

# Islamic Reform in Nigeria: The Contribution of Sheikh Abubakar Mahmud Gumi

**Huzaifa Aliyu Jangebe**

Assistant Lecturer

Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies

Faculty of Humanities and Education

Federal University Gusau

Zamfara State, Nigeria

## Abstract

*Islamic reformism has been the prime concern of Muslim scholars and intellectuals since the 18<sup>th</sup> century C.E. and as a means to arrest the mushrooming and all around decay in their societies. In Nigeria, Muslims are plunged into backwardness because of the colonial legacy and the rising of un-Islamic practices (innovations) that have been instrumental in instigating serious problems in entire country. Sheikh Abubakar Mahmud Gumi was a great reformer who stood firm to salvage the society from further religious decline during his time. He believed that the cause for the Muslims' decline was their departure from practicing the pristine Islam as laid down in the Qur'an and the authentic Sunnah. In his quest for a solution, Sheikh Gumi articulated a reformative drive, which contravened the long-aged traditions of Nigeria. The main features of Gumi's contributions to Islamic reformism in Nigeria, were highlighted.*

**Keywords:** reform, innovations, politics, scholars, Nigeria

## 1. Introduction

Islam found its way to West Africa as early as the eight century C.E.<sup>1</sup> With the spread of Islam, many Muslims mixed the Islamic practice with those of their traditional beliefs, which they inherited from their ancestors, and which contradict the teaching of Islam.<sup>2</sup> As a result, Islamic reform movements emerged in many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa with a mission to purify the Islamic principles from what they had identified as bidah, loosely translated as (innovation), on the basis of the saying of the Prophet (p.b.u.h) "Every bidah is a sin and a sin leads to Hell".<sup>3</sup> Among the Islamic movements that initiated reformism in Africa were the Mahdiyya in Sudan and al-Sanusiyya in Libya. Nigeria was no exception to what was happening in the continent. In spite of the Islamic awareness that has spread throughout the society, the proper application of the Islamic teachings was still lacking. Worst still, the rulers often compelled their Muslim subjects to patronize the un-Islamic traditional cults. The region had been plunged into a state of degeneration and the government was utterly corrupt. In order to optimize their ill-gotten gains, the rulers burdened their people with heavy taxation, and confiscation of property if they withheld.<sup>4</sup> This socio-political fiasco necessitated the emergence of the confrontational jihad that culminated in the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate known as Sokoto Caliphate (1810) that continued until the turn of the twentieth century (1903). The development of Islamic reform movement in the twentieth century Nigeria was characterized by the emergence of two major movements: Sufism as represented by the Qadiriyya and Tijaniyya Sufi orders<sup>5</sup> and anti-Sufism as represented by Yan Izala.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Abdurrahman, Doi, Islam and Multi-religious Society: Nigeria, a Case study, (Kuala Lumpur: A.S Noordeen, 1992), 8.

<sup>2</sup>Usman Sayyid Ahmad al-Bili, Some Aspects of Islam in Africa, (U.K: Ithaca press, 1<sup>st</sup>edn., 2008), 49-50.

<sup>3</sup>Muhammad Ishaq bin Khuzaimah, Sahih ibn Khuzaimah, vol, 3, (ed, by) Mustafa al-Aazami, (Beirut: al-Makhtab al-Islami, 1980), 143.

<sup>4</sup>Balogun, Ismail A. B, The Life and Works of Uthman Dan Fodio: The Muslim Reformer of West Africa, (Lagos: Islamic Publications Bureau), 1975, 15.

