muslims, therefore, have lost self-confidence and have developed an inferiority complex. This has led to meekness and docility and a tendency to readily imitate European thought. However, history, it is said, has a habit of repeating itself and Islam, with its characteristic resilience, is reviving itself from within the very fortresses of imperialism. More and more Muslims are seeking out their true history and the true message of Islam, and abandoning the false goals they have been pursuing.

Coming at a time when an increasing number of Muslims are working to develop Islamic solutions to their problems, this book will provide them with an important part of their history and will help them define their own future. For, indeed, a people without a past are a people without a future. At this critical point, one hopes and prays that Muslims will not betray their history because if they do so, history will certainly betray them. The Most High has informed us:

“You who have iman! If any of you renounce your deen, Allah will bring forward a people whom He loves and who love Him, humble to the believers, fierce to the unbelievers, who do jihad in the way of Allah and do not fear the blame of any censurer. That is the unbounded favor of Allah which He gives to whoever He wills. Allah is Boundless, All-Knowing.” Qur’an 5:54

Usman M. Bugaje

Introduction

HISTORY moves at so slow a pace as to be almost imperceptible to the observer. Ideas that shape nations take years to take root and grow and it requires decades to mold a generation capable of undertaking and sustaining change. So the rise of a nation may take place very gradually. On the other hand, the reasons for a nation's decline may be so ingrained that they are invisible and its downward progress towards its own demise goes almost unnoticed.

What shapes history are people's moral attitudes and changes in their inner state of being. So alterations in human society occur basically because people change their beliefs and, consequently, their conception of life, basic attitudes and behavior, and in an ultimate sense, their destiny. In this way human beings are responsible for their own destiny and are the shapers of their own history.

At any given moment in his life, a man may face the moral responsibility of making a choice between striving after an exalted life or pursuing a base one. This takes as read that man is a moral being with an inherent sense of right and wrong; that he is a free agent under an obligation to choose his own path; that he has a faculty of inner sight, enabling him to visualize the ultimate result of his actions, and an inner voice, warning against evil and urging good; and that potentially he is endowed with the ability to achieve whatever end he chooses for himself.

The slow pace of history offers considerable opportunity

for people to make the right choices and to make amends for any wrong ones. The unvarying characteristics of natural processes provide ample lessons for man. He is constantly reminded that day follows night, seasons come and go, one bursting with life and luxuriance, the other dry and barren. Every day this illuminating drama is re-enacted before his eyes. Every day is a sentence in a book of lessons, every season a paragraph, and generations and epochs are simply pages and chapters in that book.

True understanding of a single day is also understanding of millions of days past and millions to come. The exactness, the order, and the perfect patterning that characterize the workings of the universe also embrace the life of man. History is, therefore, a single chain of connected events, just as mankind is a chain of connected individuals and the world itself a chain of connected eras. As Allah Himself reminds us: “*Your creation and rising is only like that of a single self.*” (31:27)

Decline is also integral to all natural processes and is a stage through which all nations must pass. A critical moment arrives in the life of every nation when a decisive choice must be made: whether to take the path that leads upwards to renewal or to continue on the downward slope of inevitable decline. The upward move demands tremendous courage and willpower. It entails much social sacrifice but is nevertheless the only honorable and redeeming course to follow. To continue the moral drift means the nation has despaired of progress and given up on its future – a course of action, which runs counter to the very notion of life and to the purpose of human existence.

A nation, which has given itself up to a condition of moral decline, is said to be *fasiq* – succumbing to the iniquitous, the immoral and the offensive. The inclination towards evil stems from a perversion of faith, from a blunting of ethical sensibility, and from a violent disruption in the inner state of individuals and in the soul of society as a whole. People in this condition are spiritually blind and materialistic in

their approach to existence. They ignore history and the ultimate purpose of human life. They fail to perceive the destructive turn that the economic and social polarization of society have taken and the consequences resulting from it.

There are several reasons why a nation begins this process of decline. It has to have abandoned its belief in, and commitment to, the Supreme Being. It may have taken up another god or gods and transferred allegiance to them. This inevitably causes a serious rift in its crucial relationship with its True Sustainer and brings about a profound disturbance in its own soul. This social apostasy is the principal cause of decline. It inexorably changes the values and norms of the society involved and, by implication, its whole world-view and way of life. The world is now perceived as a permanent reality and this means that the restraints that should characterize the moral life of society are done away with. The immutable principles, which should uphold society and on which legal, moral and social rules should be based, are now regarded as a cumbersome nuisance. People are free to flout them. The general attitude which allows this permissiveness will lead to the downfall of the society concerned.

In such critical moments nations always produce rare people who perceive the direction in which the nation is moving. They operate on a higher level of ethical and intellectual consciousness and are therefore able to understand what is happening and redirect the national course. Foremost among them are the prophets or messengers of Allah. Next come the truly learned – those who combine knowledge with moral excellence. Such people are able to implement the guidance brought by the prophets.

A prophet's duty is to transmit to his nation the Divine guidance he receives, sharpen its intellect, and raise its level of consciousness. He presents a challenge to society to awaken its conscience. This is a continuous process which

is called 'warning'. The society in question must respond to this challenge and awaken from its deep sleep in order to reach a level where it can assume full responsibility for the choices it makes. The prophet extends this challenge repeatedly. The society, now morally disturbed, makes its response each time it is challenged until its fate is decided.

The challenge issued by the prophet hinges on three things: ideological commitment, way of life, and leadership. In concrete terms, the final objective of the prophet, and by extension of a truly learned man, is to return his people to faith, to Islam. It inevitably entails the dissolution of all the illusions that have crept into the intellectual and moral fabric of society and become the basis of its ideology. It means the overthrow of the institutions that sustain the apostate life of that society. It also involves the demolition of the unyielding and unrepentant social, economic and political forces that have enslaved it.

