

An Interview with Dr Abdullah Hakim Quick on Shaikh Uthman dan Fodio

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"Uthman Ibn Fodio is probably the most influential Islamic scholar in the history of Islam in west Africa...", stated Sheikh Abdullah Hakim Quick who has recently acquired a PhD in - Aspects of Islamic Social Intellectual History in 18th century Hausaland: Uthman Ibn Fodio. This is the end of a nine year educational journey, which began with a Masters and gradually moved on to a PhD degree from the History Department of the University of Toronto, St. George Campus. "The whole experience for me has really been more than just a degree. I don't look at it like a PhD from the University of Toronto, although that is an achievement, but that is a minor thing for me. Whether I got the degree or not, it wouldn't really matter compared to what I got by going into the writings of the Sheikh (Uthman ibn Fodio)."

But what is it about this scholar that makes him worthy of study? Who is he and what exactly is significant about him? Questions such as these can be answered once an individual takes a moment to look into the life of this 18 century scholar, who is known as Sheikh Uthman ibn Fodio in Arabic or Dan Fodio in Foulani (a West African) language. When asked why he had chosen this particular aspect of study, Abdullah Hakim answered that not only was Uthman Ibn Fodio most likely the most influential Islamic scholar in the history of Islam in west Africa (therefore influencing the people in Hausaland), but his teachings also spread throughout west Africa and even connected to Sudan itself. Even today, people continue to read his books. Abdullah Hakim also wanted to make the Sheikh's life and achievements in regard to Islam known, so that muslims could see how Islam grew in other parts of the world besides Southern Asia or the Middle East. As a background to his thesis paper, he examined the presence of Islam and the presence of scholarship coming into west Africa in general and into Hausaland. Hausa speaking people made up the largest proportion in west Africa, and they were a very influential group of people living in Hausaland, who were known for their merchant activities.

During this time period, it was a great time of revival when great changes were coming about in the intellectual thought within the muslim world. Places such as Timbuktu, now in the Mali Republic of Africa were considered to be great centres of Islamic learning, especially from the 12th century up into the 17th and 18th centuries. There are reports that when the Sahaba went across northern Africa, some of them went down into the desert into desert regions like Mali, Niger, southern Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Lake Chad area. This would account for the number of groups well-versed in Islam stemming from those areas. Abdullah Hakim further stated that the Timbuktu system of learning followed the Maliki school of thought. A major concept they used was the mulazama system. "The mulazama system is something which I think we really need to revive today, it was practiced all over muslim world. It is where the student, instead of studying

in a classroom setting where in the western sense a teacher comes in and students are sitting in their chairs...you actually live with the teacher, so you become part of the clerical community & you may even marry into his family. He gets to know you and you stay in the company of a scholar working and living with that person until you master certain texts." Each scholar has their own specialty of a particular branch of knowledge (eg. Qur'an or Daw'ah) so that by the time one has reached their seventh or eighth sheikh, they are pretty well-rounded in each of the subjects. This is the classical way of islamic knowledge. Abdullah Hakim emphasized that when living with the sheikh you pick up his qualities and character as well, so that you are not just learning a set of theoretical rules. Sheikh Uthman ibn Fodio studied within this system, which was also something Abdullah Hakim examined in his thesis.

Uthman ibn Fodio was one of the Foulani people, who were nomadic people who most likely originated from Senegal. They moved throughout west Africa, taking their cows to different pastures and using them for trading purposes sometimes. The Foulani people lived in a symbiotic relationship with the Hausa people, who were farmers and blacksmiths. Thus, the two groups traded their wares to survive. In the 18th century, the Foulanis developed a clerical group and this clerical group had a nomadic base while focusing on scholarship. The islamic body they formed, torodbe scholars (a Foulani word) continued to move throughout west Africa, and some of their scholars even went on to become leaders of the great jihad movements of the 18th century.

This was the actual movement that Sheikh Uthman ibn Fodio gained his knowledge, through the mulazama method. The society at this time was not doing very well. A series of corrupt kings had developed, and Islamic ideals were indistinguishable from local superstitions and practices. There was also a great deal of overburdening people with taxes, government corruption, dynastic rules, oppression, tribalism, and heavy oppression of women.

Now picture Uthman dan Fodio entering into this picture. He was around old 20 years old when he began to teach the people, and he did daw'a for 30 years. Allah gave him the ability to express himself well at an early age, and he would move through different areas of Hausaland teaching in a number of different areas. He focused on giving the masses of the people basic islamic education, and he was well-versed in classical Arabic, Hausa, Foulani language, and Tuwadic language, which made him more capable of speaking to masses of people in their own language.

He espoused many different new islamic concepts to the people, which he taught them. He focused on basic islamic education: learning fiqh, learning tawheed, also understanding the life of the Prophet (pbuh) and the basic rudiments for a sound Islamic education, following the Maliki school of thought. Then he worked on the scholars of the time themselves, striving against extremism within them (i.e. taking extreme positions on tawheed, which dealt with heavy philosophy that people were not emphasizing - eg. "where is Allah?" & anyone who couldn't answer was declared a kafir by this group) Uthman ibn Fodio wrote a book showing them how their extremism was wrong.

He also taught that all madhabs (schools of law), were correct so that people should respect them and the people within each school. He also tried to rectify

the position of Islamic scholarship with sufism. Actually, he was also considered to be a leading part of the Qadarwi Sufi order. Yet, at the same time he made it clear that anybody who went into tasawuf should only go into it for knowledge of the heart. Any whirling around, musical playing, or extremism that was not within Shari'a he was against. His followers practiced a sober, individual type of Sufism that was more into heavy reflection. Anyone wishing to study sufism more in depth was told to know their fiqh first, so that they would recognize any sufi practices that crossed the Shari'a border.

