

JIHĀD IN WEST AFRICA DURING THE AGE OF REVOLUTIONS

Paul E. Lovejoy

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INTRODUCTION

This book had its genesis in the realization that scholarship has not necessarily been crossing boundaries, particularly in the incorporation of African history into mainstream global history, and therefore the nature of the discourse on important subjects has frequently been neglected.¹ This is a particularly serious problem in the contemporary world, when militancy and aggressive confrontation have characterized the relations between Muslims who refuse to accept complacency and toleration when global capitalism and Western domination perpetuate inequities and injustice. Ignorance and simplistic interpretation characterize the CNN approach to the coverage of the news. Efforts to control resources—petroleum, minerals, agricultural production, labor migration—reinforce the wealth of the few who control companies and receive the support of countries who advance the interests of capitalist resources in the name of free enterprise in what is factually restrictive and monopolistic concentration of wealth in the elites that profit from corruption and secret arrangements that benefit the few, whether or not altruistic motives or occasional acts of generosity are implemented through donations that cleanse dirty money by attaching the names of the rich to institutions that guarantee a place in history.

The role of Islam in the modern world is often misunderstood, and the role of Islam in West Africa even more so. The terrorism of al-Qaeda and its affiliates in northern Mali and southern Algeria is attributed to an infusion of foreign ideas from the Middle East without recognition of the long tradition of Muslim resistance and political fervor in the region itself that stem from the poverty imposed by political decisions. Similarly, the murderous path of Boko Haram and the earlier Maitatsine movement in Nigeria, Niger, and Cameroon is approached with a shocking sense of discovery that fails to recognize a long tradition of homegrown Islamic radicalism, despite any role played by pan-Islamic influences.² The dynamic forces that have arisen as a response to globalization and military solutions that are far more devastating than the evil that is targeted are not necessarily revolutionary in what they

prescribe. One has only to look at the attitudes toward women to see that misogyny is a central feature of the response. In a postsocialist world, polarization has produced a new dialectic whose outcome is far from certain. That dialectic is associated with the Muslim concept of *jihād* as justifiable holy war against non-Muslims and indeed against Muslims who are considered lax and unsupportive of a strict adherence to Islamic law as understood in reference to the *Sharī‘a*.

The focus of this book is on the past, not the current manifestations of *jihād* and the global contradictions of enormous population growth, the tremendous advances in technology and scientific discovery, and the increasing concentration of wealth and power in the hands of tiny elites who have the means to perpetuate their position. Understanding the past *jihād* movement in West Africa is essential because the evolution of human society seems determined to find new ways of not learning from the past and relying on ignorance and subterfuge when the amount of new knowledge that has emerged is actually accelerating without any significant corresponding impact on the body politic. The more we learn through scientific enquiry, the less we seem to understand. The exposition of past *jihād* is essential in understanding how *jihād* continues to have strong appeal in West Africa, as does the intensive militancy of Islam in other contexts in the Middle East, in East Africa, and indeed in Great Britain, North America, and elsewhere.

This book attempts to situate the historical attraction of *jihād* in the context of the late eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century in West Africa, and specifically in the region south of the Sahara that is often referred to as the western and central Sudan and here is referred to as *Bilād al-Sūdān*, from the Arabic, the “land of the blacks.” This period is often labeled the age of revolutions in western Europe and the broader Atlantic world to highlight the series of revolutionary movements that produced the political and economic configuration of the modern world. The corresponding changes in Africa, and specifically in Islamic Africa, are almost entirely ignored or silenced. Whether or not the age of revolutions is thought to have begun with the independence of North American colonies from Great Britain in the 1780s or the outbreak of the French Revolution after 1789, the momentous events of the era resulted in the slave uprising in St. Domingue and the formation of independent Haiti in 1804, the Napoleonic Wars and subsequent attempts at restoration of monarchies in Europe, the independence of the mainland colonies of the Spanish Empire, the emergence of Brazil as an American nation, and the equally important and numerous slave uprisings

and acts of resistance that followed Haitian independence. Notably absent from this focus on the age of revolutions are events and transformations that occurred in Africa, particularly Africa south of the Sahara. The focus here is on Islamic West Africa, not other parts of Africa, but the same questions of why we do not understand more when we know more can be directed at changes that occurred elsewhere on the continent. I argue in this book that the global transformations associated with the age of revolutions have to be reconceptualized to include other movements that were contemporaneous with the transformations that occurred in western Europe and the move toward independence of the European colonies in the Americas.

