THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
THE SOKOTO JIHĀD AND THE JIHĀD OF
AL-ḤĀJJ ‘UMAR: AN ASSESSMENT

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One of the remarkable features of the development of Islam in
Western Sudan has been the life and thought of al-Ḥāj j ‘Umar al-
Fūtī, who dominated the scene during the middle of the
nineteenth century through his attempt to rally Muslims to his
Sufi-oriented ideology against political corruption, blind
adherence to a rigid system of Muslim juridical practice, and the
impinging force of European colonialism.

The purpose of this paper is to assess the jihād of al-Ḥāj j ‘Umar al-Fūtī (1830–1864) within the general framework of the
nineteenth century reform movements in Western Sudan. In
order to do this, one must de-emphasize the traditional approach
of excessive historical narration and focus on the ideological
basis of the movement. It is our belief that to understand the
fundamental objectives of al-Ḥāj j ‘Umar’s reform and to be able
to assess its achievements and shortcomings, one must analyse
al-Ḥāj j’s concept of reform, his understanding of leadership
structures and the methods he used to realise his objectives. Such
an analytical approach, we hope, will help determine how far al-
Ḥāj j’s jihād conforms to or differs from the pattern of earlier
jihāds, especially those of Shaykh ‘Uthman dan Fodio and
Ahmadu Labbo, which seem somehow to have influenced the

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AL-ḤĀJJ ‘UMAR: EARLY LIFE AND TRAVELS

Little is known about al-Ḥājj ‘Umar al-Fūtī’s early life. He was born in Halwar (Futa Toro) in 1794. His father Sa’id b. Mukhtar was a learned and religious man. Under him, ‘Umar received his first rudimentary education. By the age of ten, ‘Umar had memorized the Qur’ān. He then travelled throughout Futa in search of knowledge. He studied under such famous scholars as Cherno al-Amin b. ‘Abd Allah, a pupil of Tafsir Ḥammad Ibra, a distinguished scholar known to have been educated in Mauritania. Under Cherno al-Amin, and perhaps many other masters, ‘Umar was said to have mastered all the Islamic sciences taught in that part of Africa at that time, and he was consequently recognized as an erudite scholar. From as faraway as Mauritania, students flocked to learn from him. After a few years of teaching (1819–1822), however, ‘Umar developed an interest in Sufi doctrines. He seems to have first encountered Sufism in 1822, when somewhere in Futa Toro, he met Shaykh ‘Abd al-Karim al-Nāqili, a Tijānī Muqaddam from Futa Jallon.2 At the Shaykh’s invitation, ‘Umar abandoned his classes and accompanied his first spiritual mentor to Futa Jallon. This was the first sign of ‘Umar’s rebellion against the traditional Fuqahā’ (jurists) and their methods of education in Africa.3

Under al-Nāqili, ‘Umar was introduced to the Tijāniyyah Order and received further training in Sufi beliefs and practice. Al-Nāqili remained ‘Umar’s sole spiritual mentor for more than a year until he died in 1824. Even before al-Nāqili’s death, ‘Umar seems to have been convinced that the level of Sufi experience to which he aspired could be attained only through a higher authority in the Tijāniyyah Order. This conviction was reflected in his eagerness to perform the pilgrimage to Makkah where Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghāni, one of the highest Tijānī

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3 For more on this see ibid., 61–68; Suyūf al-Sa’id, Ms.