



(REVIEW ARTICLE)



# Political thought in West Africa: Contributions of Fodio to the corpus of Sokoto Empire

Hussaini Yashe Sani \*

*Student, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Graduate School of Social Sciences, Ankara Yildirim Beyazıt University, Turkey.*

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## Abstract

This article examines Fodio's contributions to the corpus of political thought produced in the Sokoto Empire of West Africa during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Eurocentric primarily utilizes Western perspectives in African universities, which presents significant challenges. The neglect of history, local languages, and indigenous political thought in educational institutions has resulted in the marginalization of precolonial history, traditions, and the contributions of African statesmen to political philosophy. This paper highlights the environment, the author, the political ideas of Fodio, and their enduring influence on West African society.

**Keywords:** Corpus; Eurocentric; Fodio; Political Thought; Sokoto Empire

## 1. Introduction

In political thought, a corpus refers to the collection of writings or recorded works by a particular thinker, intellectual movement, or school of thought; this includes books, speeches, essays, letters, treatises, and even oral traditions that express a person's or group's political ideas and philosophies. In Western Political Thought, specific corpora are noted for their enduring significance, depth, insightful analysis, conceptual clarity, innovative vision, and intellectual quality. These include Plato's Republic, Aristotle's Politics, Machiavelli's Prince, Hobbes's Leviathan, Locke's Second Treatise of Civil Government, Rousseau's Social Contract, Hegel's Philosophy of History and Right, Mill's Essay On Liberty and Considerations on Representative Government, Green's Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligations, and Montesquieu's The Spirit of Law (1). However, there exists a substantial degree of gender, class, and cultural underrepresentation in the production and teaching of the corpus of Western political thought. The Eurocentric perspective is mainly prevalent in the production, teaching, and application of Western Political Thought, which often leads to the exclusion or marginalization of non-Western cultures, histories, and perspectives, presenting significant challenges. Influential thinkers have shaped political thought throughout history, and their works have profoundly impacted governance.(2) asserts that the study of political philosophy has traditionally been dominated by Western figures, such as Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. Even though their contributions are significant, this Eurocentric perspective has, to a large extent, marginalized non-Western political traditions, resulting in a gap within scholarly discourse. Many African scholars and intellectuals have historically made essential contributions to political thought, yet these contributions have been largely overlooked in mainstream political theory.

This research challenges the assumption that political thought is primarily Western by emphasizing the rich intellectual contributions of African intellectuals. The Eurocentric perspective overlooks the African contribution to political philosophy, considering the continent's contribution as inadequate or peripheral (3). This exclusion maintains the misconception that African societies lacked a sophisticated political system, especially before colonial intervention.

\* Corresponding author: Hussaini Yashe Sani

However, African thinkers such as Fodio developed governance systems deeply rooted in justice, moral leadership, and social equity, which remain relevant today.

By delving into Fodio's contributions to political philosophy, this study demonstrates the importance of viewing political philosophy beyond the traditional Western framework. What's more, his writings highlight the discourse on public good, justice, virtue, equality, freedom, and equity, which constitute the ingredients of political thought. This article also explores the contributions of Fodio to political thought and the influence of his ideas in West Africa and beyond.

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## 2. Literature review

Uthman bn Muhammad bn Salih bn Fudi, popularly known as bn Fodio, son of Muhammad Fudi, was born at Marata in 1754 and died in 1817. Fodio belongs to the Fulani nation, who migrated from Futa Toro in present-day Senegal and settled in Kwoni in the Hausa city-state of Gobir. He lived in the city-state of Gobir until 1802, when, motivated by revivalist ideas, he left the State along with his followers. Fodio began his education under his father, acquiring advanced knowledge of Sharifah sciences from specialized professors in various subjects. Fodio's life can be divided into two parts. The first part, which fell at the end of the 18th century, was characterized by teaching, writing, preaching, reform, and renovation. The second phase of his life commenced in 1802, marked by his migration and subsequent opposition to the monarchs of Hausaland, culminating in the establishment of the 19th-century Sokoto Empire in Northern Nigeria and its environs (4).

