
Impact of British Colonization in Northern Nigeria:¹ Dynamics of Conquest, Resistance and Socio-Cultural Consequences, 1850-1912

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of British colonization on the sociopolitical entities of Northern Nigeria, focusing on the period from 1850 to 1912. The aim is to analyze how this colonization not only altered political structures but also transformed the cultural identities of local communities. The central issue is how colonial interventions led to a redefinition of borders, shifting from cultural boundaries to imposed linear borders, with significant consequences on social and political life. The key question is the effect of this domination on cultural values and traditional judicial structures, highlighting the resistance of some sociopolitical institutions, such as the Sultanates of Sokoto and Bornu, as well as the Emirates of Kano, Adamawa, and Gombe, against this conquest. The study aims to explore the different phases of colonial expansion, analyze local resistance and assess the lasting effects of colonization on the socio-political structures of Northern Nigeria. The theories suggest that colonization weakened cultural identities and disintegrated traditional systems, changing power relations. The expected results highlight the deep transformations caused by colonization which continue to influence the social and cultural dynamics of contemporary Northern Nigeria, leaving a complex and enduring legacy to explore.

Keywords: Colonization, Resistance, Boundaries, Sultanate, Emirates, Northern Nigeria

¹ This study concerns the Sultanates of Sokoto and Bornu as well as the Emirates of Kano, Adamawa and Gombe.

INTRODUCTION

European colonization profoundly redefined the social, political and cultural landscapes of African territories, leading to lasting changes in the lives of indigenous populations. Among the colonial powers, Britain played a significant role, particularly in Northern Nigeria, where its influence intensified between 1850 and 1912. This period was marked by a series of events that not only established colonial control but also provoked varied reactions from the Sultans and Emirs of Northern Nigeria (Eluwa, 1996: 73). The British colonization process began with a phase of exploration, characterized by trade relations and recognition. Explorers like Richard Lander paved the way for colonial expansion by establishing contacts with African states (Lander, 1830; Njeuma, 1974: 92). However, this phase was quickly followed by military expansion, driven by economic and political interests, which aimed to impose British authority on societies seen as “inferior” (Ogunyemi, 1999). In this context, resistance to colonization became significant, especially in the Sultanates of Sokoto and Bornu and in the Emirates of Kano, Adamawa and Gombe. Local leaders from these sociopolitical entities led intense struggles to defend their autonomy against the invaders (Falola and Genova, 2005). The consequences of this colonization were profound and multifaceted. The imposition of linear borders redefined traditional territories, fragmenting communities and eroding cultural values (Smith, 2004). Moreover, the dismantling of traditional judicial and institutional structures undermined local societies' ability to self-govern, leading to significant changes in governance (Mamdani, 1996; Ranger, 1986: 41). By exploring these dynamics of conquest, resistance and sociocultural impact, this study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the effects of British colonization in Northern Nigeria and an insight into the lasting legacies that continue to shape contemporary Northern Nigerian society.

THE ADVENT OF BRITISH COLONIZATION

For a long time, African communities, including those in Northern Nigeria, lived according to their own cultures, norms and values (Abdulsalami, 2013: 52). However, British colonization took place in three main phases: firstly, the phase of recognition and annexation between 1850 and 1880; secondly, the phase of military expansion from 1880 to 1890; and thirdly, the phase of consolidation from 1890 to 1912.

Recognition and Annexation Phase 1850 to 1880

The British invasion of Nigeria began with a period of recognition and annexation that marked the start of their colonial expansion in the region. By the 1850s, British explorers such as Richard Burton and John Hanning Speke undertook expeditions into the interior of Nigeria, mapping the territories and establishing contact with local leaders (Hargreaves, 1970: 45-46). These explorations revealed the economic and strategic potential of the region, prompting the British to deepen their involvement. In 1865, after negotiating trade agreements with local leaders, the British annexed Lagos which became a strategic point on Nigeria's west coast (Crowder, 1968: 78). The annexation of Lagos not only consolidated a British presence on the coast but also served as a springboard for further expansion into the interior. This annexation was driven by the growing need to control trade routes and secure British interests in the face of increasing European competition in the region. Meanwhile, the British established trading posts and strengthened their diplomatic relations with various local rulers, preparing the ground for more aggressive expansion (Pongri, 2017: 68).

Military Expansion and Campaigns 1880 to 1890

The decade between 1880 and 1890 was characterized by significant military expansion, marking a crucial step in consolidating British control over Nigeria. The establishment of the British Royal Niger Company (RNC), under the leadership of Frederick Lugard, played a central role in this expansion (Miller, 1985: 102-103). Lugard and his troops led military campaigns against the powerful northern kingdoms, notably Kano and Sokoto, using advanced military tactics and coalition strategies to weaken local powers (Falola and Heaton, 2008: 154-155). These campaigns were often accompanied by negotiations² with local chiefs, allowing for a combined approach of military coercion and diplomacy. Lugard's strategy was to establish agreements with local rulers while consolidating military control, which facilitated British expansion into these difficult territories. These campaigns were marked by intense conflicts and strong resistance from the local kingdoms³, but they helped strengthen the British presence and paved the way for a more direct administration of the conquered territories.

