

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN  
THE SOKOTO JIHĀD AND THE JIHĀD OF  
AL-ḤĀJJ 'UMAR: AN ASSESSMENT<sup>1</sup>

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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-Ḥājj 'Umar al-Fūti, 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-Ḥājj 'Umar al-Fūti (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-Ḥājj 'Umar's reform and to be able to assess its achievements and shortcomings, one must analyse al-Ḥājj'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-Ḥājj'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 development of al-Ḥājj 'Umar's concept of reform.

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## AL-HĀJJ 'UMAR: EARLY LIFE AND TRAVELS

Little is known about al-Hājj 'Umar al-Fūti's early life. He was born in Halwar (Futa Toro) in 1794. His father Sa'id b. Mukhtār 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 Hammad 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 Tijāni Muqaddam from Futa Jallon.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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-Ghāli, one of the highest *Tijāni*

<sup>2</sup> See al-Hājj 'Umar al-Fūti's *Rimāh Hizb al-Rahīm 'alā Nuḥūr Hizb al-Rajīm*, on the Margin of 'Alī Ḥarāzīm's *Jawāhir al-Ma'ānī*, Cairo, 1911, 1: 180–81.

<sup>3</sup> For more on this see *ibid.*, 61–68; *Suyūf al-Sa'id*, Ms.