
The Contributions of Abdullahi Smith to the Development of African Historiography

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Abstract

History and historiography have been part of the existence of humans, the study of which has gradually attracted the attention of scholars. History has received its share of attention, while historiography is gradually following its trend. Though the duo are part and parcel of each other, the later tend to be shied away from by many scholars and students of history. Historiography assists historians not only to understand history but also to understand the process and the actors behind writing and study of history. It is in this perspective that the contribution of a scholar, writer and teacher of history, Abdullahi Smith are examined with a view to understanding and evaluating his contributions to development of African historiography, more particularly that of Northern Nigeria. Historical method of enquiry is applied while collecting, collating of materials and writing this write up. It is discovered that the efforts of Abdullahi Smith have raised several important issues concerning the study of history and historiography of Northern Nigeria more particularly the growth and development of settlements to towns and to cities as a process of natural growth, rather than formations by conquerors and warlords.

Keywords: *History, historiography, contributions, decolonisation, African perspective*

Introduction

A Professor of history at Ahmadu Bello University Zaria Nigeria, Abdullahi Smith was a one-time Vice President of Historical Society of Nigeria. He was formerly known as Henry Ferdinand Charles Smith and was widely recognised as a leading authority on history of Islamic States of West Africa. He had a Master of Arts (M.A) from Canterbury. Born on 5th May 1920 at Somerset, England to an English family as Henry Fredrick Charles Smith, he remained with

his maiden name up to 1967 when he converted to Islam and became Abdullahi Smith. He died at Zaria in Kaduna State, Northern Nigerian on 12th June 1984. At his early age he joined the British army and served in India during the Second World War after which he went to the University of Cambridge for his first degree on scholarship.¹ He joined the British education service and did some teaching in Sudan.

The University College Ibadan Years

Abdullahi Smith came to Nigeria in 1955 when he was recruited to teach history at University Collage Ibadan by a renowned historian and Vice Chancellor of the University, Professor K. O. Dike. The time of recruitment of Smith was a period of significant changes taking place as an attempt was being made to introduce syllabuses of the college in accordance with the needs and aspirations of the environment in which the university existed. He wholeheartedly wanted to and joined the writing of African History from the African perspective.²

R. A Adeleye mentioned that Smith came to Ibadan to join the revolutionary movement in the teaching and writing of African history from an African perspective. That is with Africans at the centre of their own history. He developed himself as one of the architects in the building of what deservedly became known as the Ibadan School of History. The Ibadan History Series grew up out of the effort of some members of the Department of History University of Ibadan including Smith to evolve a balanced and scholarly study of history of African people south of the Sahara. In the years before the Second World War, the study of history was retarded and vitiated by an assumption of many scholars that lack of written records in some parts of Africa meant the absence of history.³

European writers depended so much on written documents to the extent that they tended to equate written documents with history. As such, many of them saw no history in Africa due to lack of written documents. Even in the 19th century when Europeans occupied Africa, the scholars did not make attempts to identify the methods of preserving African history by Africans and effort to build on it. Historical traditions in Africa unknown to many then, was preserved

in form of customs, proverbs, sayings and historical traditions of their communities. Historians continued to write as if Africans were not active participants in the great events that shaped their continent.⁴

The above view was shared by Smith as noted in "A Little New Light" a collection of his works where he notes that the fact that the real conflict between Africa and European institutions was hardly felt anywhere more than 200 miles from the coast before 1800's leaves an area of nearly 700,000 square miles southward of the latitude of Lake Chad unaccounted for up to the late 19th century in so far as the European influence type of theme is concerned.⁵ With this view in mind, Abdullahi Smith dedicated most of his active life as a historian trying to uncover the African history. He came out with a paper first published in 1961 titled "A Neglected Theme of West African History: The Islamic Revolutions of the 19th century".⁶ Smith further stressed that the history of West African Savannah in the 19th century had its own independent theme and consist of series of revolutionary movements that radically changed the society and the political complexion of the whole zone during the hundred years or so before the establishment of the European government.⁷ These movements were the Jihads resulting in the emergence of a new West African aristocracy and widespread conversion to Islam.⁸

Another contribution of Abdullahi Smith to African Historiography is in the use of sources in history. He encouraged historians and students of history in his time to use oral traditions that are logical and rational. He however disputed the legend of Bayajida or Abuyazid that came in multiple versions, one of which says that Bayajida came from the Middle East to Daura and killed a snake or serpent that hitherto prevented or denied unhindered access to people from taking water from the only well in the town. Bayjida's reward was getting married to the queen and having seven sons that formed the Hausa Bakwai. He also had other seven sons from a concubine that formed the Banza Bakwai. Another version of the story was that Abu Yazid had a son Bawo who also had sons that formed the seven Hausa and Banza Bakwai states.