Fodio's writings were primarily composed in Arabic, with some in the Hausa and Fulfulde languages. These works predominantly focus on theology, sociology, and political science. Furthermore, it is essential to understand the environment, author, classification, and influence during the period.

### 2.1. The Environment

The Sokoto Caliphate, established in 1804 and comprising an area exceeding 250,000 square miles, is recognized for its contributions to political thought. The Caliphate included a substantial portion of what are now the Republics of Northern Nigeria, Niger, and Cameroon in West Africa. During the 19th century, it represented the largest Islamic polity in much of West Africa. The Caliphate emerged from a reform movement led by Fodio, which commenced in 1774 and culminated in 1804, uniting over two dozen sovereign states into a single entity, with Fodio as its founding leader (4). As noted by (5), the Sokoto Caliphate, which persisted as a political entity for a century, extended its hegemony from Masina to Bagheri, a journey of four months, and from Yorubaland to the terminus of Adar and Agades, a distance of two months from south to north.

It is essential to recognize the literary works produced in this region since the commencement of the Jihad. In 1774, Fodio's movement established the primary center of the Jihad, specifically in Degel of Gobir state, which emerged as Hausaland's most powerful State by the late 18th century. As the most politically advanced region, it also evolved into the intellectual hub for the Reformists. Gobir can be likened to the Athens of Hausaland during this period. Consequently, the center of intellectual and literary activities has persisted since the introduction of Islam in Hausaland at the beginning of the 14th century, reflecting the social, economic, and political transformations until it reached its zenith in Gobir state toward the end of the 18th century and in the Sokoto Caliphate at the beginning of the 19th century.

### 2.2. The Author

Sheik Uthman bn Muhammad bn Salih bn Fudi (1754–1817), along with his mentees, was the principal author of the corpus and a leading figure in the Jihad movement and the Sokoto Caliphate. This group included Muhammad Bello, Fodio's son, who succeeded him as the head of the Caliphate and served as the second caliph from 1817 to 1837, and Abdullahi bn Fodio (d. 1826), who managed the Caliphate's western region. All three were members of the Fulani ethnic group and made substantial contributions to literature, scholarship, research, and political activities in 19th-century West Africa (4).

They were highly skilled experts in Arabic and Islamic sciences. (6) similarly, notes that they were well-educated scholars who completed their training and careers in politics and literature within Hausaland without undertaking scholarly journeys to any Arab country, including Mecca, for the Hajj. The political ideas under discussion were thus developed by scholars who were locally nurtured.

### 2.3. The classification

Fodio, along with his son and brother, authored more than three hundred volumes of books, along with numerous poems, covering nearly every field and branch of Islamic knowledge, such as Hadith (prophetic traditions), Cosmology and Metrology, Tawheed (theology), Tasawwuf (Sufism), Luga (Arabic language), Waz (paraenesis), Adab (manners), Tibb (medicine), Tarikh (history), and Ilm Siyasat (political science). Most of their writings were in Arabic, while several were also written in the Fulfulde and Hausa languages (7). Although their works were comparable in several ways, their areas of interest differed. Fodio's brother, Abdullahi, is primarily interested in Islamic law. Fodio's son, Muhammad Bello, is mainly interested in the community's politics, whereas Fodio chooses the middle path between the two. Every single one of them thrived in their field of study and knowledge to a global standard (8).

- The initial phase, often termed the formative phase or the pre-Jihad period (1774–1804), is characterized by the reformists' emphasis on political mobilization, education, preaching, and the establishment of Jama'a (community). The literature from this period addresses a range of topics, including the dichotomy between belief and atheism, the role of scholars and education in society, public education with a particular focus on women, and the development of a Muslim community in anticipation of the forthcoming conflict with the oppressive monarchs of Hausaland.
- The second period was from 1804 to 1817. This phase was mainly characterized by the overthrow of the Kingship system and the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate. Other features of this phase included the expansion of the Caliphate and military treaties. Additionally, the prerequisites and characteristics for Islamic leadership were defined. Consequently, this period focused on elucidating the objectives and functions of Islamic leadership, as well as the structure of the Islamic governance system.
- The third period (1815–1833) was characterized by the consolidation of the Islamic State, the processes for assessing the struggle, the debate regarding the reintroduction of pre-Islamic governance systems or customs, and the expansion of his creed to regions beyond Hausaland (4).

