

Colonial control of firearms in the Sokoto Province 1897-1950s

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Abstract

This paper is a historical investigation into colonial control of firearms in the Sokoto Province. The role and use of firearms in colonial Nigeria have gained currency in the last five decades. The European interest in the commercial expedition of Africa facilitated the movement of firearms as an item of trade in exchange for African slaves. The increasing access to firearms, from European traders, provided the opportunity for the emirates of the Sokoto Caliphate to acquire a considerable number of these weapons. However, the vast majority of the literature focuses on their role in warfare and conquest. Despite the important role of the defunct Sokoto Caliphate in the import of firearms, it scarcely received scholarly attention. Deploying the historical method of inquiry, this paper argues that the British attempt to maintain law and order after the conquest of the Sokoto Caliphate instituted several measures to control possession of firearms by the natives. The study concludes that ownership of firearms was seen as a potential threat to the stability of both the colonial administration and the Native Authority.

Keywords: Colonial, firearms, control, Sokoto Province

Introduction

The place and role of firearms in the political and economic history of the Sokoto Caliphate cannot be underestimated. Since Smaldone path-breaking book, *Warfare in the Sokoto Caliphate: Historical and Sociological Perspective* (1977), many works have emerged on warfare and defense policy of the Sokoto Caliphate. But one major area that did not gain currency is the study of Colonial State control of the trade and possession of firearms.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century Sokoto Caliphate and its emirates witnessed a decisive change in its economic and political history. Notably, were the new interests of Europeans not merely in trade but also in intervening directly in the social and economic life of the people. It first began with a campaign to learn more about the peoples of and resources available in the interior of the continent through the activities of the explorers.¹ This is evident from the account of Clapperton's visits to Sokoto in the

1820s and Henry Barth that revealed to European the existence of the organized State of the Caliphate. This subsequently resulted in the establishment of trading post along the banks of the Niger and Benue by 1860.² The campaign to stop the slave trade, to encourage the export of certain crops, with missionaries seeking to convert to Christianity ways of living, and traders pressing to go into the interior to trade appeared much later. In view of this, British and French military and commercial forces came to occupy the coast of West and North Africa where the major entrepot of its external trade, particularly in firearms were located.³ Thus, the firearms traffic from the coast of Guinea began to penetrate the Sokoto Caliphate in the mid-nineteenth century and expanded considerably by the 1870s, with Nupe acting as the principal part of entry and distribution.⁴ The emirates of the Sokoto Caliphate in the west successfully exploited the European arms trade from the South. The new

sources of trade and wealth and essential commodities such as firearms became objects of competition between different states or interest groups within states. This expansion of trade in arms trade was significant as it was the first time in history the Sudanic states were no longer isolated from the international trade in firearms by middlemen who monopolized it for their own military advantage.⁵

By mid-1865 a British merchant McCosty had secured a trade treaty with Etsu Masaba (1759-73) to supply guns, muskets and powder. With this development, Masaba and the Nupe Kingdom became the major suppliers of firearms to other parts of the Sokoto Caliphate and beyond. The increasing access to firearms, from European traders via Nupe, provided the opportunity for the emirates of the Sokoto caliphate to acquire considerable number of these weapons. It was however the British enterprise as argued by Smaldone that opened the Caliphate to European trade, and provided the firearms that could not be obtained from North Africa.⁶

With the growing access to firearms Europeans began to institute policy of seeking to control the trade in firearms. In 1890 at the Brussels conference a decision was taken by the participating European states to regulate the arms trade to Africa. The signatories at the conference pledged to forbid the sales of modern precision rifles in tropical Africa, however, flint locks, unrifled guns and common gunpowder were exempted from this restriction.⁷ The fact is that, small number of muskets and common gunpowder continued to be exported to the northern emirates, until the beginning of the twentieth century, but the trade in modern firearms from the south had ceased.

Whilst the European restricted the trade in modern firearms, guns and other arms, ammunitions and weapons

were used by Europeans to realize their imperial ambitions when they use force to suppress Africa's resistance to European incursion, conquest and colonialism.

Conquest and Colonization of Northern Protectorate

It should be noted that before 1900, all the Northern part of Nigeria was administered on behalf of the British Government by the Royal Niger Company (RNC) a chartered company headed by George Toubman Goldie. From 1878 through intrigues the British succeeded in driving other European from the Niger.⁸ With the treaty of Berlin in 1885 the area was granted to Britain on the basis of their effort in signing treaties with the Sultans in Sokoto and Borno.