In examining Islamic West Africa and the background to the contemporary spread of al-Qaeda, al-Shabaab, Maitatsine, and Boko Haram, I draw heavily on my earlier work, in which various aspects of my argument in this book have been elaborated.³ The orientation of my many publications has been directed at overcoming the neglect of African history that underlines this book. The proposition that is pursued here is simple: how are we to understand the age of revolutions from the end of the eighteenth century through the middle of the nineteenth century without considering the course of jihād in West Africa during the same period? Why is it that parallel developments are not examined? Why do scholars continue to interpret the West African experience in simplistic terms, unless they are specialists, when there is a vast literature that is accessible and easy to understand? Why do scholars talk about people in Senegambia as “converts to Islam” when they were simply Muslims who had not converted from anything because they were born into societies that had been Muslim for centuries and when there is no proof of any “conversion”? Why do scholars refer to “Islamicized Africans” who were actually Muslims when the same scholars do not use the same conceptual framework and do not refer to “Christianized Europeans” when they discuss Europeans who not only might be Christians but also might be Jewish? Why is such conceptual weakness tolerated when the same scholars make sure that sound historical standards are applied in accepting articles for learned journals like the *American Historical Review* or the *William and Mary Quarterly*? Common sense dictates that such biased, terminological slippage should not be allowed to determine the achievement of tenure and promotion when in fact such bad scholarship and inept thinking have impeded scientific advancement. Somehow, breaking through the conceptual blockages of perceiving the Atlantic world as a framework that does not incorporate Africa into the picture has to confront the failure of scholarly discourse.

The age of revolutions in Europe and the Americas transformed political structures and laid the foundations for economic development in western Europe and the Atlantic world, but also, despite the failure to include an analysis of Africa in the Eurocentric paradigm, it was challenged and transformed from within Africa. These transformations emanating from Europe and the Americas led to European colonial imperialism and imposed racialized interpretations of history that prevail to this day through the terminology that is employed in discussing the “other” and the means of verifying distorted methodology. The changes that emerged during the age of revolutions introduced what has been called a “second slavery” in the Americas, particularly in the United States, Brazil, and Cuba, despite revolutionary changes that undermined monarchies, sometimes promoted more representative governments, and propelled economic change and technological advancement. Yet the analysis stops abruptly when a global view is required. How are we to understand the contradiction between revolution and intensified exploitation without examining what can also be called a “second slavery,” to use a term coined by Dale Tomich,⁴ which emerged in the jihād states of West Africa in the same period? How can we explain the contradictions of political reform and restorative reaction in Europe and the Americas without considering Muslim countries and the parallel and equally contradictory movements that prevailed in the regions dominated by Islam? The impact of industrialization and economic growth was indeed global, but there were countervailing forces at work in the world that attempted to achieve similar intensified economic growth, as outlined in this book with respect to the many Muslim countries of West Africa. To the extent that such transformations occurred during a time at which political revolution was current throughout the broad Atlantic world that includes West Africa, one has to account for the expansion of economies in areas dominated by Muslim governments in West Africa and elsewhere. This is not to say that the various trajectories were the result of the same causes or shaped the course of events in a common global pattern, but any attempt to understand contemporary Muslim extremism has to consider that there was a period in the past when the age of revolutions was shadowed by the age of jihād.

A number of articles and book chapters that I have previously published have prompted particular arguments in this book. I want to fully acknowledge the extent to which this analysis draws on my previous and ongoing research that has been central to my scholarly career. Moreover, a number of my students have been influential in the development of my thinking. Their

research has expanded on some of my ideas, and I have drawn considerable inspiration from working in the collegial atmosphere that graduate teaching promotes. In some cases I have published essays in collaboration with students and former students, as well as editing collections of essays that draw on cooperation and intellectual discussion. I have also developed my ideas in concert with colleagues with whom I have long interacted and with whom I have sometimes published, if not always agreed. It is often difficult to distinguish the sources of ideas and the specific contributions of primary materials that underlie this book. I have shared rare source materials and have borrowed from others in ways and at times that would require a detailed autobiography to uncover. The primary materials that I have amassed over the past forty years, which are on deposit at the Harriet Tubman Institute for Research on Africa and Its Diasporas at York University, amount to an enormous quantity of data. Rather than cite the various articles, chapters, and sections of my books that have influenced the writing of this book, as well as the extensive materials from archives in more than twenty countries, I refer instead to the bibliography and the discussion in the book itself. Similarly, the publications of my students, where relevant, are also referenced in the bibliography and in the annotations.