So while the prophetic challenge is essentially ethical, it nevertheless manifests itself in all spheres of life, since its basic objective is to create a totally new socio-political grouping – an *ummah* – which may be the formation of a new society, the building of a new nation or the ushering in of a new epoch.

The process of raising people's consciousness operates on three levels. On an individual level a person is trained to see himself in relation to his Lord, in relation to the complex structure of the universe, and in relation to himself. It is also necessary for individuals to comprehend the position they hold within the social strata. Peasants who toil hard, only to have the fruits of their labor usurped and squandered by the idle, should be aware of that; laborers should be conscious of any exploitation by powerful masters; the poor should know the reasons for their poverty; women should understand any oppression and humiliation they suffer arising from gender bias. In short, all persons should know their positions in society,

why they are there, and what should be done individually and collectively to correct any imbalances that exist.

Finally it is necessary to have an intellectual perception of an ideal society, a concept of the future based on a correct understanding of life and history, and ways of dealing with the prevailing untenable state of affairs. The elevated consciousness thus generated inevitably crystallizes into a social force, so that the men and women who have been imbued with a prophet's elevated vision become a distinct, active and vigorous social entity.

To act as a historical force, a prophet firstly needs the moral authority to enable him to influence the minds of people and to sway events. Moral authority is the most potent and enduring force in history. The symbolic embodiment of it in prophethood has commanded loyalty from the larger part of humanity since the beginning of human history. A prophet also needs knowledge to enable him to understand and interpret events accurately, to tell him the absolute values upon which a society should be established, and to provide him with insight into the operation of universal forces. Finally, a prophet must have political power to enable him to administer society properly, to uproot evil and to expand the frontiers of justice. Moral force and knowledge come to the prophet without a struggle, but political power is invariably gained only through struggle.

In any reflection on the need for social change, the essential question to be answered is what makes a society so bad that it requires changing? The answer is *fasād* – corruption. *Fasād* brings about distinct social and political divisions, engendering a small but extremely powerful element in society called the *mutrafūn* – those who live in decadent and undeserved ease and luxury and who thrive off of unbridled corruption – and the rest of the people called the *mustad'afūn* – the oppressed masses of the population.

The *mutrafūn* enjoy a monopoly over the wealth and

economy of the state. The impact on their characters of the luxury they enjoy invariably results in undisciplined behavior. Their control of the economic forces leads to arrogance, a characteristic manifested not only towards other people but also even towards Allah. They grow oppressive and constitute a tyrannical minority. The *mustad'afūn*, who comprise the poor, the needy, the beggars, the debtors and the slaves, constitute the workers who generate the resources and produce the wealth of the state.

In such a society injustice becomes legitimized state policy and justice a remote and strange possibility. Society, though divided, is unified in its acceptance of injustice as an absolute value. The transformation of this society is only possible when the distinct and separate social entities are identified, the oppressors are unambiguously known as such, and the oppressed are seen to be oppressed.

A third social grouping then comes into existence who may be called the *muṣliḥūn* – people of right action. They stand between the *mutrafūn* and the *mustad'afūn* and take on the responsibility of bringing society back to a correct human balance, of acting as a force to liberate the oppressed. In doing this they will certainly incur the wrath of the tyrannical power elite. Paradoxically, however, the cord that binds together the *mutrafūn* and the *mustad'afūn* has, in many cases, proved unbreakable. This may be because oppression has the effect of destroying the spiritual qualities of human beings to such an extent that they lose the moral stamina to resist evil and resign themselves to it. Or perhaps it is just that human beings can reach a stage of moral degeneration when they simply lose interest in striving after justice or excellence.

This paradox is responsible for many of the tragic political realities of world history and the terrible contradictions which still exist in so many societies. It creates the conditions and justification for slavery and has been responsible for the sorry plight of the peasantry in all but a few periods of

history. We find a handful of families controlling the great bulk of the wealth and resources of a nation, while the majority of its citizens can barely meet their basic needs. Dignified patience is required from those who take on the task of transforming such societies. The work is thankless and tedious, a Divinely imposed responsibility which has to be discharged without anticipation of any earthly reward.

It is within the framework of this philosophical understanding of social history that Hausaland – the large area of *Bilād as-Sudān* which lies between Lake Chad in the east and the Middle Niger in the west – of the twelfth century A.H./seventeenth century A.D, and the later emergence of Shehu Usman dan Fodio, must be seen. This framework is necessary if we are to appreciate the circumstances, both negative and positive, which created the generation of the spiritual and social momentum that, in turn, culminated in the establishment of the Sokoto *khilāfah* and the eventual social and political transformation of the *Bilād as-Sudan* as a whole.

The Shehu divided the people of Hausaland into three groups. The first were those who believed sincerely in Islam, the second were straightforward idolaters who worshipped stones, trees or the like, and the third, whom he named the *mukhalliṭūn* (syncretists), were those who practiced an outward show of Islam but combined that with a simultaneous observance of various pagan rites. To the Shehu, the last group constituted the main problem because it included the bulk of the leadership of Hausaland.

The result was that unbelief, iniquity and open defiance of Allah's laws had become the order of the day. The social system was immoral. Women were oppressed and, in Shehu's words, "neglected like animals". There was unrestrained mixing of men and women. Cheating and fraud were rife. In the legal sphere the *Sharī'ah* had been subjected to significant alteration and property laws were geared towards benefiting the rulers. Hausaland was at a critical stage in its history, needing a profound challenge

to stir its conscience. Shehu Usman dan Fodio was the man who emerged to lay down this challenge, to awaken the vast land to its religious and social responsibilities and to provide an alternative political, moral and intellectual leadership.