Smith however came with a strong proposition which traced the history and development of villages (*kauyuka*) to towns (*garuruwa*) and the cities (*birane*). We congratulate Smith for debunking the widely accepted Haematic Hypothesis which said that the Hausa and other Sudanese societies had no history of formation of strong political units but rather they depended on white skinned Arabs and others to lead them. In his article titled "Some Considerations Relating to the Formation of States in Hausa Land", Abdullahi Smith believes that states were also formed by men. These great men were responsible for the formation of several states and scholars of history should discover not only who they were but also what secret powers they had.⁹ This bourgeois materialist approach tried to enquire on the mystical powers or otherwise of the state founders when he in another instance wondered who these sets Bayajida, Oduduwa, Kiskas, Tseodos, and Oramiyans were, what was the secret of their powers and in short just how they managed to produce the states that we know in Hausa land, Borno, Yoruba, Nupe, Benin and elsewhere that has hardly been enquired.

This reminder to historians by Abdullahi Smith led to the production of two important works from Ibadan School of history. *The Sokoto Caliphate*¹⁰ by Murray Last, published in 1967 and "Power and Diplomacy in Northern Nigeria 1864-1906"¹¹, Sokoto Caliphate and its Emirates" by R. A. Adeleye, both originated as Ph. D theses. The two works were supervised by Smith.

Apart from the above, there is also the work of Hambali Mohammed Junju "Asalin Hausawa" (The Origin of Hausas) an unpublished paper in which he mentioned that we can hardly take Bayajida who is proved to have prevailed in the tenth century as the peregrinator of Hausa since in the first place, the legend itself is contradictory at that time of Bayajida's arrival in Daura where he found the indigenous-inhabitants with a strong institutions of sarauta system (rule, authority) headed by Sarauniya, a queen. They also had their own language of communication which was certainly Hausa. Hallon W.K. and Hambali Junju in a joint publication titled *Asalin Hausawa, the Bayajida Legend in Hausa Folklore* also agreed that Bayajida came to Daura in the

10th century. The debate is still open courtesy of Abdullahi Smith.

Abdullahi Smith at Ahmadu Bello University Zaria

In 1962 Abdullahi Smith moved to Ahmadu Bello University Zaria (ABU), Kaduna State Northern Nigeria and became pioneer Head of Department of History. The university was established in 1962 with the mandate to encourage teaching and research as well as to provide social services to the entire people of Northern Nigeria. In a speech on the occasion of its inauguration the then Premier of Northern Nigeria, Sir Ahmadu Bello the Sardauna of Sokoto, outlined the above-mentioned basic functions for which the university was established (teaching, research and community service) and that the university shall continue to earn respect as long as it keeps growing in line with its stated objectives. If however, it deviates from the stated objectives, it will lose respect and dignity accorded to it. This basic principle continues to uphold in ABU and other universities in Nigeria.

It was in line with these objectives that Abdullahi Smith settled at Zaria and established Zaria School of History, just like the Ibadan School of History and it became ABU School of Historiography. He also built Arewa House in 1970, the Centre for Research and Historical Documentation. Before then, the Northern Historical Research Scheme had earlier been established in 1964, while Sokoto State History Bureau was established with his assistance in 1977. People like Bashir Ikara and many teachers, researchers, students of history and the members of the general public benefited from these centres.

Contributions to Historiography of Northern Nigeria

In a view to decolonise the writing of African History from colonial perspective, Smith debunked the view or norm in the age of colonial rule that African societies without European written sources had no history to be written, or thought.¹² Similarly, the colonial historiography also said changes in the African societies before colonial rule were shaped by racial and tribal conflicts. It is in this perspective that one of the colonial intellectuals a former District Officer (D.O) and Resident of Sokoto Province namely H.A.S

Johnson published a book in 1967 on the 1804 Sokoto Jihad titled *The Fulani Empire of Sokoto* projecting the revolutionary social reform movement as a product of mere tribal conflict between the Fulani as supported by others against the Hausa. Likewise, the colonial historiography opines that state formation in Africa was the handiwork of some legendary hero immigrants.