<sup>5</sup>Sufism played an important role in the expansion of Islam in Nigeria. In fact, Islam and Sufism had penetrated the continent at the same time, and their spread was simultaneous. The two Sufi orders which have greatly influenced Nigeria are the Qadiriyya and the Tijaniyya. The Qadiriyya order was the first to enter West Africa and Nigeria in particular. Eventually, it spread far and wide in the society and, later, influenced the great Sheikh (Usman Dan Fodio), who launched his reform

During this period, the colonial ideologies have swept throughout the region, taking the people away from the purest teachings of Islam. Sheikh Abubakar Mahmud Gumi (1924-1992), stood out as the most prominent among the reformers of the twentieth century. Gumi deemed it necessary to salvage the society from any further social and religious erosion in the light of the pristine teachings of the Prophet (p.b.u.h), and the early generation of Islam. He argued that the backwardness of the Muslims in Nigeria is a repercussion of their departure from the true Islamic teachings. In the twentieth century the colonial legacy and blind imitation had penetrated deeply in the society. In this atmosphere, Gumi came up with his own reform programme. He is considered as one of the ulama in Nigeria who aspired to reform the Islamic practice and restore it back to its pristine state as it was during the early period of Islam.

## 2. Abubakar Gumi: Life and Works

Abubakar Mahmud Gumi (1924-1992), popularly known as Sheikh Abubakar Gumi, is a remarkable and an erudite Islamic scholar, who influenced his society and became a role model to other scholars. He was born in an established family (*bait Ilm*) with a strong tradition of Islamic learning. He was brought up under his parent's care, and his father had always looked after him to the utmost of his best. Thus, he was given ample opportunity to demonstrate his knowledge, and to give his opinions on different issues.

### 2.1 Education

The late Sheikh Gumi began his education under the tutelage of his father "Malam Mahmud Na Gumi". He memorized the Holy Qur'an and some important books of the Maliki school of thought, such as *Risalah* Abi Zaid al-Qirawani, and attended the traditional Islamic school, popularly known as 'Makarantar Allo'.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in 1933, at the age of nine years, he began his western education at Dogon Daji elementary school. At the western school, Abubakar Gumi demonstrated his utmost competence, for he was shortly appointed, on account of his extraordinary Islamic knowledge, as *Hakimin Sallah* (Religious Prefect) for the students in charge of all their religious activities. Thereafter, based on his impressive performance, he was promoted to standard two after spending only one term in standard one. After spending one year in the elementary school at Dogon Daji, he was transferred in 1936 to Sokoto Middle School, currently named (Sultan Ward Primary School Sokoto).<sup>8</sup> After a successful journey that lasted for six years with bountiful achievements at the Sokoto Middle School, he decided to pursue his studies at Kano law School. Besides attending regular courses, students of Kano Law College had adequate time to privately pursue other readings. Having successfully completed his studies at the law school, Gumi returned to Sokoto, where his service was urgently requested. Then he remained there for some years before pursuing, in 1952, a two-year further education at the School for Arabic Studies in Kano, where he got a higher elementary training certificate. Eventually, in view of his excellent grades and performance, Gumi was sponsored for a Higher Diploma in education at the *Bakht al-Rida* Institute of Education in the *de facto* British colony of Sudan from 1955 to 1956.<sup>9</sup>

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movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Tijaniyya order, founded by Sheikh al-Tijani (1737-1815), became widely accepted later and soon its Zawiyas were established in Kano and Borno. Gradually, the Tijaniyya was preferred by the educated youth in Nigeria, and it had more followers than the Qadiriyya order. For more details See: Abdurrahman Doi., *Islam and Multi-Religious*, 216-220.

<sup>6</sup>Under the name Jamaat Izalat al-Bidahwa Iqamat al-Sunnah, (Izala), this organization was launched in Jos, Plateau State, on 12 March 1978, to counteract the activities of the Sufi brotherhood. It regarded itself as a follower of Sunnah. See Muhammad Sani Umar, "Changing Islamic identity in Nigeria from the 1960s to the 1980s: From Sufism to anti-Sufism" in *Muslim Identity and Social Change in Sub-Saharan Africa*, edited by Louis Brenner (London: c. Hurst & co, 1993), 167.