This study fills the gap through a comprehensive examination of Fodio's political writings, their theoretical foundations, and their broader intellectual significance. By contextualizing his ideas within Islamic political thought, this research contributes to the expanding scholarship on African contributions to political philosophy.

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## 3. Research methodology

The study employs documentary research methodology. This methodology involves the collection and analysis of primary data sources. (9) characterizes documentary research as the examination of written materials that offer insights into human behavior and societal structures. This method is vital for analyzing the extensive collection of primary documents left by Fodio and his contemporaries, as well as other writings concerning Fodio.

### 3.1. Data Analysis Techniques

Content analysis is utilized to analyze the concepts and arguments in Fodio's writings. It aids in systematically examining texts to deduce key ideas. Through examining his writings, the study extracts the core principles of Fodio's political thought and evaluates their relevance to contemporary governance discourse. What's more, the comparative analysis method is utilized to bring out some unique aspects of Fodio's governance system while situating it within the broader spectrum of political theory.

### 3.2. Rationale for the Qualitative Approach

A qualitative methodology is particularly suitable for this research, as it facilitates a profound and interpretative analysis of historical and philosophical texts. The qualitative methodology, as opposed to quantitative methods, utilizes numerical data in the form of numbers and also uses statistical analysis. Qualitative research provides flexibility to interact with texts while considering their contextual and ideological ramifications.

In sum, this methodology integrates both historical research, documentary, and content analysis within a qualitative framework. This integration ensures a rigorous and comprehensive exploration of Fodio's thoughts. In addition to documenting Fodio's ideas, the study examines its historical and contemporary impact.

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## 4. Political Ideas

We mention a few themes developed from the collection of Fodio's work, which include Revolution, Scholarship, State and Political Authority, Justice, and Women & Minority Rights.

#### 4.1. Revolution

Fodio, before Marx, was the pioneering scholar to conduct a class analysis of his society, delineating three principal social groups. The first category, the *Mutrafin*, comprises those who monopolize State and economic resources, utilizing their power and wealth to oppress and exploit the impoverished. Fodio identified *Habe Sarakuna* (kings) and feudal lords in Hausaland as constituents of the *Mutrafin* category. The second class, the *Mustafin*, encompasses the impoverished, the destitute, beggars, slaves, peasant farmers, pastoralists, women, and laborers. This group represents the exploited and disadvantaged who labor to generate the wealth of society; thus, the *Mutrafin* can be likened to the bourgeoisie that exploits the surplus labor of the Proletariat (*Mustafin*). The third social group is the intelligentsia, regarded as the revolutionary vanguard. According to Fodio, these revolutionary vanguards could enlighten and inspire the *Mustafin* to overthrow the *Mutrafin*.

The analytical framework proposed by Fodio is part of the Islamic dialectical historical approach, which perceives the evolution of society over time as a continuous process of struggle. Fodio, preceding Lenin, advanced the notion of the necessity for creating a revolutionary vanguard, thus proposing three stages. The first phase is the formative period, which necessitates enlightenment, education, and political mobilization to create the revolutionary vanguard (*Jama'a*). The second phase involves educating and transforming the vanguard into a mass movement aimed at establishing an Islamic state and overthrowing the current ruling class. The final stage focuses on consolidating the revolutionary State and its policies among the general populace.

#### 4.2. Scholarship

Fodio regards scholars and scholarship as essential to society's existence, development, and productivity. Consequently, he saw scholarship and scholars as the repository of knowledge within society. In *Brother's Light*, (10) identified three categories of scholarship and scholars:

Initially, what he terms the ruling class motivated and centered scholarship produced by palace or venal scholars (*Ulama-Al-Su*). Fodio was profoundly troubled by how many scholars of his time had become instruments of the ruling class, particularly under the *Habe* kings. He perceived these scholars as having forsaken their sacred duty to guide people with honesty and integrity. Instead, they utilized their knowledge to flatter and protect the powerful, crafting religious justifications for injustice, exploitation, and oppression. Their primary concern, he believed, was not truth or the welfare of the community but rather acquiring wealth, titles, and prestige by remaining close to the palace. They paid no heed to un-Islamic practices, allowed harmful innovations to proliferate, and failed to speak out against rulers who abused their people. In doing so, they misled the people and helped maintain a system of tyranny. Fodio felt that this betrayal of religious knowledge had profoundly damaged society, leaving people in ignorance and silencing those who sought genuine reform. Fodio classifies the majority of the pre-jihad scholars as belonging to this category; he views them as being in political alliance with the despotic and unjust *Habe* kings.

The second category encompasses scholars who engage in intellectual pursuits for the intrinsic value of scholarship or the exhilaration of intellectual challenge. These individuals pursue knowledge not with the intent to uphold justice but rather for the sake of learning itself or to demonstrate their intellectual prowess. Unlike palace scholars, these individuals are not necessarily corrupt or aligned with rulers; however, their approach to knowledge is fundamentally self-centered. They perceived scholarship as an intellectual exercise, a means to exhibit their mastery of complex texts, or to prevail in academic debates. Fodio regarded this form of learning as devoid of substance, as it failed to address the genuine struggles of society. Although these scholars may possess sharp intellect, they do not utilize their knowledge to advocate for justice or enhance the moral fabric of the community. In Fodio's view, they have transformed something sacred, namely religious knowledge, into a personal pastime or status symbol. For Fodio, regardless of their brilliance or erudition, they have fundamentally misunderstood the purpose of knowledge. Fodio perceives many Western classical philosophers as belonging to this group. Among these scholars are those who engage in speculative or futuristic intellectual endeavors (*ilm - al-kalam* and *ilm ghayb*).

The third and most esteemed category of scholars, according to Fodio, comprises those who utilize knowledge to champion positive change in society, demonstrating a profound concern for both truth and the real challenges faced by the community. These scholars are not motivated by power or the desire to showcase their abilities; their work is grounded in a sincere aspiration to resolve problems, guide individuals toward righteousness, and construct a society that embodies moral and spiritual values. They regard knowledge not as a possession to be hoarded but as a tool for improving society. These scholars teach with humility, speak truth to power, and stand in solidarity with the oppressed. They apply their learning to address tangible issues, such as unjust taxation, ignorance, gender injustice, corruption, and strive to build communities where individuals can live with dignity, fairness, and faith. Fodio believed that this form of scholarship was essential. It was not about abstract theories but about ensuring access to education, just governance,

and societal progress. In many respects, this vision of the scholar was one that Fodio embodied himself: a teacher, reformer, and leader who employed knowledge to serve.

#### **4.3. State And Political Authority**

In broader Islamic thought, scholars such as Al-Mawardi had long emphasized that the purpose of the Dawla (State) was not merely to collect taxes or wage wars but to protect religion and organize social affairs under Sharia law (11). Nevertheless, in regions like Hausaland, this deeper vision of an Islamic state remained largely unrealized. For Fodio, the State was a sacred trust to fulfill divine obligations. In works such as *The Obligation of Migration*, Fodio argued that rulers lacking moral integrity and Islamic knowledge were illegitimate (10). To him, leadership should be an earned position based on piety and service to the community. For Fodio, an ideal State should be based on establishing and safeguarding Islamic law, ensuring justice for both the rulers and the masses, in addition to public welfare and education.

Fodio's vision encompasses religious principles; he views the leader as a moral servant to God and the people. Following his successful revolution, Fodio avoided concentrating power solely in his hands. Instead, he established a decentralized and federal system where autonomous emirates pledged allegiance to the Sokoto Caliphate yet retained localized authority under Islamic guidance (12). The Sultan of Sokoto (Caliph) led the executive, aided by wazirs (ministers), the Shura, or council of scholars (ulama), advised on legal and religious matters, and Kadis (judges) handled legal disputes based on Sharia law across the emirates (13).

