

British Colonial Officer H. R. Palmer:
"Attitude of the Muslim Provinces of Nigeria" During World War I

Confidential.

APPENDIX A.

ATTITUDE OF THE MUSLIM PROVINCES OF NIGERIA.

From the beginning of the war to November 1916, if there was any Turkish or Senusi propaganda in the northern provinces of Nigeria, its effects were negligible and its reception cold. Certain persons were captured during 1915 who declared they were Turkish agents, but it is extremely doubtful whether they were in fact such, and whether their professions were not induced by an inherent love of charlatanism and the ordinary motives of a mendicant.

But it must be remembered that to the Fulani rulers of Northern Nigeria, and still more to their subject people the Hausa, all that comes from the East is an object of veneration; hence any wandering Muallim or professed saint or political agent is always certain of food and hospitality. The people live and have lived apart from the general current of the Muslim world, and have not the slightest real interest in or feeling about many of the questions which loom so large in Eastern politics. They have never heard of the Agha Khan, hardly know that there are such people as Indian Muslims, and look on the Sultan of Turkey merely as a peer of the Emir of Sokoto, who himself professes to be, and to them is, the only Khalif (Amir ul Muminin) that matters. In fact, they disregard all Muslim history between the death of the last of the four "rightly directed Khalifs" and the accession of the first Fulani Emir—Othman dan Hodio—in 1807.

The British Government has pursued a policy of retaining under the guidance of Residents the native rulers and their Muslim polity, shorn of abuses; so that the upper classes in Nigeria have everything to lose and nothing to gain by any kind of disorder—at least, most of them have.

Many of the chiefs—especially those who owed their position entirely to the British Government—were extremely uneasy about the War up to the date of the fall of Garua in the Cameroons. There can, I think, be little doubt that German agents (probably agents of the German companies trading in Nigeria) had promised nearly all the deposed Emirs and other chiefs out of office a speedy return to power were the Germans to be successful locally.

With the fall of Garua, however, and subsequent conquest of the Cameroons, rulers and people became entirely reassured. The war to them was the war in the Cameroons. The war in Europe was too distant and too imperfectly envisaged really to affect their minds for the most part, except that in large centres like Kano, where there exists a fairly large Tripolitan colony, there was undoubtedly a certain undercurrent of sentiment for the Turks, and pious hope that they might recover North Africa. In this connection the Germans were viewed merely as the *instrument* by which the Turks might come back to their own. It will be apparent that no anti-German propaganda of ours would probably affect these views.

Were Nigeria an isolated country, there would be little more to say about its attitude to the War, and one could almost have said for certain that nothing would go wrong there.

Unfortunately, however, it is impossible to consider Nigerian politics without reference to the countries to the east and north and west of it—the Eastern Chad basin, the Sahara, and the Western Sudan—because really the whole Sudan belt is one country with no real geographical obstacles, with homogeneous peoples having a common religion, and with few or no real racial antipathies.

From Darfur to the Senegal and from Yola to Agades the chiefs exchange presents and news, and are often united by marital and other ties. While they are not intolerant Muslims as a rule, they are far more fervid believers in and votaries of the essential tenets of Islam than the average Turk or Arab of North Africa. They would be quite capable under certain circumstances of fighting for their faith as did the dervishes at Omdurman, though that is hardly a likely contingency in Nigeria so long as their Muslim life and social order are protected as they have been since 1903. Up to the present the pride of the Fulani in their own position and history has entirely discounted the political influence of external sects. The Emirs have usually dismissed Senusi agents with presents and nothing more, not because they disapproved of their aims, but because they would not be patronised by Sidi Ahmed or anyone else.

There would, however, probably be a point at which their general sentiment for Islam and an instinctive desire for independence and freedom from Christian control might get the upper hand of their discretion, and assert itself.

That point has (since 1914) been brought appreciably nearer by two things.

- (1) The Italian evacuation of the Tripoli hinterland.
- (2) The French "conscription" of Sudanese natives for service in France during 1915-1916.

The Italian evacuation of the Tripoli hinterland produced an immense moral effect all over the Sudan, and especially in Kano, which is so closely connected with Tripoli commercially.

The French "conscription" of natives for active service has embittered and envenomed not only the vast bulk of the Moslems to the immediate north of British territory, but a very large number of our own people who are in many ways closely connected with them. "Here," say they, "have these Nassára (Christians) been for twenty years preaching and legislating against slavery, and now they themselves are slave-raiding our villages and taking away our children to fight for them." It would appear peculiarly unfortunate that the French did not except from this system certain parts of the Western Sudan, for, as far as can be judged from Kano information, they have thereby made the local leaders of the Tijani *tarikhi* (a sect generally considered the most friendly to Europeans) extremely hostile and anti-French.

Any intelligent and well informed native will tell one that the French have ruined the country to the immediate north of Nigeria, and European merchants at Kano concur in that opinion from their point of view.

As is well known, and was in fact to be expected, Turkish and Arab agents have succeeded in stirring up the Tuwareg in the Sahara, and sporadic outbreaks have been going on for the past year. Officers from Bilma, Agades, and other posts who passed through Kano last autumn were all very pessimistic as to the state of the Sahara. The French have killed a great many of certain tribes, e.g., the Ulimiden, but the Tuwareg are born fighters, and keep returning to the charge by committing some new outrage from time to time. Just before leaving Kano in November 1916 I heard that the Kelgeres had ambushed and annihilated a French patrol.

The relations between Sokoto, Katsina, Kano, and Bornu and such places as Bilma, Agades, and Tawa are so constant and intimate that the failure of the French to preserve order in their territory cannot, but react in greater or less degree on the Emirates of Nigeria. Once the atmosphere of unrest is created, the immediate occasion of trouble is more likely to be some petty local affair than any large question of world-wide importance. As Muslims, the Emirs can have only one real grievance, i.e., that they are under a Christian Government; but even that disadvantage does not loom large in their eyes beside their anxiety to maintain their prestige among their people, and the personal security of themselves and their families.

It will, therefore, be apparent that the potential sources of danger in Nigeria are rather among (1) people of the ruling caste who are not actually in power, (2) the rather limited class of pious fanatics, or clever charlatans, and (3) the ignorant peasantry, than among the actual rulers of the country.

The latter will probably continue in the future, as in the past, to discourage any society or propaganda which might cause an upheaval. It must be added, however, that the more intelligent and informed Emirs who know something of, or are in touch with, the East regret that Great Britain has been compelled to act against Turkey in Arabia and Persia. This is, I think, due to a fear that we may become too much involved in Arabian politics. On the subject of the declaration of independence by the Sherif of Mecca, their attitude was one of doubt whether he would succeed in maintaining his independence—a doubt mainly due to past history; but at the same time their sentiments are certainly not unfriendly to the Sherif's position, and, in fact, with their particular views of Muslim history, there is every reason to think that they would prefer to regard an Arab of the Kuraish as the Eastern Khalif rather than the very distant, shadowy, and "ajam" (foreign) potentate known to them as the Sultan of Stamboul.

There can be no doubt that, if a safe pilgrimage to Mecca is assured to them under the new régime, they will ultimately not only acquiesce in it, but welcome it.

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