<sup>7</sup> From early age, children begin to learn Qur'anic recitation and the Arabic alphabet. However, Makarantarilimi, is an advanced stage of learning that is devoted entirely to Qur'anic studies, and it usually starts during adolescence. For further details, see: Muhammad Sani Umar, *Islam and Colonialism: Intellectual Responses of Muslims of Northern Nigeria to British Colonial Rule*, (Leiden Brill: Boston, 2006), 161-162; Aliyu Abubakar, *al-Thaqafah al-Arabiyyah fi Nigeria*, (Beirut: Mu'assasat Abd al-Hafiz al-Bassat, 1972).

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>9</sup>Ahmad Haruna Sokoto, *Shahararren Malami [The Famous Scholar]*, Sheikh Abubakar Mahmud Gumi, (Sokoto: Sokoto Newspaper Company limited, 1995), 13.

He recorded in this respect:

“We had been admitted for the institute’s advanced Diploma in education in *Bakht al-Rida* institute. It was an exciting moment as we settled down to a normal life of full-time study once again. We learnt principles of education, Arabic, History, Mathematics, as well as English and Drawing. The languages of instruction were Arabic and English..... We mixed with other fellow students freely, and almost every one of us thought that it was indeed a fair time. During our teaching practice we were all sent to *Madrasah al-Ahfad*, a calm college across the Nile from Khartoum in Omdurman suburbs”.<sup>10</sup>In the later part of his life, Sheikh Gumi had become a prominent scholar and a reference on religious matters. Besides his formal educational journey, he studied privately under many scholars, either at their homes or wherever he met any of those great Ulama, (scholars). His knowledge was particularly profound and diversified in Islamic disciplines.

## 2.2. Career

In Nigeria, which was then dominated by the British colonialists; it was extremely difficult for a reformist scholar, who often opposed colonial policies, to be employed. However, his case was an exception. He occupied many positions in public offices. Thus, after he graduated from law school, he was posted as a scribe to the office of the then chief judge, Sokoto province. In 1956, Sardauna appointed him as first Nigerian Pilgrims’ officer to the Holy land, and in 1960 the Deputy Grand Qadi of northern Nigeria. Subsequently, he served as the Grand Qadi of northern Nigeria, from 1962 to 1967.<sup>11</sup>Besides these positions, he was also appointed a member of the management team of King Faisal Bank, founded in 1976. He also served as a member of the supreme council of several universities, such as the Islamic University of Madinah, Saudi Arabia, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria and the University of Ibadan,<sup>12</sup> Nigeria.

## 2.3. Works

Sheikh Gumi left tremendous treasure of literary works in the form of books, booklets and articles. His scholarly articles, published under the *Nasiha* series, and in a number of local newspapers, include *Gaskiyatafikwabo* (Truth is better than the penny), *triumph and new Nigeria since 1970*.<sup>13</sup>However, his most popular books published and circulated within and outside the frontiers of Nigeria, include:

- 1- *Rad al-AzhanilaMaani al-Qur`an* (Intellectual return to the meaning of the Qur`an).
- 2- *Al-Aqidah al-Sahihah bi Muwafaqat al-Shariah*: (The Correct Belief in Line with the law).
- 3- *Kitab al-Nasihaila Amir MantiqatKatsina* (Book of Advice to the Emir of Katsina):
- 4- *Where I Stand*, written in English with I. A. Tsiga.
- 5- *Hal al-Niza` fi Mas`alatNuzul Isa alaih al-Salatwa al-Salam*. (Resolve of the Dispute on the Issue Regarding the Second Coming of Prophet Isa -p.b.u.h-)
- 6- *Musulunchi da AbindakeRushe Shi*: (Islam and what invalidates it).
- 7- *Zad al-Haj*, (The provision for a pilgrim)
- 8- *KitabMaratib al-Islam*, (A Book on the levels of Islam)
- 9- *KitabManasik al-hajwa al-Umra*, (A Book on the Rituals of Haj and Umrah).
- 10- *TarjamarMa`anonin al-Kur`aniMaigirma*: (The Meanings of the Holy Qur`an).
- 11- *Tarjamarlittafin al-Arbain al-Nawawiyyah*, (Translation of Forty Hadith).
- 12- *TarjamarKitabNur al-Bab*, (Translation of Nurul al-Bab).
- 13- *TarjamarlittafinHidayat al-Tullab fiAhamMasail al-Din*, (Translation of the students guide book on the most important religious issues). Moreover, besides these publications, Sheikh Gumi left several unprinted manuscripts, including, *Qiyam fi al-Iqtisad al-Muasirwa al-Taamulmaa al-Bunuk* (Values on the contemporary economy and dealing with Banks), and the translation of, *KitabUsul al-Din* (A Book on the Fundamentals of Din).