In another innovative move, Smith demonstrated that African history can be studied using local sources.¹³ He promoted research into areas tabooed by colonial historiography. He made it clear to local historians that historical research could be carried out using Arabic manuscripts of some of the actors as well as the local historians. That was the reason why he had established a unit under the Department of History called the Northern History Research Scheme (NHRS).¹⁴ The unit was mandated to traverse the arid and semi-arid area of Borno for the purpose of collecting Arabic manuscript there and in other parts of Northern Nigeria. He also mandated himself to study and understand these Arabic sources. The Arabic manuscripts are available at the NHRS library. Smith translated many primary sources from Arabic for use by historians and his students. It could be noted that Arabic literacy was by far long in existence before the arrival of Europeans. Sub Saharan Africa had long established relationship with the Magrib.

Scholars like Ibn Batuta had their account of Bilad al Sudan (Africa South of the Sahara) in Arabic text. Such Arabic texts were of great historical importance and were in existence since the 10th century A. D. In the Jihad literature on the Sokoto Calipate, Arabic sources contributed a lot in providing answers on the reasons for the Jihad. The book written by the first Sultan of Sokoto Muhammad Bello on instruction from his father Shehu Usmanu Bn Fodiyo is a clear pointer to that.¹⁵ In the book, the manifesto gave detailed reason why the Jihad was fought and who was fought, plus the reasons why such people were fought. The book was studied in its Arabic text and Smith made the information available in English to his readers.

Apart from the study of the state formations, Abdullahi Smith also contributed to the study of the Sokoto Jihad and other Jihads that followed in West Africa in the 19th century. He created a new intellectual terrain for the study of this very important historical phenomenon by showing that the Jihads of Shehu Usmanu, Alhajj Umar and Seku Ahmadu were not just about the seizure of power but involved a conception of new type of society which was believed by the Jihad leaders to be better, more just and in accordance with divine injunctions. He shifted the study of the Jihads movements of West Africa from pre-occupation with tribes and ethnicity entrenched by colonialist historiography for over one hundred years. His views and his person in this context may be described as pessimist. Although he was European by origin, a Briton, he refused to join hands with European leftists who viewed African History and societies in the negative form. Smith's support for fundamental rules and facts in digging the history of the Jihad movements did not classify him as a fundamentalist who shared views with the Jihadists to fight the rulers of western Sudan before the Jihads.

One finds it very difficult to say which school of thought or historical approach Abdullahi Smith belongs to, because he did not identify himself with Marxist, Socialist or Capitalist school. When in search for general truth on how things happened one may say Smith is a Marxist, generally a fundamentalist who viewed things as they happened. Added to that, Abdullahi Smith is truly a substantivist who does not look sideways when the centre can be seen or traced. The view was expressed by his colleagues and students where he worked at the University College Ibadan and at Ahmadu Bello University Zaria.¹⁶ The type of chasing shadow approach to historical events was not in his mind but his emphasis was to get to the object of discussion which really had the shadow and study it, was his prerogative.

Again, one can see him as a pragmatist, mainly concerned with the result or practical consequence rather than depending on theory. Emphasis was placed here in his study of the Jihads and the consequences of their achievements and merits. His view on the process of state formation is viewed by some as a mere theory due to the fact that some

states were formed not by transition from the theory of village to town, to city (*birni*, plural, *birane*) or by warfare and conquest but for economic as well as by natural instances. The case of Gusau town in Zamfara State Northern Nigeria is an example of such formation due to economic instance. Gusau is the capital of Zamfara State. It became a town due to economic impact of the railway station and some industries like that of textile¹⁷ and shoe-making. It was also the centre of growing and collection of cotton, groundnut and other raw materials as well as vast agricultural land, and people's migration to the town also fattened it. In a similar manner, new Maradun known as *Sabuwar Maradun* in Hausa also located in Zamfara State grew as a result of resettlement provided by the Federal Government of Nigeria when Bakolori Dam was constructed in the area in 1975.¹⁸ The town was provided with basic amenities like roads, water and electricity.