Consolidation Campaigns (1890 to 1912)

The years 1890-1912 were marked by decisive campaigns to consolidate British power in Nigeria. During this period, the British launched major offensives to capture strategic centres such as Kano and Sokoto, which were important strongholds of resistance (Lovejoy, 1980: 85). These campaigns were accompanied by harsh repression of local rebellions, allowing the British to stabilize their control over the newly annexed territories. The capture of Kano, for example, was a decisive blow that weakened local forces and allowed for broader British domination in the northern region (Osaghae, 1998: 77-79). The British used a combination of military power and psychological warfare strategies to overcome resistance, including tactics such as sieges and the destruction of resources in besieged cities. This period also saw the establishment of temporary administrative structures to manage the conquered territories and begin integrating the new regions into the British Empire⁴.

RESISTANCE TO BRITISH COLONIAL CONQUEST

Several traditional sociopolitical entities strongly resisted the British colonial conquest. However, this study emphasizes the Emirates of Kano, Adamawa⁵, Gombe, as well as the Sultanate of Sokoto and Bornu.

Sultanate of Sokoto and Emirate of Kano

Regarding the fall of the Sokoto Caliphate, this battle took place on March 14, 1903, and ended the next day with the crushing defeat of Sokoto. The Fulbe forces were not a match for

²In Northern Nigeria, the resistance was long and fierce, as the population, rooted in warrior traditions before British colonization, refused to submit. The sultan and emirs fought to their last breath, which explains the difficulties the British imperial army faced against these sociopolitical structures in Northern Nigeria.

³Some princes, obsessed with power in this region, colluded with the British colonial administration to weaken their chiefs. This was the case in Sokoto and Adamawa.

⁴This military campaign was quite long.

⁵When we talk about the Emirate of Adamawa, we refer to this highly organized political structure founded by the Pullo scholar known as Modibbo Adama. This Emirate extended as far as Northern Cameroon, including several lamidates, the most important of which were those of Ngaoundere, Banyo, Tibati, Garoua, Baschéo, Rey-Bouba, Maroua, Bogo and Mindif. All these Fulbe socio-political entities, subordinated to the Emirate of Adamawa, suffered the horrors of colonization by the Germans, British and French.

the colonial forces armed with modern weapons (Mohammed, 1969: 174). The Sultan and the Emir of Kano escaped and began the long and arduous march to the East, with the British in pursuit. The Emir of Kano, Aliyu Babba, known as Aliyu *Ibn* Abdullahi-Maje Karofi, was captured and exiled to Lokoja until his death in 1926. The two forces ultimately met hundreds of kilometers away in a small town called Burmi on July 27, 1903, where the Fulbe army was annihilated (Palmer and Richmond, 1908: 44). Numerous heroic acts of bravery of epic proportions were recorded that day. The Sultan died fighting with over ninety of his supporters around him; his body was retrieved from the pile. Several Emirs and their supporters died that day as well. The British also suffered casualties. From that day onward, British authority replaced Fulbe authority throughout the protectorate. The Emir of Sokoto pledged allegiance to the British Crown, and Sokoto became a British province, to which Gwandu was later added as a sub-province, making Sokoto one of the dual provinces of the protectorate (Palmer and Richmond, 1908: 45-46). This explains the impact of British colonization on the Sokoto Caliphate and the Kingdom of Kano.

On the other hand, concerning this British conquest, this informant disputes the duration of the resistance of the aforementioned Fulbe Empire. The resistance of Sokoto lasted three years by the Fulbe army. However, this army was betrayed by some princes who sought the deposition of Prince Dahiru Muhammad in favour of Prince Dahiru junior. Thus, this prince guided the British imperial army through all the traps laid by the Fulbe warriors at the entrance of the Sokoto Caliphate (ChubadoU.,Mansur, 2024: 524). The throne against the warfare tactics used by the Fulbe is the result of a pact between Prince Abubakar and the British colonial administrator Lugard⁶. This resistance to British colonial conquest also took place in the Emirate of Adamawa.

Emirate of Adamawa

The Adamawa Emirate, which was also vast with more than twenty lamidats, was fragmented into micro-states called lamidats. Yola completely lost control of these lamidats, as the German and English colonizers had drawn the borders of Cameroon, with part of the lamidats located in the northern part of Cameroon (Chubado and Musa, 2020: 431; Alkasum, 2003: 103). The European colonizers implemented the theory of divide and rule in the Yola Emirate⁷. The Kingdom of Adamawa was destroyed, and Zubeiru was deposed and pursued. The British colonial administration, through intelligence, spent all its time tracking him down. He was one of the greatest resistors to British colonial conquest in Adamawa. He was hunted by the British colonial administration. In a letter written by Barclay, the representative of the British colonial administration in Yola, it states: Zubairu:

From latest information this man is at present in Gudu. He is raiding around the place for slaves and cattle and is causing a great deal of political unrest, his presence being a serious menace to the peace and development of the Province. I should be glad therefore, should you consider it feasible, if you would arrange to have him captured or driven out of the country (Bobbyi and Alkasum, 2009: 13).

⁶Interviews with Abubakar Ibrahim, Businessman, Male, Age 66, (Sokoto, 11/6/2024).

⁷Interviews with Muhammad Bayero, Trader, ... (20/10/2025).