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 67.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid, 20.

<sup>12</sup>Ahmad SanusiGumbi, Rayuwar Sheikh Abubakar Mahmud Gumi, [The Life of Sheikh Abubakar Mahmud Gumi], (Kaduna: Gumbi Enterprises, 1986), 4.

<sup>13</sup>Abubakar Mahmud Gumi &Isma`il A. Tsiga, *Where I Stand*, (Ibadan: Spectrum books, 1992), 137.

### 3. Gumi and Innovation

The major preoccupation of Sheikh Gumi was combating innovations. The Arabic word *bidah* is derived from the verb *badaah*, which literally means to originate, introduce or to be inventive in a manner not done before.<sup>14</sup> Technically, in Islamic law, a *bida`* is defined by the prominent Islamic scholar ibn Rajab al-Hanbali as follows: "Any form of worship which has no basis in the *Shariah* to warrant its legislation".<sup>15</sup> Muslims jurists had classified *bidah* into five: obligatory, recommended, forbidden, disliked and permitted. But, these classifications are seemingly contestable. The Prophet (p.b.u.h), nonetheless, had generalized all *bida`*, and refers to them as "novelties" in an authentic *hadith*.

On the authority of Irbad bin Sariah, said:

The messenger of Allah gave us a sermon by which our hearts were filled with fear and tears came to our eyes. We said: "O Messenger of Allah, it is as though this is a farewell sermon, so counsel us." He said: "I counsel you to fear Allah and to give absolute obedience even if a slave becomes your leader. Verily he among you who lives [long] will see great controversy, so you must keep to my Sunnah and to the Sunnah of the rightly-guided khulafa - cling to them stubbornly. Beware of newly invented matters, for every invented matter is an innovation and every innovation (*bidah*) is a going astray, and every going astray is in Hell-fire".<sup>16</sup> According to Sheikh Gumi, *bida`* can be categorized into two main broad forms: whether it concerns Iman (faith) or *Muamalat*, (social dealings).<sup>17</sup> To him, a *bida`* in *muamalat* is of three types. The first is *wajib* (obligatory). The second category is a *mustafab* (recommended) innovation. The third type is a *mubah* (permitted) innovation.<sup>18</sup> But, for *bida`* on Iman (faith), Sheikh Gumi stated: "On no account could this type of innovation be allowed in matters relating to faith, like the articles of belief, prayers or other rituals."<sup>19</sup> According to the above quotation, Sheikh Gumi was of the opinion that all innovations in faith are blameworthy, in fact, they constitute a major sin. Therefore, the concept of a good innovation in faith is simply unacceptable. He probably based his strong rejection of innovations on several authentic prophetic traditions that admonishes new invented practices in Islam. One of the famous *hadith* is the following: Whosoever introduces into matter of ours, [Islam], something that does not belong to it, it is to be rejected.