Moreover, there are instances where some towns fall and others rise as a process of state formation. Alkalawa in the present Zamfara State fell and Gobir rose in the same area. Similarly, when Leka fell as the former capital of old Kebbi Kingdom before colonial period, Gwandu rose. The capital of Gwandu was subsequently moved to Ambursa and to Birnin Kebbi in the present Kebbi State due to several reasons. This further shows the relevance of economic and social reasons in the establishment and growth of cities in Africa.

Drought, famine and floods are other contributors to the fall and rise of some towns. Yelwa Yauri is another example in Kebbi State Northern Nigeria where flood led to relocation of the town from the bank of River Niger in 1967 to a safer location due to construction of Kainji Dam. A similar situation took place in 2000 at Tungar Bauna, Borayi and Dabire villages in Argungu Local Government area of Kebbi State. The new settlements were provided with potable drinking water, mosques, schools and clinics. Their growth improved significantly due to enough land for expansion and improved conditions of living, in addition to migration from other villages, contrary to the limited area they hitherto occupied along the marshy and mosquito infested riverbanks that had no such amenities.

Despite some of the above challenges, we congratulate Smith for his ability to have come up with his findings as it was significant at the time of postulation. It was a precarious period of deviation from the metropolitan views on the history of Africa. It was his views and ideas that gave a little new light¹⁹ into the history of some states in West Africa.

The growth and development of Zaria School of historiography later gave way to the foundation and growing of similar schools at Usmanu Danfodiyo University Sokoto by Sulaiman B. Swai, Hamza Muhammed Maishanu, Aminu Isiyaku Yandaki and others, schools of historiography at Bayero University Kano featured by Samaila Sulaiman Yandaki and Abdullahi Garba exists at University of Maiduguri, all in Nigeria.

In evaluation of the contributions of Abdullahi Smith to the development of African historiography, some views of his former colleagues and students at University College Ibadan²⁰ and A.B.U Zaria are presented as follows.

Gabriel Olusanya a Professor and former lecturer at University of Lagos and later Director General Nigeria Institute of International Affairs Lagos Nigeria referred to Abdullahi Smith formerly known as H.F.C Smith who later naturalised and became a Nigerian, as a person who took extra interest in all the students and worked hard to get African History established as a discipline in Ibadan. "His contributions were very important. I was able to serve under him at Ahmadu Bello University Zaria in the middle of 1960s." Olusanya further stated that I enjoined service (in Zaria) because he took more than professional interest in his students and staff. Their problems were his. I took A. B. U job because of him. I could not refuse Smith because he encouraged me through a difficult period in my final year at Ibadan in 1959/1960 session when I fell ill. Smith cared not only in academic affairs of his students, but also their welfare. He rejoiced with those who rejoiced and was unhappy together with those who were unhappy. This was what changed in the academia. I believe there is no longer dedication to duty as it used to be in those days. Teaching is no longer regarded as avocation, society has changed. One cannot deny this fact, while one would like to see some

degree of commitment on the part of lecturers if we are really going to have an improved system of education in Nigeria. The student lecturer relationship in our time was very rich, very warm and very rewarding.²¹

Adamu Chiroma a 1958/1959 student of Abdullahi Smith at University College Ibadan and a former Governor of Central Bank of Nigeria said Smith taught African history, Nigerian history and Islamic history. He was an old fusspot apart from the fact that it might count against you in the examinations, Smith could never forget that you owed him an essay. He would keep asking you even after you would have written your final examination thesis. At another time he might just not pass you if you missed writing an essay. It was a very important part of course work.²² Lateefat Okunnu, U.I 1959 student and a former Deputy Governor of Lagos State from 1990 from 1992 said Smith was very brilliant man, tall and distinguished. He came to class without any lecture notes and expected the world from your essays.²³

Another historian greatly influenced by Abdullahi Smith at Zaria was Bala Usman. While writing about Smith, Bala mentioned, "I obtained great inspiration, insight and discipline" from him. Yusuf Bala Usman's Ph. D thesis was completed in 1974 it was supervised by Abdullahi Smith. The thesis was re-arranged and published as a book in 1981.²⁴ A total of twenty Ph. D works on Northern Nigeria in addition to three M.A.s were supervised by him. He also contributed not less than twelve researched articles with bearing on Northern Nigerian history to learned journals.

Abdullahi Smith never saw himself as a paragon or a model of perfection. He always reviewed his writings with a view to updating them. This may be one the reasons why he did not write or publish a book authored by him. He however contributed to a number of journals and other literary works.