Through this letter⁸, it is clear that the British colonial administration tracked Emir Zubairu in all the localities emerging from Adamawa. The British administrator Barclay alerted the entire population of Gudu to apprehend or even kill him. Thus, Emir Zubairu is the last resistor to the British colonial administration. During his reign, this emirate encompassed several lamidats located in the northern parts of Cameroon and Nigeria. However, other sources contradict this testimony regarding the last resistance in the Yola Emirate (Kirk-Greene, 1969: 22—23). When Zubairu was dismissed, some members of his *faada* (cabals), including part of his army commanded by Ousman Muhammadu, resisted for more than five years against the British imperial army. For this reason, before fleeing from his Emirate, Emir Zubairu left part of his army to defend his palace. For these warriors, composed of infantry and seasoned cavalry, leaving the palace in the hands of invaders was not a good sign.⁹

In short, at the outset, the British colonial administration attempted to negotiate with Zubairu, but he was against the entire British onslaught on the soil of Yola. For him, the white man was not trustworthy, and the destruction of the Adamawa Kingdom was their objective. Therefore, ceding the throne of Yola was not part of his plans. He swore to die on the throne, whether in the palace or in the surroundings of the Adamawa Kingdom. However, he would ultimately be killed in Yola, but outside of his palace. Thus, when Ousman learned of Zubairu's death, he continued to resist until his last days. It was in this manner that he was captured and executed with the complicity of *Lamido* Bobbo Ahmadu¹⁰. This entity was ravaged by the English colonizer. Emir Zubairu was the last resistor who witnessed the balkanization of this emirate, which had made the Hausa-Fulani communities of the two northern parts of Cameroon and Nigeria¹¹ proud. He laid ambushes for the contingents of the imperial army. He was the last Emir of the Adamawa Kingdom; after a fierce resistance against the German and British invasion, he was expelled from Yola. He sought refuge in Gudu, then led expeditions against the British by allying himself with *Lamdo* Ahmadou Roufaou of Maroua. The latter was also ousted by the Germans in Maroua. Nevertheless, supported by a contingent of Fulbe warriors, he returned to Gudu after a stop in Garoua and was killed in that same town of Gudu¹². The majority of the lamidats that composed the Adamawa Kingdom did not intervene in his favor, as the British had corrupted them, and those who refused were deposed. These colonizers sowed discord and completely divided the lamidats to impose their hegemony. Hence, the principle of division is enacted. Thus: Notable

Dividing to rule is an ancient and wise rule of human relations. It is easier to control and manage individuals than a team, hence “divide to better rule”. “Thus, the statement that the principle of “divide to rule” was first publicly and openly proclaimed as a policy by the Roman Senate: *Divide et imperia* (Divide to rule)... just like the message from the German poet Heinrich Heine in a letter from Paris dated January 12, 1842, in which he states that the formula “divide to rule” was first compiled by the Macedonian king Philip (359-336), father of Alexander the Macedonian. Other sources attribute the paternity to the Italian thinker, diplomat, and writer Niccolo

⁸The British colonial administrators exchanged letters in all the former kingdoms of Sokoto to track down opponents of their administration.

⁹ The British invasion was the worst thing that ever happened to the emirs of Northern Nigeria. Never before had they experienced such a flood.

¹⁰ The informant wished to remain anonymous for security reasons.

¹¹ Interview with Muhammad Bayero, Trader, ... (20/10/2022).

¹² Interview with Hamadou Bouba, Farmer, Male, Age 72, (Banyo, 17/6/ 2022).

Machiavelli, which is doubtful for the same reasons as mentioned above¹³.

Dividing to better rule has always served as a means to impose oneself. This is why we can say that the German and British colonizers fragmented the Adamawa Emirate to better control the well-organized and structured traditional Fulbe chiefs through their traditional structures. According to this informant:

*“Huunde Nawnde komin gidi be nassara ha lamou fombina, doum tchendigou aamin. Nassara sendi baba be biyum, derdirabé, bandirabe, legnol, goure pamare be mawde, yahke dji amine, dinadji amine, seyo amine. Dehbe pafimi min don kawti narri, be kabbi, sey bhe badidiri yerima'en. Yahke mandehn halaa lournal foudi tchaka aamin, fassiki'en en baangi, lambe aamin labbe fou diwaama, doggi, baraama.”*¹⁴

“One of the greatest difficulties we encountered in Adamawa is the division of our society by the whites. They divided fathers and sons, ethnic groups, families, great and small in our villages, our religions, our lifestyles, and our happiness. Because they understood that we were united, they used various means to sow discord between our princes. It was from this period that quarrels began among us. Traitors appeared, the lamidats were deposed, chased away, and others killed.”

In short, through this affirmation, it is clear that colonization is the greatest misfortune that the Adamawa Emirate experienced. Because this domination ravaged all cultural values, the lamidats, families and imposed traitors at the head of all these lamidats. Thus, in Northern Nigeria, colonization also significantly impacted the Sultanate of Bornu and the Emirate of Gombe.

Sultanate of Bornu and Emirate of Gombe

The Bornu Empire, located in the Lake Chad basin, was an important centre of resistance against British colonization at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. Under the leadership of powerful figures such as Emir Umar of Gombe¹⁵ and Shehu Ashimi of Bornu, Bornu responded to British imperial ambitions through a series of diplomatic and military strategies. Shehu Ashimi sought to maintain their independence by playing on the rivalries between European colonial powers, notably negotiating with the French and Germans to balance British pressure (Nettels, 1991: 133). Additionally, the Bornu Empire used its influence over regional trade networks to limit British intrusion. Resistance became more pronounced from the 1890s when the British intensified their efforts to control crucial trade routes that crossed Bornu territory. The Empire's armed forces, despite their inferior

¹³<https://rt82.ru/en/the-theory-of-suppression/who-owns-the-statement-divide-and-conquer/> (consulted on March 4, 2023).

¹⁴Interview with Muhammadu Adama, Quranic School Teacher, Male, Age 68, Yola, 18/9/2025.