This decentralized approach reflected a keen understanding of the diverse cultural and ethnic composition of Hausaland. Fodio's writing articulated that rulers must be accountable to God for their treatment of subjects. In *The Migration Obligation*, (10) underscored that effective governance entailed

- Safeguarding life and property.
- Upholding justice and eradicating tyranny.
- Developing infrastructure and promoting literacy.
- Providing welfare, particularly through zakat (alms) and public charity
- The State was not merely a political apparatus; it served as a moral custodian tasked with elevating society to align with divine expectations.

#### **4.4. Justice**

In *The Migration Obligation*, Fodio conceptualizes justice through two perspectives: firstly, as the equitable distribution of what is due to each individual, and secondly, as the cultivation of societal relationships acting as a father to the young, a son to the elders, a brother among equals, and ensuring that wrongdoers are held accountable in a fair manner (10). The conceptions can be seen as a response to the conditions of the Hausaland. Fodio's view aligns with earlier scholars; he asserts that a single day of just leadership surpasses seventy years of worship. Fodio advocates that leaders surround themselves with just and wise scholars, which aligns with the Islamic tradition of consultation. Fodio challenged the nepotism that was dominant among the Habe kings, (14).

Fodio had the conviction that justice constitutes the foundation of effective governance. For him, the law must be both principled and adaptable. His advocacy for a legal framework rooted in Islamic principles yet sufficiently flexible to accommodate evolving social contexts demonstrates an awareness of the delicate balance between tradition and reform. His ideas resonate with the Islamic legal concept of maqasid al-sharia. Maqasid means goals or purposes, and Sharia refers to the divine Islamic legal framework. Thus, Maqasid al-Sharia are the essential objectives that Islamic law intends to achieve for the benefit and welfare of humanity (15)—The pursuit of public welfare by ensuring that laws serve as instruments of justice rather than rigid doctrines.

#### **4.5. Women and Minority Rights**

According to the doctrines of Fodio and the founders of the Sokoto Empire, society should enjoy certain fundamental rights. Moreover, disadvantaged groups such as women, slaves, and non-Muslims are expected to enjoy special rights. His efforts, alongside the broader leadership of the Sokoto Empire, were rooted in Islamic law while being acutely responsive to the unique social fabric of 18th and 19th-century Hausaland.

In *Enlightening Minds*, (10) Fodio views women as the bedrock of the revolution because they were denied a significant number of rights before the revolution, such as the right to education, participation in governance, freedom of association, and human dignity. He advocated that women should not be exploited or viewed as mere articles of sex.

Further, Fodio emphasized having interactive town hall meetings with women and children to hold a public audience with him.

The issue of Slavery presented a similarly complex challenge. As noted by (16), Slavery was an essential socio-economic factor in the life of the people in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Hausaland, both because of its economic role and because slaves constituted a considerable portion of the population. Some Habe kings were selling slaves to Europeans through the Yorubas in the western part of Nigeria. Apparently, for that reason, the slaves actively participated in the armed revolution against the Habe kings, and the revolution had a strong anti-slavery sentiment. However, how were the slaves handled? The Islamic law provided various ways for slaves to become free. The focus of the Fuqaha (jurists) at that time was on treating the slaves fairly rather than on finding a way to abolish Slavery. However, in the case of the revolutionaries, another factor might have been their wish to keep the slaves in some semblance of contentment because they could not afford rebellions to occur while the overthrown Habe kings were launching raids against the newly established Empire. Therefore, Fodio was concerned that the lawfully enslaved individuals would not suffer abuse at the hands of their masters. The owners were cautioned that it was their duty to provide for the clothing and food of their slaves and to refrain from overworking them. Therefore, the slaves were well treated, most were set free, and their liberty and pursuit of a decent life were restored. From the observation, slave owners may have paid attention to Fodio's advice about treating them humanely. This, in turn, may explain why there hasn't been a slave rebellion. Besides, slaves may occupy a higher social status in society than many non-slaves.

Furthermore, a significant number of non-Muslims existed in the Caliphate who, despite the Islamization process, resisted being converted to Islam. On the contrary, the revolution was targeted at the overthrow of the despotic leadership of the Habe kings, not the populace. Therefore, a large number of non-Muslims retained their religion and were protected under the Islamic concept of Dhimma (protected people). Dhimma is an Islamic legal term referring to a legal acknowledgment of non-Muslim individuals and communities in place of the Jizya (Poll tax), also extended to the protection of the freedom to practice their religions (15).