### 4. Gumi's Religious Reforms

His first attempt was in early 1949, in Maru, an incident that came to be known as "Maru episode". While performing his teaching duties in this city, he observed and witnessed the distortion of the Muslim faith there, which resulted from the mixing of Islamic rituals and practices with the local traditions. The distorted Islamic rites and rituals had thus been viewed by the towns-people as immaculate Islamic practices. However, the issue that motivated Sheikh Gumi's reform was on and around dry ablution (*tayammum*).<sup>20</sup> For the performance of *tayammum* for Salah had then and there become a prevalent practice among scholars, imams (leaders of the congregational prayer), and the entire Muslim population in the town, though this is allowed only during times of scarcity of water. Sheikh Gumi had thus condemned it, and urged that according to the rules of Islam, dry ablution is permissible only if no water was available at the time of performing a particular prayer. Similarly, he added, sick people who are unable to perform wet ablution are permitted to observe the prayer with dry ablution.<sup>21</sup> Hence, since these two conditions were not then applicable to the general population of Maru district, Gumi ruled that the act should cease immediately. He appealed to his students to stop attending the Friday prayer in the town, unless and until the chief Imam of the central mosque perform wet ablution.

<sup>14</sup> Muhammad b. Mukrim b. Manzur, *Lisan al-Arab*, vol. 8, (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1<sup>st</sup> edn., 1990), 6.

<sup>15</sup> Abd al-Rahman b. Ahmad b. Rajab, *JamiulUlumwa al-Hikam*, (Beirut: Dar al-Maarifah, 1999), 266.

<sup>16</sup> Muhammad bin Isa al-Tirmizi, *al-Jamii al-SahihSunan al-Timizi*, vol. 4, 2676, (Beirut: Dar Ihya al-Turath, 2000), 44.

<sup>17</sup> Gumi & Tsiga, 147.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>20</sup> *Tayammum*, refers to a way of performing ablution with sand, soil, stone or pure earth, by wiping the face and hand with intention of purification to pray. Its legitimacy was proven in Allah saying in the holy Qur'an: O believers! Do not draw near to the Prayer while you are intoxicated until you know what you are saying, nor while you are defiled- save when you are travelling - until you have washed yourselves. If you are either ill, travelling, have satisfied a want of nature, or have had contact with women, and can find no water, then betake yourselves to pure earth, passing with it lightly over your face and your hands. Surely Allah is All-Relenting, All-Forgiving. Qur'an, Surah al-Nisai: 43.

<sup>21</sup> Gumi & Tsiga, 48.

Instead, Sheikh Gumi conducted the Friday prayer in the school premises. In response, the traditional ruler listed many things against Sheikh Gumi, including the dry ablution issue and made a report to the colonial officers in Kaduna. Thus, a commission of enquiry was formed. But the committee cleared Sheikh Gumi free from those charges, and even urged the king of Sokoto (SarkinMusulmi) to visit Maru and abolish the practice of dry ablution. This acquittal had boosted the image of Sheikh Gumi as a renowned scholar and indefatigable reformer. In addition to the abolishment of dry ablution, Sheikh Gumi stood firm to reform the mode of pilgrimage to the holy land in Makkah. Being entrusted in 1975 with the leadership of the Nigerian pilgrims to the holy land, a position which he held until 1978, Sheikh Gumi had become responsible for the actual enactment and implementation of the regulations of the hajj. He intensified his efforts to improve the due process for admission to the hajj, where he urged that only those Muslims who can prove their capability should be allowed to perform the hajj. Furthermore, he contended that the *Istidaah* in the context of hajj means that the prospective pilgrim should not only be free, responsible and matured, but also has to be able to finance his trip to the holy land. Gradually, Sheikh Gumi's struggle yielded. In 1982, the Nigerian government approved and ordered the official registration of all potential pilgrims at their respective local government pilgrim boards. Moreover, in light of the increasing complaints from the government of Saudi Arabia regarding the Nigerian pilgrims,<sup>22</sup> Sheikh Gumi urged those aspiring pilgrims to demonstrate their ability to correctly read a number of the essential practices and prayers.<sup>23</sup>