¹⁵For more details on the history of the Emirate of Gombe, see the song by Cameroonian artist Babba Sadou titled: “*mii waari laamou Abubakar Gombe*” which literally translates to “I came for the enthronement of Abubakar” (in 2014).

equipment and organization compared to the British, engaged in several notable skirmishes, including ambushes and raids against colonial expeditions (Walker, 1999: 158). The most famous of these was the battle of 1893, where Bornu troops inflicted significant losses on British forces, temporarily slowing their advance in the region.

However, the advance of British forces gradually eroded Bornu's capacity for resistance, largely due to their technological superiority and modern warfare strategies. The British progressively captured key posts and neutralized local centres of resistance, notably employing psychological warfare techniques to demoralize enemy forces (Eaton, 1997: 2000). The fall of Bornu Empire in 1899 marked the end of significant resistance in the region, although pockets of resistance persisted into the early 20th century. The capture of the capital, Gazargamu, allowed the British to secure control over trade routes and consolidate their authority in the Lake Chad region, marking the end of an ancient and influential empire in the face of British colonial power. This resistance was also present in the Emirate of Gombe, as the emir refused any British incursion.

The Emirate of Gombe, another important player in the resistance against British colonization, waged a fierce struggle to preserve its autonomy in the face of colonial expansion. Located in the northeastern part of modern Nigeria, the Emirate of Gombe was led by a dynamic king like Umar, who defended their territory with remarkable determination. As early as the 1890s, the British, under the auspices of the Royal Niger Company, attempted to penetrate Gombe territory, attracted by the region's economic resources and strategic trade routes (Smith, 1985: 86; Chubado and Fatimah, 2025: 17). The population of Gombe, under Emir Umar's leadership, adopted a resistance strategy that combined diplomacy and military force. They formed alliances with neighboring kingdoms and conducted guerrilla campaigns against colonial troops, using their knowledge of the terrain to effectively counterattack British forces (Gugler, 1981: 75). Gombe's resistance was also manifested through local uprisings and prolonged battles, notably the famous battle of 1898, where Gombe forces inflicted significant losses on British troops and managed to repel their advance for a time.

However, as in the case of Bornu, Gombe's resistance ultimately yielded to the technological and strategic superiority of the British. Colonial forces intensified their efforts to crush centres of resistance by employing more effective warfare tactics and consolidating their positions with fortifications and permanent garrisons (Lewis, 1980: 98). The capture of Gombe in 1902 marked the end of organized resistance, although rebellions continued to exist in rural areas. The final submission of Gombe allowed the British to strengthen their control over northeastern Nigeria, consolidating their empire while integrating the region into their colonial administration. This conquest also facilitated the establishment of colonial infrastructure and British economic policies, putting an end to persistent local resistance and incorporating the Emirate of Gombe into the British colonial system (Chubado and Sani, 2020: 219). Subsequently, the fall of these socio-political entities (Sultanate and Emirates) in northeastern Nigeria had various repercussions.

EFFECTS OF BRITISH COLONIZATION IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

The African continent in general, and particularly the northern parts of Nigeria, have suffered the consequences of British colonization. In the face of this hegemony, the African man lost his cultural bearings. For this reason, Abiola asserts that the disasters and traumas faced by the African man are the repercussions of the arrival of Europeans in Africa (Abiola, 2008:

19). These repercussions involve the fragmentation of their cultural boundaries, the destruction of their values and their socio-political entities.

From Cultural Boundaries to Linear Boundaries

In traditional African societies,¹⁶ the concept of boundaries differs from that imposed by European colonizers during colonization. The boundary of a village chief or any administrative district ends where his authority ceases to exert influence (Vidrovitch, 1999: 39-40). For the northern communities of Nigeria, the notion of a boundary was limited to this cultural demarcation. However, colonization changed this notion, leading to the establishment of linear boundaries between these communities.¹⁷ The Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 is the origin of the limits set by European colonizers.

The English colonial conquest forcibly subjected the communities on both sides of the region to the concept of cultural boundaries. The Kanouri community was fragmented. Before this domination, the communities living in Banki, Amchidé, Kolofata, Doublé and Gambaru were an integral part of the Bornu Empire, which is now in the northeast of Nigeria as an autonomous state.¹⁸ In the current Extreme North region, the Kanouri shared the same cultures with those from Maiduguri.¹⁹ Thus, the British colonial conquest, which resulted in these linear boundaries, allowed European colonizers to trample on the cultures of the Bornu Empire communities. Regarding this colonial conquest, Barry asserts that it is the result of a violent process that enabled European powers to carve out vast territories at the expense of African states in the wake of defeat (Barry, 1999: 60).

According to this informant, cultural boundaries restricted their familial ties on both sides. Before colonization, the Fulbe of Jada and Chamba formed part of the same community as those from Yola, but the boundaries drawn by these colonizers made them believe they were different. Many prominent figures from Adamawa State were born in the towns of Jada²⁰ and Vimtim, including former Nigerian Vice President Atiku Abubakar and former Chief of Staff Alex Sabunda Badeh²¹. Colonial boundaries divided populations linked by a common destiny. The same ethnicities are found on both sides of international demarcations (Nobukpo and Roussy, 2017: 5). They further state:

¹⁶ Territories administered by African traditional leaders whose rules are established based on their culture.

