

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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THE SARDAUNA OF SOKOTO

July 20, 1962  
13 Brechin Place  
London S.W.7.  
England.

Mr. Richard Nolte,  
Institute of Current World Affairs,  
366 Madison Avenue,  
New York 17, New York.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

The most powerful man in Nigeria came to London this summer, and with him he brought the ancient and puissant essence of Islam as well as the rugged realities challenging the political and cultural unity of the Federation of Nigeria. Alhaji Sir Ahmadu Bello, Malam, Knight of the British Empire, Member of the House of Assembly, President General of the Northern Peoples Congress, Sarduna of Sokoto, Premier of Northern Nigeria had come to spend nine days in England as an official guest of the Government of the United Kingdom.

His titles spell out in vivid form his eminent cross-cultural status and stature. Alhaji is the rank of one who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca, the birthplace of Mohammed. Malam is the honorific of a learned man well versed in the precepts and doctrines of the Koran. Sokoto, once the leading city of the Fulani Empire, continues to be regarded by the Moslems of Northern Nigeria as a holy city. In times far more feudal the sardauna was the commander-in-chief of the entire aristocratic warrior class as well as the royal army of the sultan. Historical events and social change have modified the role to that of chief political officer and adviser to the sultan. All this and more is Ahmadu Bello, African, Nigerian, Muslim, Knight and Premier.

The stronghold of Islamic tradition and culture is personified in the aristocratic and autocratic Sarduna of Sokoto. It is as Sarduna, not Premier, that he is generally addressed and those more intimate refer to him not as Sir Ahmadu, but as Alhaji Ahmadu.

He was born in Rabah on the 12th of June, 1909, and there he was brought up in that strict Muslim discipline appropriate for the descendant of a long line of hereditary rulers. His father was Chief of Rabah, and his great-great-grandfather was Shehu Othman Dan Fodio, who founded the Fulani Empire in a series of bloody jihads (holy wars) a hundred and fifty-six years ago. His first cousin is the current Sultan of Sokoto, titular, ritual and theological ruler of Sokoto. It is Alhaji Ahmadu, however, who wields the political power in Northern Nigeria.



THE SARDAUNA OF SOKOTO

Ahmadu Bello began his education in a Koranic School at the age of four. At eleven he went on to the Provincial School at Sokoto and from there entered Katsina Teachers Training College, qualifying as a teacher at the age of twenty-two. As a student he is reported to have enjoyed high academic standing, an active social life and sports. The unfathomable English game of cricket became, and remains, dear to his heart. Like the majority of his Northern countrymen he is reputed to be an accomplished horseman.

He taught for three years in Sokoto before he took a path well worn by hundreds of African leaders, from educator to politician. He succeeded his father as Chief of Rabah. From Rabah his next step upward in the joint theological and political hierarchy of Northern Nigeria was his appointment as Sarkadauna of Sokoto in 1938. In 1944 he became chief secretary of the Sokoto Native Administration, thus combining the traditional Muslim Office of Sarkadauna with the status and power of a British colonial official. This kind of appointment was in keeping with the British policy of "indirect rule", i. e. rule through traditional native authority whenever such a policy was deemed safe by colonial officials.

Four years later Ahmadu Bello went off to England to spend a year studying the British form of government. On his return in 1949 he secured a seat in the Northern Region's House of Assembly. When a new Nigerian constitution came into being under the British in 1951 he was appointed Minister of Surveys and Works.

In 1953 the Sarkadauna of Sokoto became the Premier of Northern Nigeria. In that office he negotiated in London for Nigerian independence, successfully fought for the kind of constitutional safeguards that made it impossible for the more Westernized Regions of Eastern and Western Nigeria to politically dominate the North, and established his own pre-eminent power in the Nigerian Federation by consolidating his control over Nigeria's largest political party, the Muslim based Northern People's Congress.

The NPC's solid voting majority in Federal elections is the source of the Sarkadauna's strength in the Nigerian Federation. Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa the Federal Prime Minister, is a member of the Northern People's Congress and members of NPC dominate his cabinet. The Sarkadauna dominates the NPC. Opponents of the NPC argue this dominance includes Sir Abubakar himself. There is little doubt the Sarkadauna could have the job of Federal Prime Minister. He seems to prefer the monolithic nature of his northern office to the political give and take he would have to endure in the Federal office down among the southern infidels.

Since Nigeria's independence in 1961, the Sarkadauna has continued to look with favor on Great Britain. After all the British did offer respect to the ancient traditions and glories of the Muslim North by their policy of indirect rule. The mutual admiration of autocratic Muslim Northern Nigeria and aristocratic

Great Britain was solemnly symbolized when Queen Elizabeth made the Sardauna a Knight of the British Empire.