### 5. Gumi and Politics

Politics has preoccupied the minds of the Muslim scholars in twentieth century Nigeria. Since then, the concept of democracy has developed and influenced various social and political developments. The discussion of the role and influence of the Muslim scholars in the political arena in Nigeria may be traced back to Sheikh Gumi, as he was the first reformist to advocate uprightiness in the government policies. Nonetheless, Sheikh Gumi was basically a political, though he was very active in the issue of the political unity of the Muslims in the region. He neither joined a political party nor wrote any work on political issues. He said: "I cannot do it [politics] so I don't think it is good for me to join any politics, but I can help to choose a good politician who will be suitable for politics".<sup>24</sup> In the light of this, Sheikh Gumi had a positive impression of the political activities, and, as such, he supported some political parties and administrations. Nevertheless, he did not always acknowledge or appreciate policies and activities of the politicians. Rather, he used his office (religious adviser) to impose the Islamic elements in government decision making in the country. As a result, his life was full of political ups and downs during civilian governments. Moreover, Sheikh Gumi became familiar with international politics, largely because he frequently accompanied the Sardauna to the Arab world. After the assassination of the Sardauna in 1966 and, until his death in 1992, Sheikh Gumi continued to exercise great influence on the successive governments. The uniqueness of his political reform was particularly reflected in his appeal to strengthen the political participation of the Muslim women in the 1979 and 1983 general elections. To ensure the selection of a good leader, Gumi urged the Muslims in Nigeria to allow their wives to register as voters and to practice their right to vote. Loimeier, maintained that the election of 1979 had been the first federal elections in which the women of northern Nigeria were entitled to vote.<sup>25</sup> In this regard, Sheikh Gumi justified his argument for women participation in politics by using the slogan: *SiyasaTafiMuhimmanchi da Sallah* "politics is more important than prayer".

Besides this statement, Sheikh Gumi voiced on the eve of the presidential election of 1983, portrayed the importance of elections in the Muslims society of Nigeria. He also used another expression, that election is more important than the pilgrimage, "*al-Intikhabatahammin al-Hajj*".<sup>26</sup> The tone of his appeal has been heard all over the country. Some scholars used the same tactic to encourage Muslims to allow the participation of their wives in any elections in Nigeria. These scholars continued to promote Sheikh Gumi's mobilization of Muslim women in Nigeria. One of his students, Sheikh Lawal Abubakar, said that it will be a catastrophe if Muslims continue to prevent their women from registering for election.

<sup>22</sup>John Paden, Ahmadu Bello Sardauna of Sokoto: Values and Leadership in Nigeria, (Zaria: Hudahuda publishing company, 1986).548.

<sup>23</sup>Sheikh Gumi, interview, New Nigerian Newspaper, (6 June, 1984).

<sup>24</sup>Isma`ilBalarabeShehu, The Light of Truth (Kano: GidanDabino Publishers, 2001), 28.

<sup>25</sup>Roman Loimeier, Islamic Reform and Political Change in Northern Nigeria, (U.S: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 166-167.

<sup>26</sup> Sheikh Gumi, interview, GaskiyaTafiKwabo [Truth is better than penny], Newspaper, May 1983.

He further said “such people would only live to regret their actions in the future, when the wrong people are voted into power”.<sup>27</sup> Another prominent Kano based scholar, late Sheikh Amin al-Din Abubakar, also appealed to Muslim women to register for elections. Moreover, some of the Muslim women activists also appealed for their fellow women to register, as this is their fundamental right.<sup>28</sup> It could hence be argued that Sheikh Gumi’s appeal for political mobilization of Muslim women in Nigeria was an important step to block the empowerment of evil politicians.

## 6. Conclusion

Gumi stands as the most eminent reformist Muslim scholar of his generation. One principle underlying his religious writing is his insistence on adherence to the pristine teachings of Islam. In order to promote “pristine” Islam, he wrote and engaged in debates against the traditional scholars who he believed were promoting innovations. His expertise in other areas of Islam such as exegesis and Islamic creed was usually recognized by the Muslims in Nigeria. In light of his immense contribution in fighting tradition believes, he is regarded as the father of Salafism in Nigeria. While Gumi contributed significantly to the development of religious reforms in Nigeria, his contributions to the socio-political and educational discourse of the time were also remarkable.

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<sup>27</sup> The Reporter, 16 Oct. 1987, quoted in Loimeier, *Islamic Reformand Political Change*, 169.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 169.