¹⁷ Based on the song by Tiken Jah Fakoly titled "Plus rien ne m'étonne", we observe that European colonizers divided Africa during the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 without consulting African leaders. This is why peoples with different cultures find themselves in the same country. As Tiken Jah Fakoly says, "A part of the Manding Empire found itself among the Wolofs, a part of the Mossi Empire found itself in Ghana, a part of the Soussou Empire found itself in Manding, a part of the Manding Empire found itself among the Mossi". Thus, the peoples of northeastern Nigeria, particularly those of Bornou and Adamawa, also fell victim to this pragmatic delimitation imposed by the British colonizer. Other artists, such as Alpha Blondy and Longue Longue, have also addressed the issue of the balkanization of Africa.

¹⁸ Interview with Chetima Hamdou, Mayor of the city of Mora, male, 52 years old, Mora, September 29, 2022.

¹⁹ The cultural relationships maintained by the Kanouri, Peul, Haoussa, and Mandara peoples of these two northern regions reflect their shared past.

²⁰ The former officer of the Nigerian army and governor of Adamawa State, Murtala Nyako, was also born in Jada. He is also a prominent industrialist. He acquired his resources through his livestock farming and mango orchards. This makes him a major exporter of mangoes to Africa and Europe.

²¹ Interview with Yaya Nouhou, administrator, male, 43 years old, Jimeta, on October 20, 2022.

It should be noted that the division of ethnicities was written from an ethnographic reading grid invented by colonizers, the result of an objectifying external gaze, reifying and essentializing for control and exploitation purposes. With a stroke of a pen, societies were classified, delineated and confined within territorial frameworks, regardless of their historical context or their own dynamics. This correspondence between an ‘ethnic’ identity and a territory could be linearly transcribed on ethnographic maps. The conclusion was evident: the boundary divided ethnic groups, justifying the necessity for an exchange of territories as previously explained (Nobukpo and Roussy, 2017: 6).

The nomenclature of ethnic groups in the world is the work of European colonization. Each ethnic group is found in a territory that is foreign to it, explaining the emergence of boundaries between these societies that completely divide them. The ultimate goal is the exploitation of the territories divided by these colonizers. For this informant²², British colonization was a curse. The linear boundaries separated him from his children. He remained in Jada while his children were left permanently in Banyo. This division imposed by Europeans justifies the maxim “divide and conquer”. In the same vein, a *Mallam*²³ in Amchidé states, “the cultural boundary was disrupted by the unfounded demarcations established by colonizers. As a result, people with a common past have nearly lost their identity markers”. Listening to the testimonies of these informants, we understand that colonization had a huge impact on their communities. It imposed boundaries that do not fit their cultural realities. The establishment of this demarcation obeys the interests of the colonizers. It is in this same logic that Barry specifies, stating that these lines are drawn based on the profits that imperial powers derive at the expense of the populations split by new customs, linguistic, and administrative barriers (Barry, 1999: 61). In any case, British colonization fragmented the territories of northeastern Nigeria, particularly the Bornu Empire and the Adamawa Emirate. Alongside this structural dismantling of these territories, the British colonizer attacked the cultural values of the communities in northeastern Nigeria.

Abandonment of Cultural Values

Nigeria in general, and particularly its northern part, experienced a cultural onslaught from the British colonizing power. After destroying the educational system of these communities,²⁴ the British colonizer relied on schools²⁵ to destroy their religious values. Each colonial

²² Interview with Maliki Yahya Bello, Former Merchant, Male, Age 80, Jada, 22/10/2025.

²³ This informant wished to remain anonymous for security reasons.

²⁴ It is about community education aimed at teaching good manners for the conduct of a society to every individual especially child.

²⁵ Mostly, the schools were built by this British colonial administration. These schools were under the authority of the Anglican Church established in Kaduna. During this colonial period, the current State of Kaduna was the seat of the British colonial administration in Northern Nigeria. Consequently, the missionaries who provided the lessons did not take into account the time that children needed to dedicate to Quranic School. Combining these two types of education was difficult for some children. The majority of parents of these children in Northeast Nigeria were against this school, which, in their view, did not align with their cultural realities. This school is an institution that aims only to rebel children against their parents. Because of this, many parents decided not to send their children to school which sometimes forced the British colonial administrator to punish these parents.

power, acting according to its own temperament and options, interests of the moment and its ability to involve a more or less significant number of its mid-level staff in managing its empire, practiced either a policy of pure and simple assimilation in language, education and culture, or a policy of selective and more nuanced assimilation. England, being pragmatic, distanced itself more clearly from the ‘natives’ and introduced their languages in the early years of elementary education, especially for certain subjects like history, geography, religion, natural history, etc. In reality, such practice served as a prelude to the learning of English (Sow and Abdulaziz, 1998: 555). It is understood that the colonial system destroyed the cultural values of the communities in northeastern Nigeria. The values of these communities are considered malevolent acts that must be abandoned, directives given by this colonizer. Regarding the questioning of the societal values of African people, a Muslim writer from Fouta-Djallon describes it as “the miseries of our century” (Sow and Abdulaziz, 1998: 556), continuing:

“Misfortune appears, times have changed, the illicit spreads, the lawful diminishes. Tradition disappears, heresy emerges. Modesty shrinks, selfishness abounds. Kinship breaks, pleasure is pursued. Pity fades, adultery develops. Illegitimate children abound, truth is abandoned. Education decreases, hypocrisy abounds. Wealth abounds, discord abounds. Theft abounds, plunder abounds. Lies abound, Satan has triumphed! Their hearts, more than venom, are evil. Their concern is nothing but to amass wealth, to gather women and jewels. They have chosen the world and left the other. Negators and ignorants multiply. Divergences and sins multiply. Flight becomes imperative. There is nowhere to flee, nowhere to stay! The world embraces as it is vast” (Sow and Abdulaziz, 1998: 555-556).