Consequently, Lugard proclaimed the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria at Ibadan in 1897. The Protectorate included the Emirates of the Sokoto Caliphate and parts of the former Borno Empire. The event that followed was marked by the invasion and subsequent defeat of the Southwestern emirates of Nupe and Ilorin. A few hundred troops armed with modern weapons defeated thousand armed with the traditional weaponry. The RNC marched on Nupe with about 500 native soldiers equipped with modern repeating rifles and commanded by British officers. The Hausa were made to dominate the constabularies and regiments of the West Africa Frontier Force (WAFF).⁹

In addition, these troops were supported by six 45 maxim guns, two whit wart guns (nine- and twelve- pounders) and five seven-pound rifled muzzle leading artillery pieces. Nupe on the other hand, mustered about 30,000 troops, including 10,000 cavalry and only a few hundred gunmen, mostly musketeers. In the British interest to occupy the emirates' assorted weapons were employed which ranged from the latest Maxim gun to snider riffles.¹⁰

The conquest made it possible for the British to take control and effective occupation of the territories that became Northern Nigeria. With the conquest, emirate governments were directly subject to British authority. In 1900 British took over direct control of the areas so as to drive away some other European interest. Sa'ad pointed out the reason for the change in action of the British as:

The realization that the Royal Niger company had failed to keep away other European rivals from the Niger-Benue territory led to the revocation of its charter by the British government in 1900. Then a Protectorate was declared over the territory claimed by the company and Captain Lugard was appointed its high commissioner.¹¹

It is instructive to note that the fall of Nupe and Ilorin was the prelude to a series of British expeditions against the other emirates of the Caliphate between 1901 and 1903. In some cases, the emirs submitted peacefully, in others armed resistance was slight and the emirs were brought under British control with minimal violence. For instance, in the case of Adamawa (1901) and at Kano and Sokoto (1903) the British forces encountered considerable military resistance.¹² Kano was invaded after the occupation of Zaria with a strong resistance. In preparation for the British, the emirate procured large quantities of arms from Tripoli merchants and run-away WAFF soldiers. Armed with a lot of weapons, Lugard decided to advance against Kano in the early years of 1903 with 24 officers, 12 NCO's, 2 medical officers and 722 rank and file made up of 550-foot, 71 artillery men and 101 mounted

infantries with four 75mm guns and four maximum guns led by Col. Morland. The Kano fighting forces were estimated as 800 cavalry and 5,000-foot infantries, a lot of casualties were recorded following the British conquest. The British conquest of the Sokoto Caliphate was however, carried out in piece-meal before the subsequent imposition of British colonial rule.¹³

On February 27, 1903, the British forces had converged in Kaura-Namoda with a strength of 25 officers, 5 NCO, 2 medical officers and one medical NCO, 68 gunners, 656 rank and file, 400 careers, 4 Maxims and four 7mm guns, marched towards Sokoto en-route Argungu, Shagari and Sokoto. The Sokoto warriors were armed with spears, arrows and Dane guns. The superior weapons of the British led Sokoto to fall to the British forces.¹⁴ In an address delivered by Lugard immediately after the conquest of Sokoto on 21st March 1903, Lugard declared that:

The Fulani in old times under Danfodio conquered this country. They took the right to rule over it, to levy taxes to depose Kings. They in turn by defeat lost their rule which has come into the hands of the British. All these things which I have said the Fulani by conquest took the right to do now pass to the British. every Sultan and Emir and the principal officers of State will be appointed by the High Commissioner throughout all this country.¹⁵

The first major administrative step taken by the British after the subjugation of the northern emirates of

the Sokoto Caliphate was to introduce the indirect rule system. The application made a successful litmus test. The system emerged effective for administering large populations and proved the cheapest being ran with the minimum of European personnel. The indirect rule as pointed out by Saeed, provided a symbiotic mechanism wherein the emirates could rely on British guns to suppress opposition to their rule, while British could rely on them to suppress opposition to imperial over-rule.¹⁶

The indirect rule system was adopted by Lugard because of lacked of enough fund and manpower for the direct system of administration. For administrative purposes, the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria was divided into Provinces, each with a Resident as its executive head. These Provinces were, in turn, sub-divided into Native Authority (NA) areas with executive legislative and judicial power vested on the Emirs and chiefs. The residents were the links between the High Commissioner and the emirs.¹⁷

Sokoto Province and Colonial control of firearms 1897-1920s

With the fall of Sokoto, it formally became a British Province to which at a later period Gwandu was added as a Sub Province making Sokoto one of the double Provinces of the Protectorates. The lack of administrative staff to manned the affairs of the Provinces as pointed out by Lugard in his report necessitate the merger of the earlier sixteen Provinces to eight.¹⁸ These Provinces were controlled by a Senior Resident officer.

The colonial law that outlaws the carrying of arms and ammunition can be trace to Ordinance No. 11 of September 13, 1865, Lagos. The preamble of this audience states that:

Whereas it is desirable to prevent the export of arms

and other ammunitions of war from Lagos until such time as the questions now pending between the government of Port novo, Abeokuta and the British government respectively shall have been satisfactorily arranged.¹⁹

In the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria, the law applicable to matters of gun control originated from the arms and ammunition exportation Proclamation No. 19 of 1900, and the firearms Proclamation of 1901, as amended, in 1904.