Most of his articles and the research works he supervised like, Sokoto Calipate and The Transformation of Katsina were all emphasising on political history. Social and economic history were not written. Also, his historiography was restricted to 19th and 20th century periods, only the

Transformation of Katsina by Bala Usman written under his tutelage went beyond the period to examine the history of Katsina from 14th century.

Again, the historiography of Abdullahi Smith lacked theory, since theory is expected to lay the basic framework from which historical facts could be examined and explained. Some writers however argued that even lack of theory is itself a theoretical frame work. Theory in fact may be a guiding principle to explain historical facts. By this lack of theory, we can say that Northern Nigerian history which Smith spent the rest of his life on from 1962 to his death in 1984 remained heavily empiricist in nature. Though Abdullahi Smith did not see himself as a model of perfection we sincerely see him as one. His incredible job in the history of Sudanese states shall forever be remembered.

Conclusion

The contributions of Abdullahi Smith to the growth and development of African historiography are enormous. He is known to be the progenitor and developer of Northern Nigerian historiography particularly in the fields of political and Islamic history. The postulation he made on the emergence and development of settlements as a process from settlements to villages, towns (*garuruwa*) to cities (*birane*) is still relevant, more particularly in the twenty first century when tribal and religious skirmishes are no longer there for establishment and expansion of geographical territories under the hitherto warlords of any guise.

Smith taught and influenced many of his students in the study of history and historiography at Ibadan and Zaria schools. That later influenced the rise of similar schools at Sokoto, Kano and Maiduguri where history and historiography are critically studied and analysed by scholars and students alike. His contribution to the finding and using Arabic manuscripts without any doubt confirmed the existence of history of Africa south of the Sahara long before the arrival of Europeans to the area where they earlier claimed had no history due to unavailability of European documentary evidences. This is in addition to his recommendation in the use of oral sources in writing of

history that found their roots as valid sources and are still in use as sources of African history.

Endnotes

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2. Abdullahi Smith Centre for Historical Research, *A little New Light.....*, v.
3. Denis Murray Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate*, London: Longman, Green and Co. Ltd, 1967, iii.
4. Abdullahi Smith Centre for Historical Research, *A little New Light...* , viii.`
5. Abdullahi Smith Centre for Historical Research, *A little New Light...* , viii.
6. The paper was published in the *Journal of Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol. 11 no. 2, 1981.
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8. Smith, "A neglected Theme of West African History: The Islamic Revolutions of the 19th century Nigeria", *JHSN Vol. ii No. 2*, 1961.
9. Maikudi Karaye, "Myth and the Formation of Social Consciousness, Bayajida Myth", in *Nigeria Magazine*, Vol. 54 No. 1 Jan-March, Lagos: Federal Ministry of Information, 1986, 48.
10. Last, Denis Murray, *The Sokoto Caliphate*, London: Longman, Green and Co. Ltd, 1967.
11. Adeleye R.A., *Power and Diplomacy in Northern Nigeria*, London: Longman, 1971.
12. Abba Alkasum, A valedictory Lecture on the History of the Department of History A,B, U Zaria, 1962-2022, Unpublished Lecture at Zaria, 2023, 3.
13. Abba Alkasum, A valedictory Lecture on the History of the Department of History A,B, U Zaria, 1962-2022, Unpublished Lecture at Zaria, 2023, 3.
14. The Centre is located at Kaduna in Kaduna State, and headed by a Director appointed from Ahmadu Bello University Zaria.
15. Muhammad Bello born in 1782 reigned as Sultan of Sokoto from 1817 to 1837. He wrote many books and pamphlets including Infaq`I maysur, Nur Alfajr, Tanbeeh As-Saahib, Ghayth`l wable, Risaa`lat`il-Amrad majmu`l- Istigfar, np, nd.
16. Bunmi Salako, *Our U.I.*, Ijebu Ifo: Adeyemi Press, 1990, 85
17. Abubakar Atiku Udulu *Agriculture, Crafts, Enterprises and Industries in Zamfara State 1996-2016*, 112.
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22. Bunmi Salako, *Our U.I.*, Ijebu Ifo: Adeyemi Press, 1990, 104.
23. Bunmi Salako, *Our U.I.*, Ijebu Ifo: Adeyemi Press, 1990, 113.
24. Yusuf Bala Usman, *The Transformation of Katsina (1400-1883)*, Zaria, A.B.U Press, 1981, 1.

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