Another area Sheikh ibn Fodio was strongly vocal in was women's education. During his time, there were either two extremes: women were either walking around in nothing but a waist-cloth, or on the other extreme they were locked into their houses against their will. They were all generally ignorant of Islam. What the sheikh did was he brought the women out of their houses, and put them in one area and the men in another area and began to regularly lecture them. However, the extremists of the time strongly disapproved. "They said 'fitna, you are mixing men and women!'", Abdullah Hakim explains, and even went on to a modern example: "The Muslim Students' Association (MSA) brings a question to me every year, 'Brother Abdulla, can we have brothers and sisters in the same room?' Every year. Every time there is new leadership in MSA they are asking the same question." The Sheikh answered these extremists by saying that they were not educating the women before, they were simply using them like a dish..eating out of it and then throwing it away, having no further use for it. He went on to say that he had brought these women out of their houses and was educating them, and they were covering themselves up. Men and women were always kept in separate areas, and because we were talking about people with high morals coming together to learn and practice Islam - there was no fitna there. He even used examples from the early days of men and women in the Prophet's mosque. The way men dressed was also addressed by the Sheikh, as he encouraged them to wear turbans and long, loose clothing. Thus, all his followers were readily distinguishable.

Another aspect that he educated the men about was taharah. Surprisingly enough, this Sheikh went into intimate details on various subjects like this one. Apparently at the time, the men had a harmful practice for their method of purification which the Sheikh stopped. Another personal issue he addressed was the relationship within a marital relationship, and how to strengthen the bond between these two people. He took it to the point where he actually spoke to people about the sexual relationship between a man and his wife, which one would usually not expect from someone talking about fiqh. But these were realistic things that he was doing for society. As stated in Abdullah Hakim's thesis, it is clear that Uthman dan Fodio was not only the jihad leader, but that he also affected the social-intellectual situation in Hausaland, as he radically changed the society. Sheikh dan Fodio has written a book called Yahya al-Sunnah which talks about bringing the sunnah to life again by going into points like these.

Female circumcision was another major social issue the Sheikh delved into. This practice was in the Sudan, Somalia and was going across to his country and he stopped people from doing it. He brought the hadith of the Prophet showing that only a little bit was allowed to be removed from the tip of the clitoris, but was by no means necessary as it wasn't really part of Islam. His argument against it,

once again went into graphic details of how if men allowed this to happen then a woman would not be able to achieve her climax in a physical relationship, which would then cause their relationship to deteriorate. To have a more fulfilling relationship, they should allow her to retain what Allah gave her. This obviously was a heavy argument for the Sheikh to be making, especially in the 18th century!

"Uthman ibn Fodio went into common events people faced, for instance how to set up masjids, sunnah ways of eating food, describing the benefits of cleaning up your plate, eating with your right hand, washing your hands..all these different social benefits." He went through the sunnah and explained why they would benefit and the reasons behind these practices. Uthman ibn Fodio also spent a great deal of time concentrating on cleaning of the heart. So a number of his texts deal with reza, showing off, jealousy, arrogance, anger, and other general diseases of the heart which are so rampant today in the muslim world. "Basically, I was concluding that he was more than just a scholar, that he was a social reformer in his time and he's still relevant up until now." stated Abdullah Hakim.

Gradually, the number of Sheikh Uthman ibn Fodio's follows grew, until he was at a point where whenever he travelled he took 1000 of his scholars with him. The kings became nervous because of the number of people he drew away from them. The Sheikh demanded that the laws be changed to become more islamic. Later he was attacked by order of the kings, and his group made hijrah, then made jihad and won despite their smaller numbers - thus establishing a khalifah. When the battle was won he stepped down from his Amir position, and went to a small village to teach until he died. This shows that the Sheikh wasn't into power, because he had just won the battle that would have given him ultimate control and yet he chose to step down.

His relevance up to today makes it conceivable for us to consider the types of lessons from him. "The issues he handled were actually very crucial to our own existence today." Abdullah Hakim pointed out. He went further to mention that many of his khutbahs that he gave at the Jami Mosque between 1985-1990, and many of the positions that he came to on various issues, were actually based on what he had discovered through reading the writings of the sheikh. "That is why the whole experience for me, has been more than an academic one. It has changed me as a person." He has even visited Nigeria and visited the sheikh's grave, and also visited his family. Even the fact that Sheikh Uthman don Fodio had special classes for women and children after Asr prayers, so that women would have a forum where she could ask for help from the Sheikh, inspired Abdullah Hakim ".that was one of the things that helped me even to develop this office here, ISSRA. There has to be a place where women can come and youth so they can express themselves. So that was one of the inspirations for me for some of the things we are doing here."

As students, we can all learn from Sheikh ibn Fodio's experiences. There are several points to note, for instance the importance of a sound islamic education (i.e. knowing the meaning of the Qur'an, basic fiqh, a broad-based education), avoiding extremism and having balance, believing in authentic traditions, and putting much less emphasize in culture and superstition - especially in unislamic concepts. Abdullah Hakim also advised that muslim sisters read the recently

published book written by Jean Boyd called Nana Asma'u, about one of the Sheikh's daughters.

Abdullah Hakim's actual thesis paper will not be available for another two years. But if anyone is interested in reading it, he plans to make copies available. Some of Sheikh Uthman ibn Fodio's works are also available in English, 37 of which Br. Abdulla Hakim has copies in his possession. Marvin Hiskitt, Murray Last, Ibrahim Sulaiman and Mohammad Sharif may also have translated some of his works and may act as a starting point for anyone looking up don Fodio's work.