In section 4 of the Arms and ammunition Exportation proclamation declared that, it was unlawful to bring into the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria any arms and ammunition from neighboring countries, unless such material passed through any of the British-controlled territories in West Africa.

In this regard, African ownership of firearms was increasingly seen as potential threat to the stability of colonial communities. Crucial to this development, the British did not want the colonized people to access the most deadly firearms with which they could resist colonial rule. Aderinto assert that, early colonial state regulated gun ownership to reflect social status with common people permitted to own old fashioned Muzzle-loaders popularly called Dane guns, educated Africans possessing slightly more advance shotgun and Europeans and eventually some African elites monopolizing control of the most lethal firearms.²⁰

The reason for a change in colonial attitude towards African's ownership of firearms as observed from Lugard's report was both for security and financial cost of administration. Lugard report that:

As a measure for the prevention of internal

wars, the country has been disarmed and throughout all Nigeria, there are now practically no firearms whatever other than flintlocks, which are not prohibited by the Brussels Act.²¹

Lugard further explained the cost of the military force which is necessary to preserve order in country, become a heavy burden upon the revenue. The evidence suggests that economic factor played a role in the control of firearms. The fact is that, British experience from active resistances in the Kano emirate required a proactive measure to the situation.

In March 1903 following the fall of Kano Lugard ordered for the surrender by Wambai Muhammadu Abbas before his appointment as Acting Emir and his men of their firearms, bows and arrows: they were allowed only to retain their swords, spears, and chain armour which the British consider to be lethal weapon. Abbas and his men were estimated as at least 10,000.²² Alexander in his analysis of control of firearms observed that, those who governed arms-bearing communities attempted to control the distribution of weapons, usually to keep the weapons out of the hands of those they regarded as enemies.²³

In Sokoto the British not only witnessed a heavy resistance but also suffered heavy losses in the Satiru revolt (1905-1906). In the first encounter, the British Acting Resident Officer H.R. Preston-Hillary and his escort were killed. The impact of the revolt on the British colonial administrators and WAFF was clearly demonstrated in the report of Lugard. He decried that the defeat was the first serious reverse suffered by the West African Frontier Force since it was raised (in 1898).²⁴ It is interesting to

state that, during the first incident the *Satirawa* apart from killing the Acting Resident and his escorts seized two machine gun from the W.A.F.F. Although during the last encounter that led to the crushed of the Satiru community the maxim guns were recovered, but it has actually served as a pointed to the British of a strong anti-colonial struggle in the area. The support offered by the Sultan and his forces also shows a kind of join forces against the rebels. It was this and many other reasons that in the first decade of the twentieth century the colonial administrator and its collaborators the native authority possibly feared that civilians with guns would challenge their authority. Despite all efforts to regulate the keeping of firearms some civilians managed illegally to possess them. The Mahdi uprising continued to be a major security challenge to the British government. Up to the 1920s the British in Northern Nigeria were apprehensive of Mahdism as an extreme anti-European creed which might result in risings should the Administration abandon caution in its dealings with the indigenous people.

Colonial control of firearms 1940s-50s

The struggle for decolonization at the verge of Nigeria's independence raised considerable concern to the colonial regime to completely deregulated the ownership of Dane guns, which were seen as unthreatening but tightened up rules around possession of short guns and precision firearms among educated Nigerians. In his analysis of the impact of World War II, Muhammed argued that:

The influence of ex-service men in the formation and strengthening of the political parties created both security

problems for the colonial government, and posed great challenges for traditional authorities.²⁵

The government also observed that short guns have been in circulation because many owners either did not have licenses or did not renew them as expected. This new development compelled northern administrators to review the gun laws. Earlier in 1942 a new Ordinance was passed but the date of commencement was, however repeatedly postponed at the request of the police who had not during the war, sufficient staff to enable them to enforce the Ordinance. It was Attorney General H.C.F Cox that pushes for the bill that will grant free permit to every owner of a firearm who was considered (a) "proper person". But such persons would have to obtain a license to use the firearms.²⁶ In 1947, a draft Regulations that was to come into force with the Ordinance was forwarded to the Secretary of State by the Commissioner of Police. Meanwhile it had become quite clear that the 1942 Ordinance was seriously attack in many aspects. For instance, the increasing need for greater internal security with consequent request for amendments to the Ordinance coupled with lack of agreed policy by the committee saddled with the responsibility makes the Ordinance in effective.²⁷ The weakness found with the previous Ordinance was clearly stated in a letter by the Secretary, Southern Provinces to the Colonial Secretary that:

I should like to call attention to the still more unsatisfactory position regarding

cap guns which under Order in Council No.6 of 1930 are admitted on payment of duty of £1. Under paragraph 2 of the Regulations a cap gun is an arm of precision and a native cannot obtain a cap gun without the Lieutenant-Governor's permission (Regulation No.7).....²⁸

This complained and several others necessitated a change in government policy and regulation of firearms in the Provinces. The new arms Ordinance prohibited the importation of seamless steel tubing. This was because it was observed that large numbers of cap guns and cap pistols were made from it. The new arm policy restrictions covered a wide range of issues that include; Cap gun licensing; manufacture of cap and Flintlock guns; permits to possess small-arms etc. As part of the policy, it was generally agreed that, Police should be the sole prescribed authorities for the Arms Ordinance (with the exception that Residents would still be responsible for granting permits to possess and purchase precision arms).²⁹ The regulations also prohibit a native from possessing an arm of precision without the consent of a Resident in charge of a Province particularly on the cap guns. In view of this, applications for permission to bear arms were received by the district officers and forward to the resident for recommendation to the Police.

Table 1: List of some applications for permission to bear arms in Sokoto Province, 1951

S/N	Name	Recommendation
1.	Mr. A. I. Roda	Recommended
2.	Mr. Edmound Ukuoma	Not recommended
3.	Mr. R. E. Berthomieu	Recommended
4.	Mallam J. S. A Bada	Not Recommended
5.	Mr. D. Garrick	Recommended
6.	Mr. S. F. Bamgbaiye ⁷	Recommended
7.	Mal. Ibrahim	Not Recommended

Source: Compiled from SHB/14/13/128

Table 1 reveals that out of the seven applications forwarded for permission three were not recommended. The reason for this was that, the colonial government as part of its measures refused to recommend arm permit to Southerners who spent less than 15 years in government service as well as to private contractors of perhaps not particularly good repute. The Province has earlier in the 1920s experienced an unprecedented migration of the Southerners (owing largely to the railway, and telecommunications) who came to take up jobs with government establishment. As it is evidently showed from the applications Mr. Inameti work with Nigerian Railway Corporation at Gusau as road workshop superintendent, while Akinyei works at post and Telegraph in Sokoto. The fact is that, most of those applications were from either Southerners or contractors with unquestionable character. In some cases, it was observed that, the district officer was made the 2nd recommender contrary to the regulations. The actual law and the regulation required a recommender to be persons of standing and responsibility who know the individual personally.

As part of its policy instruction in 1956 the resident Sokoto Province restrict the issue of permits to bear guns to persons of Senior service status whether they work for the government, the native authority, the commercial firms, or are independent status. The

reason for such decisions was according to the resident:

I observed that in Makurdi riots and saw one or two cap-guns or flintlocks but not a single rifle shot-gun or revolver. As such firearms rendered the situations more dangerous or aggravated casualties.³⁰

In addition, Boiley Acting Civil Secretary, Northern Region report that during the 1953 Kano riot there were at least two incidents in which short guns were used by rioters. He further explained that the riots proved that in moments of crisis the Southern people were prepared to use them against their opponents. Since the riot it is reported that, there has been and increased in applications to bear arms. It is therefore, essential that, arms licenses permit was issued only to persons of good repute who can produce bonafide reasons for possessing firearms.³¹

A firearm is defined in section 2 of the Act of 1958 to mean any lethal barreled weapon of any description from which any shot, bullet or other missile can be discharge and includes a prohibited firearm, a personal firearm or any of the categories referred to in parts I, II and III respectively of the schedule hereto, and any component part of any such firearm. (154).³²

It important to note that, while the restrictions of imports of firearms intensified in the Province, local blacksmith forge their own barrels. For example, in Moriki District about 20 guns were produced monthly. In Sokoto a double-barreled guns of local manufacture cost circa.25/-to35/-sh. ³³ The colonial state also considered import licenses compulsory for any person or firm to import any arms or ammunition. This was with a view to regulate the number and type of firearms that might be imported at a time or over a period. In order to increase government revenue, the Provincial courts fine cases of illegal possession of firearms.

Consequently, the firearms Act of 1959 became the main legal instrument addressing the production, import and export of light weapons.

Conclusion

This study interrogates the colonial policy on the control of firearms in the Sokoto Province. It illuminates the various ways the colonial state sought to control the trade and possession of firearms. The desire to enhance national prestige, market outlet, search for raw material which was motivated by technological advances such as rapid-firing rifles and machine guns brought Europeans into Africa. The study demonstrates that, the proliferation of firearms in the Sokoto Caliphate was a decisive factor in the colonial conquest of the area. Though firearms were exchange in trade with slaves but were regulated by the Brussels' Convention. In an attempt to maintain law and order after conquest the British instituted several measures to control possession of firearms by the natives. This study concludes that, ownership of firearms was seen as potential threat to the stability of both the colonial administration and the Native Authority.

Endnotes

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