#### **4.6. Contributions of Fodio's Ideas to scholarship and political activities in West Africa**

The Sokoto Empire lasted for a century and had an impact on learning and literary development. Fodio's promotion of a culture of learning among the local populace and the remarkable increase in literacy in Hausaland have had a lasting influence. According (17), the vision of an ideal society and the revolutionary drive to achieve it were central to the Sokoto Empire, which was fundamentally intellectual. He argued that Fodio's writings and ideas were scholarly to the extent that they could be taught at colleges and universities. Smith inferred that Fodio was primarily a scholar and that, regardless of other inspirations, his objectives were derived from academic literature and traditions of learning. This argument is supported by (13), who asserts that the Caliphate was founded on a solid foundation of knowledge, as scholars were entrusted with its political, economic, and military leadership.

Under the Caliphate, knowledge functioned as both an indicator of future opportunities and a means of attaining honor and dignity. Educational institutions were established, and a suitable educational framework was implemented. Further, (13) stated that the intellectual and academic foundation led to flourishing enlightenment and facilitated the emergence of scholars who engaged in scholarly pursuits in various disciplines. Fodio aspired to reconstruct the society of the rightly guided caliphs in Western Sudan by drawing inspiration from a previous golden era in Islamic history.

Fodio and his mentees, notably his brother Abdullahi and his son Muhammad Bello, made substantial contributions in this domain. Fodio authored "Diya Alawi," an extensive exegesis of the Quran in Arabic (18). Additionally, he composed "Nur Albab" (Enlightening Minds) to motivate the general populace to pursue knowledge. Fodio also authored a widely recognized treatise on justice and equality titled "Uslu al-Adl limital al-Umor we Ahl al-Fadl" (The Principles of Justice for those in Authority), which discusses the importance of upholding the rule of law and maintaining justice.

Conversely, the publications that articulated his explicit call for Hijrah and revolution include "Bayan Wujec AL hijra" (Migration Obligation), "Wathena Bahlul Sudan" (Letter to the People of Sudan), and "Masa 'il Muhimmad" (Important Questions). Within these works, he delineated his rationale for designating the Hausa kings and their territory as Dar al-Kufr. Furthermore, his revolutionary ideologies and teachings are explicitly articulated in these writings.

Fodio and several of his disciples have exerted a lasting influence in the domains of public administration and state policy through the authorship of works such as "Irshaad Ikhwan" (Guiding the Students) and Abdullahi bin Fodio's "Diya al-Sultan" (Guide to the Sultan). The volumes explored a range of economic topics, including labor, trade, and agriculture. Similarly, attention was drawn to the avoidance of non-Islamic practices such as cheating and Riba (usury). Additionally, there was a discussion of general rules and recommendations for buying and selling. Works such as Tazyin

Alwaraqat (Decorating Pages) and Infaq Almayсур (A Little Light in the History of Hausaland) by his mentees exemplify contributions to history and historiography. Notably, Fodio, along with the mentees, also left a significant legacy in the fields of health and well-being, an approach that appears to be unique among reformers in the region.

## 5. Conclusion

Following an examination of the origins, context, development, and diverse applications of Fodio's political thought, it is noteworthy that scholars continue to explore this corpus in their doctoral research at both African and international universities. Although the history of the precolonial Sokoto Empire has been documented in books and journals, it is yet to be compiled, edited, translated, or published as a textbook for teaching political thought in Africa.

These findings position Fodio among the intellectuals who exerted substantial influence on the customs, interpersonal relationships, and intellectual heritage of his people while also establishing him as one of history's most significant political figures. A component of the legacy of the Sokoto Empire is Fodio's involvement in the social dimensions of his people's lives and his commitment to the intellectual development of scholars and students.

Fodio trained a considerable group of academics, both male and female, who recognized their roles as educators, social activists, and leaders. Further research should uncover additional evidence of the contributions of Fodio to political thought.

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