This poem illustrates the repercussions of colonization on African communities in general, and northeastern Nigeria in particular which is not spared. From this observation, it is understood that the colonization endured by the peoples of northern Nigeria led them to abandon their values in favor of British values that do not align with their cultural environment. The sad reality is observed in their traditional chiefdoms. The *Ajami* script used primarily by Hausa and Fulbe modibbé has lost its place. The new judge (*Alkali*),²⁶ trained in British schools, have now abandoned the use of this writing in all traditional institutions. It is noted that when colonization began, Africans lost their bearings. This manifested in educational institutions, in administration and in economic exchanges (Abdoulaziz Yaouba, 2006: 120; Iliyasu, Chubado and Rukaiya, 2022: 48).

In the Hausa-Fulani societies of northern Nigeria, the English colonizer banned traditional values such as the *Soro*²⁷. This ritual, which was used on the night of marriage, was perceived

²⁶ During the precolonial period, they played a crucial role in the traditional Fulbe, Hausa, and Kanuri chiefdoms, as they were the true instructors and messengers of the Emirs, lamibé, and lawan. They resembled the image of the viziers in Pharaonic Egypt.

²⁷ It is an ancient custom practiced by the Fulbe. It takes place on the evening of the third day after the bride has entered her marital home, marking the consummation of the marriage, as until that point, the most important wedding ceremonies have occurred without the presence of the main parties involved. The young man, around 18 years old, and the young woman, around 13 years old, must be in their first marriage (*koowawal*). The participants in the *Soro* are: on one side, the two spouses and their sponsors (referred to here as *baaba en*,

as a sign of ignorance towards humanity. As a result, the Hausa and Fulbe²⁸ of this northern part of Nigeria have almost entirely abandoned this practice. Except for the Mbororo and other Fulbe pastoralists in the rural areas of Deba Fulbe, Mayo Belwa and Jada who continue to make use of this cultural value. However, in the major Hausa-Fulani cities of Nigeria, Soro no longer exists. All this banning of their cultural values finds its origin in British colonization according to this informant²⁹. Therefore, the prohibition of this marriage ritual by the British colonizer led to the acculturation of the Hausa-Fulani communities in this northern part of Nigeria. Regarding the impact of the acculturation of African peoples, Hugon explains:

The African lives in a mental universe that is static; traditionally, he lives surrounded by rites, prohibitions, and taboos. He values the past and assigns secondary importance to material things. Colonialism, the religious and educational penetration that accompanied it, has caused upheavals that often lead to the acculturation of elites. The survival of a prescientific mentality is an obstacle to progress; the inadequacy of the mentality to technical evolution leads to uprooting, the cause of conflicts. The evolved African is placed between two worlds; he cannot commune with the traditional values whose insufficiencies he recognizes; he cannot commune with the values of the modern world, whose meaning he does not understand (Hugon, 1967:70).

Before colonization, the African man lived within his own values. He mastered the concepts of time and science. However, the colonial onslaught transformed African peoples. The European educational system shook African cultural values, explaining why some Africans became uprooted, distancing themselves from their traditions. The combination of European and African values is an obstacle to this uprooting of Africans. Among the Fulbe emirates, European colonization also had significant impacts. While the *Lamido* is still known for his absolute powers in all areas, the English colonizer challenged this. Many *Lamibé* were dethroned and humiliated before their populations (Sa'ad, 1976: 87). This was the case for *Lamido* Zubairu of Yola, who refused to conform to the cultural values imposed by the British colonizer and was subsequently hunted down.³⁰ The cultural values of the Emirate of Yola which sought to impose their hegemony were confiscated (Mamoudou, 2004: 328).

For a chief who used his cultural values to manage, prevent, or resolve conflicts in an endogenous manner, the British colonial onslaught completely abolished these traditional mechanisms. The council of notables (*Faada*), which was the epicentre of decision-making

literally 'fathers'), with the young man having as his sponsor the oldest initiated man in the *Soro* from the village, and the young woman having the next oldest; on the other side, all the other men, consisting solely of the men from the village and neighboring villages, as well as the guests made up of representatives from the different Fulbe factions, all already initiated (*soraabe*). For more details, see the work of Abdoulaye Oumarou Dalil, "Le *Soro* ou rituel d'initiation du couple chez les foulbe du Diamaré"

²⁸Interview with Fatima Abdoulaye Oumar, Quranic School Teacher, Female, Age 71, Kontcha, 3/12/2021.

²⁹Interview with Alim Mahmud Bello, Retired Teacher, Male, 82, Yola, 12/9/2024.

³⁰According to the Hausa and Fulbe encountered in Kaduna and Kano, the association of the name "Hausa-Fulbe" originated in the early 19th century, a period corresponding to the jihad launched in 1804 by Dan Fodiyo. When he subdued the leaders of the Hausa city-states, he established his caliphate in Sokoto and permitted marital diplomacy between the conquering Fulbe and the conquered Hausa. Thus, the two ethnic groups took on this name.

for all socio-political entities, also lost its significance. This institution now exists only in a symbolic capacity. This is why the colonizer installed a leader of their choosing. This was the case in Yola,³¹ where Emir Bobbo Ahmadu Adama agreed to abandon his cultural values in exchange for retaining his throne. He replaced his brother Zubairu Adama, who had refused to give up his values through submission to the British colonizer. In short, the loss of cultural values among the peoples of Northern Nigeria can be explained by the abandonment of their ritual practices and the total submission of their emirs (Gazali and Chubado, 2025: 155). Submitting to colonial values was the only method that legitimized the power of the emirs and sultans. Evidence shows that emirs who resisted this dictate were all deposed, captured and killed.³² All of this summarizes the impact of British colonization on the peoples of Northern Nigeria. The questioning of their identities is at the root of their underdevelopment and the destruction of their traditional institutions.