One of the Sardauna's pet schemes demonstrates that he perceives an affinity between certain venerable British and Nigerian modes of life. With the Emirs of Kano and Katsina he has developed a plan for sending Northern Nigerian youths to British schools, not just any British schools, but public (private) schools. The Sardauna believes the British public schools are less likely to make northern boys discontented with traditional Muslim life.

The concern for maintaining the Muslim mode of life influences and modifies the Sardauna's desire to modernize and industrialize Northern Nigeria. There is a regional law that establishes preferential treatment for northerners. If a position cannot be filled by a Northern Nigerian, a European has preference over an Easterner or Westerner. Non-Muslim Nigerians are not to be given an opportunity to secure power in the North. Although more costly, it is better to have a complete, clearly defined and containable outsider than a Nigerian not politically and ideologically committed to the North and Islam.

The modern notion of female equality is an anathema to the Sardauna. The Northern Region is the only one that does not allow women to vote. Questioned about pressures from the other Nigerian regions for country-wide female suffrage, the Sardauna sardonically indicated southern agitation for women's suffrage in the north was misplaced. If women of the north voted, he said, the North would never suffer an election loss. After all, the Muslim men of the North had four wives, the Christians in the South only one. He has three wives himself and a large family of potential voters.

The Sardauna harks back to Muslim tradition in the Nigerian political infighting. He refers to the responsibility of his leadership in a mixture of ancient and modern terms. "The Sword of the Sardauna can be drawn only by the holder in times of strife against the enemies of his country in the service of Allah". On another occasion he has called for a jihad, a Muslim holy war, not the "war of the cutlass" but a just struggle for justice and right. By a combination of this immemorial religious fervor, individual drive and shrewdness, and the big battalions of northern Nigerians, Hausas and Fulanis, which far outnumber the Ibos and Yorubas of the South, the Ahmadu Bello continues to grow as a Sardauna of strength and Premier of power.

His nine days in England were full of comings, goings and greetings. He flew to Chatsworth in Derbyshire to visit the centuries old family home of the Duke of Devonshire, his official host and greeter in the United Kingdom; he went to Hammersmith Hospital to thank the staff for its efforts on behalf of a set of Nigerian Siamese twins; he was entertained at lunch by Prime Minister MacMillan, Received at Buckingham Palace by Queen Elizabeth, he watched her confer the accolade of knighthood on one of his travelling companions, the Emir of Katsina. Later he went to a garden party at the Palace, paid a visit to Nigerian cadets studying at the old and honored British military academies of Sandhurst and



The Sardauna (right) and some of his followers at the reception in his honor in London.

Aldershot, and discussed his forthcoming autobiography with his publishers, the Cambridge Press.

Near the end of his visit he was present at a reception in his honor given at the May Fair Hotel by the United Kingdom branch of the Northern Peoples Congress .\* It was here that my wife and I met, briefly talked with, and observed the Sardauna in action.

The usual crowd was there, Members of Parliament from the Conservative, Liberal and Labour Parties, a gross of Knights, at least one Duke, four Earls, Nigerian students, High Commissioners and Ambassadors from African countries, African scholars, former Colonial Civil Servants, ladies from Great Britain, Africa, and the West Indies, journalists, photographers and miscellaneous types. The Premier arrived in a green Rolls-Royce (always the R.R.). He and his followers, Emirs and sons of Emirs, moved down the hall to the reception room full of colors, people, smiles, obeisances. His girth was ample, his walk stately, and his countenance serene. His greeting to those who came through the reception line was pleasant and easy. The young Northern Nigerian who was our special host guide whispered our identification in the Sardauna's ear. He spoke to us briefly of the United States and the University of California. We would have lingered longer, but a young party official pulled us gently but firmly along. It was a very short brush-up against an African personification of power, present and past.

At the end of his visit in the United Kingdom, the Sardauna flew off to Cairo to visit President Nasser and to receive an honorary degree from Al Azhar University, a great center of Islamic teaching and the interpretation of the Koran. It was a fitting stop in the journey of the Muslim man of power, for he sees his personal direction, his country's progress, and his children's future through the vision and world of Islam.

Sincerely,

  
Charles J. Patterson.

\* The major Nigerian political parties, as well as those of many other African states, have branches in London. Some of these branches were founded during the struggles for political independence. Others had their origin among the many African students studying in Britain.

Received in New York August 21, 1962.