My approach relies on a methodology that I have characterized as an alternative perspective to a Eurocentric bias that can discuss Muslim converts when there is no proof of any conversion or “Islamized” structures and people when nothing was “Islamized” in the way that is intended in such descriptions, because things, institutions, and people were already Muslim. There was no process under way that can be described as “Islamization,” even if what was emanating from Europe was justification of imperial ambitions through claims to “Christianization” and “Europeanization” that were intended to justify subjugation and domination. It was and is easy to determine who was a Muslim and who was not, even if Muslims disagreed over whose interpretation of Islam was legitimate and whose was not. People did convert. That is not the issue, but when, where, and why conversion occurred requires an understanding of historical context.

The relevant historical questions relate to interpretation of the impact of Islam, not to conversion. In West Africa, the Qādiriyya *ṭarīqa* or brotherhood that adhered to a *ṣūfī* or mystical order of interpretation became dominant during what can be called an era of jihād, at least until the emergence of Tījāniyya and then the Mahdiyya extended the influence of jihād beyond the period that was contemporaneous with the European age of revolutions.

The primacy of Sufism does not mean that everyone was an adherent of the Qādiriyya or accepted its *wird* or path. Depending on context, people behaved as Muslims in some contexts and might not in others. Behavior was defined by prayer in Arabic, profession of monotheism, and recognition of the Prophet Muhammad, as well as the practice of certain customs relating to Ramaḍān, fasting, and communal celebration. Religious leaders who were literate in Arabic and taught children and adults the rudiments and advanced sciences had to be acknowledged as leaders of the community, whether it was seen locally in the specific context of a town or section of a town or broadly in terms of the world of Islam. Relations between males and females were subject to norms that were written and based on the Shari‘a. Local customs and practices were also respected, however, although there was a strong tendency to condemn human sacrifice, the veneration of spirits associated with trees, rocks, hills, and other natural phenomena, the eating of pork, drinking, smoking, and human greed through the collection of interest, speculation, and hoarding. Individuals in situational contexts sometimes acted in ways that others might condemn as unorthodox. Slavery was a complicating factor in understanding how Islam was understood because of the emphasis on the status of freeborn Muslims as being inherently protected from enslavement and the social ostracism associated with the lack of kinship. However, to discuss societal relationships in terms of conversion or a process of “Islamization” does not grasp the historical context and only imposes a discourse that is foreign and that cannot be documented.

The jihād movement was revolutionary, as I document in this book. Interpretations of Islam were fundamentally changed as a result of jihād. Not only were existing governments overthrown and new states established, which were revolutionary acts in themselves, but also the centrality of Islam to society and social relationships was consolidated in ways that had not been the case previously. Most of the savanna and the Sahel had long been part of Dar al-Islam, the world of Islam, but the establishment of the jihād states intensified the practice of Islam among elites, merchants, and the general population in ways that affected the meanings of ethnicity. I have previously attempted to present a more sophisticated analytical approach and perspective on understanding identity in the context of West Africa, which I have characterized as a “methodology through the ethnic lens.” As I have explained, ethnicity is a complicated phenomenon that is situational. References in the sources to what is considered “ethnic” require explication to discover what is meant and what is not. Ethnicity is complex, both changing and not changing.

Hausa and Mande had existed as identities related to language and culture for hundreds of years before the period that is the focus of this book. Patterns of scarification and cultural upbringing reinforced these identities over very wide geographical regions involving very large populations. Recognition of the ethnic factor is only the first step in understanding the revolutionary impact of the jihād movement on political structures and economic underpinnings that once may have been referred to as modes of production and social formations.

Many scholars have attempted to confront the perplexing dilemma of ethnic terminology that sometimes seems to confuse attempts to understand African history. This perplexity especially applies to scholars of the Atlantic world and scholars of slavery in the Americas; a comparable dilemma of ethnic terminology does not seem to affect the analysis of European history, when there was no such identification in the ongoing frictions among France, England, Spain, Portugal, and other “European” countries. The origins of people, how they have identified in different contexts, and the languages individuals have spoken are repeatedly confused and often fused. The same methodology should be employed in the disaggregation of context and the explanation of relationships for people of European and African background. If we examine the age of revolutions as a unifying feature of history in the world of western Europe and the Americas, we need to understand the age of jihād in West Africa during the same period. The implications for appreciating the seriousness of contemporary jihād in the Islamic world, whether in West Africa or elsewhere, are profound.