Destruction of Traditional and Judicial Structures

This colonization had various repercussions in the Hausa-Fulani³³ cities such as Adamawa, Kano, Bornu, Gombe, Sokoto, etc. The British colonial administration prioritized the northern states of Nigeria due to their large and ingenious population.³⁴ In 1912, the novice British secretary, Lord Harcourt, appointed Sir Frederic Lugard to lead Nigeria because of his experience in Africa (Nicolson, 1969). This appointment granted Lugard the privilege of overseeing the entire Nigerian territory. He established his headquarters in Kaduna, which became the capital of northern Nigeria. This establishment in Kaduna seemed to be a strategic location for the British. Consequently, Lugard targeted the judicial system in Kano, Kaduna and Sokoto. The British colonial army invaded these cities, deposed all local leaders (Emirs), along with their administrative bodies (*Faada*)³⁵. We witnessed a total submission of the Emirs in these Hausa-Fulani cities. Through the British colonial administration, Lugard implemented indirect rule and imposed the traditional authority of northern Nigeria. All of them received his orders (Crocker, 1936: 18—19).

Northern Nigeria, which was the bastion of traditional Fulbe and Hausa structures, was destroyed. Sokoto, Zazzau, Katsina, Adamawa and others were all defeated to the point that these chiefdoms were damaged by the British colonizer. Previously, the royal houses were constructed using mud mixed with straw. This architecture was very beautiful to behold and quite resilient, according to this notable³⁶. Thierno Mouctar Bah demonstrated the importance of this architecture in defensive systems during times of war. Traditional African societies favored this construction due to the numerous conflicts and incursions between empires and kingdoms (Bah, 1985). In this Northern part of Nigeria, the emirate that first suffered this destruction was Zazzau located in Kaduna. It was the primary state in the North where the British could establish their command zone. If an emir refused the destruction of his palace, he would be directly dismissed from his position and imprisoned simultaneously. For a chief who submits to the destruction of his palace, he retains his title as emir and receives funding, as explained by this prince³⁷. Regarding this submission through the destruction of traditional structures in Northern Nigeria, Riveron shows that emirs retained their title of Caliph but had

³¹ Interview with Hamid Alh. Aminu, Kasuwan Bacci, Male, Age70, Kaduna, 3/1/2025.

³² Interview with Sani Abdallah Sanusi, Shoes Seller, Male, Age 80, Kano, 12/9/2025.

³³ The informant preferred to remain anonymous for security reasons.

³⁴ Interview with Hamid Alh. Aminu, ... (3/1/2025).

³⁵ Interview with Sani Abdallah Sanusi, ... (12/9/2025).

³⁶ The informant preferred to remain anonymous for security reasons.

³⁷ Interview with Sani Abdallah Sanusi, ... (12/9/2025).

to answer for their actions to the British officer in charge of the district, who held real authority. The British high commissioner could dismiss the emirs and any official if necessary (Rivron, 2014: 27). However, the real problem faced by the British colonial administration representative, Sir Lugard, was the non-submission of Sokoto. At that time, the Sokoto Caliphate was the largest in West Africa, according to this informant.³⁸ In the same vein, Murray shows that in 1820, the caliphate of Sokoto comprised seven emirates under its command, with two other major emirates in development (Murray, 1996: 607). Despite all its grandeur and influence, the British colonial administrator imposed his hegemony and divided this Fulbe Empire. Lugard was the true agent of London who pacified this empire. His experience in colonial administration was demonstrated in India. That is why the colonial administration appointed him to pacify northern Nigeria, particularly the Sokoto Caliphate which refused to submit³⁹. Perham explains through Lugard's biography:

“For the task set him, Lugard was so exactly fitted that his life up to this moment might have been a training especially designed by Providence. He was experienced in every activity that the newly annexed country demanded; in transport and supply; in survey work; in prospecting for minerals; in dealing with Africans, whether potentates, raw tribesmen, or wage labourers. He knew Africa and Africans as did few men of his time. He was a soldier and a jungle soldier, in a job that was still half military and he had himself created the Regiment he employed. He knew his region, having worked around the middle Niger for six years, helping to win its western frontiers. He had been in contact with Islam and he was an expert on slavery in a region where it was a major problem. His physique allowed him to do two men's work in a climate and conditions which halved the capacities of most men. But no list of qualities, however long, would have met the needs of the work if they had not been fused within an ardent temperament and directed by a will of exceptional strength. He entered upon his work with complete confidence” (Perham, 1968: 139).

Through his detailed biography by Perham, we understand the role played by Lugard in pacifying northern Nigeria in general and Sokoto in particular. However, in 1903, British control over the entire protectorate was made possible by a successful campaign against the emir of Kano and the sultan of Sokoto. There were, however, uprisings that were brutally suppressed by Lugard's troops. A Mahdist rebellion in 1906 at Satiru, a village near Sokoto, ended in total destruction and a significant loss of life.⁴⁰ Subsequently, British colonization ravaged all traditional Hausa-Fulani structures in Northern Nigeria. Despite the resistance of the peoples of the Sokoto Caliphate for a few years, this resistance was crushed, and Sokoto was destroyed. The second empires that faced destruction were the kingdom of Kano and that of Bornu. According to this informant, the Borno Empire suffered a massive onslaught from British power. In 1900, the colonial troops demilitarized Yerwa.⁴¹ The Shehu's palace was

³⁸Interview with Sani Abdallah Sanusi, ... (12/9/2025).

³⁹The inhabitants of Sokoto refused to provide us with estimates of these figures, which is why they preferred to remain anonymous during our investigation.

⁴⁰Interview with Malam Abana Bakar, Quranic School Teacher, Male, Age 87, (Yerwa-Maiduguri, 1/10/2023).

⁴¹Interview with Abubakar Ibrahim, Businessman, ... (11/5/2025).

completely destroyed. Around 1907, the British colonial administration financed the construction of another palace that did not reflect the culture of the Borno people, especially that of the Kanuri people who were the dominant ethnic group in this empire. Regarding the year of construction of this palace, Babagana supports this by showing that:

“The Shehu Palace was built in 1907 by the British. The original settlers who were relocated to build the Shehu’s palace on its spot were the descendants of the Borno former Mais (Kings) of the Borno Empire before the coming of the Elkanami dynasty. The Palace was built in the year 1809; however, the construction work of the palace began in the early 1900s immediately after the defeat of Rabih az-Zubayr in 1900” (Babagana, 2017: 6).

Through the theses supported by these authors, we note that British colonization destroyed the traditional structures of the Hausa-Fulani and Kanuri peoples in Northern Nigeria. The Sokoto Caliphate, which was the largest, was fragmented. Upon his appointment as head of the English colonies in West Africa, Lugard directly seized Sokoto. This empire, which had made Dan Fodiyo proud before his death, was dislocated, but this occurred after a bloody war between the Sokoto Caliphate and the British imperial army⁴². In the same vein, this prince shows that British colonization is a disaster that befell the Sokoto Caliphate. Even though the warriors of this empire waged a resistance war for four (4) years, they were defeated by British military superiority. We then witness the dismemberment of this empire. All its socio-political entities such as Kaduna, Adamawa, Katsina, Kano, Borno and Gombe are fractured. At the head of all these, Lugard appointed pliable men. However, before the arrival of the British, some discontent and revolts were often felt in the Sokoto Caliphate. This was after the death of Shehu Usman Dan Fodiyo⁴³. Some princes of Sokoto were responsible for this weakening. Princes Hayatu, Ibrahim, and Abubakar were all against the enthronement of Muhammadu Bello after Dan Fodiyo’s death. Thus, internal crises began within this Caliphate. They spread throughout all its kingdoms until the advent of the British colonial administration, which seized this weakness to invade Sokoto.

CONCLUSION

British colonization in Northern Nigeria, from 1850 to 1912, marked a profound transformation in the socio-cultural and political dynamics of the region. Through the phases of recognition, annexation, military expansion, and consolidation, the British Empire imposed its authority on territories previously governed by traditional institutions such as the emirates of Sokoto, Kano, Adamawa and the sultanates of Bornu and Gombe. The fierce resistance of these entities, grounded in their religious, political, and social heritage, could not stop the superior British colonial power. Attempts to safeguard autonomy and traditional values clashed with a superior force equipped with modern weaponry and sophisticated military tactics. The impact of this colonization was considerable, affecting not only territorial boundaries, which shifted from cultural frontiers to arbitrary lines imposed by British administration, but also targeting the very foundations of local societies. The gradual abandonment of cultural values and the destruction of traditional and judicial structures deeply altered the social fabric of Northern Nigeria, creating fractures with long-lasting

⁴²Interview with Abubakar Ibrahim, ... (9/5/2025).

⁴³Interview with Muhammadu Bindowo Yahya, school teacher, Male, 70, (Sokoto, 13/5/2025).

repercussions. Colonialism thus planted the seeds of forced modernization and also of an evolving identity, torn between the glorious past of pre-colonial societies and the new challenges brought by the colonial order. However, it would be interesting to debate how this British colonization has shaped contemporary relations between the Northern Nigerian states and the traditional structures (Sultanate and Emirates) that still exist today. Can it be said that these institutions have found a way to adapt or have they remained fragile vestiges of a once-glorious past?

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4	Chetima Hamdou	Mayor of the City of Mora	Male	52	Mora, 29/9/2025.
5	Fatima Abdoulaye Oumar	Quranic School Teacher	Female	71	Kontcha, 3/12/2025.
6	Hamadou Bouba	Farmer	Male	72	Banyo, 17/6/2025.
7	Hamid Alh. Aminu	Trader	Male	70	Kaduna, 3/1/2025.
8	Malam Abana Bukar	Quranic School Teacher	Male	87	Maiduguri, 1/10/2025.
9	Maliki Yaya Bello	Former Merchant	Male	80	Jada, 22/10/2025.
10	Muhammadu Bayero	Trader	Male	70	Jimeta, 20/10/2025.
11	Muhammadu Adama	Quranic School Teacher	Male	68	Yola, 18/9/2025.
12	Muhammadu Bindowo Yahya	School Teacher	Male	70	Sokoto, 13/5/2025.
13	Sani Abdallah Sanussi	Shoes Seller	Male	80	Kano, 12/9/2025.
14	Yahya Nuhu	Civil Servant	Male	43	Jimeta, 20/10/2022.

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