

Nigeria and the Arab States*

by Chris Chidebe**

Nigeria is the most populous state in Africa south of the Sahara. Her geography and her history together make her an interesting socio-political and cultural experiment. It is a land with believers in both Islam and Christianity. A country whose northern parts were the prizes of *jihadic* victory of a highly Islamized Fulani elite, and whose southern portions are inhabited by peoples who were voluntarily or involuntarily brought under the control of the marching Christian soldiers determined to expand the domain of imperial Europe and committed to recruiting souls for Jesus. Nigeria is a meeting ground for two periods in African history. It is the place where Islam still rejoices over its past glories and successes; it is also a place where Euro-Western Christianity has made a major breakthrough.

It is against this background, and with such facts in mind, that the subject of Nigerian-Arab relations is here explored. I divide this paper into four parts. The first part is a brief historical sketch of the impact of Arabs and Islam on the Nigerian society and the Nigerian mind. The second part addresses itself to the early post-colonial period in Nigerian-Arab relations; the third part discusses Nigerian-Arab relations under military rule in Nigeria; the fourth part discusses Nigeria's Third Republic and the Arab states.

A. Islam, Arabs and Nigeria

The arrival of Islam in northern Nigeria dates back to the 11th century and constitutes a major development in the history of this region of Africa. It not only linked the Hausas, the Fulanis, and other Islamized ethnic groups with the wider world of Islam to the north, northeast, and west, but it also opened up the possibility of Muslim expansion southwards. Indeed, one of the effects of Islamization in Northern Nigeria was the emergence of a full-fledged Islamic culture and civilization in certain parts of what we now call Nigeria. The sphere of

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Islam was extended by the Fulani jihad, and the push south of the Islamic movement in Nigeria resulted in the conversion of almost half of the Yoruba population. Because of these Islamic gains, Nigeria today dramatizes well the three strands of thought President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana identified as (1) Islam (2) Euro-Western Christianity and (3) Traditional African Thought. Each of these three competing ideologies on the African intellectual landscape is represented in the world of African symbols. Islam is represented by the masjid (Mosque) and the Al-Hajji (Muslim pilgrim); Christianity is represented by the Missionary school and the African Christian minister; the traditional African religion is still present in the person of the BABALAO (Yoruba) or the DIBIA (Igbo).

Islam, in retrospect, has been an important factor in Nigerian history and culture. Because of this, we can now argue that Nigerian-Arab relations go back to the early contacts between Sudanic Peoples of Nigeria and Arab merchants and scholars, who came to sell their wares and to promote their Islamic beliefs. Though these early relations were not highly developed, they meant a great deal to a good number of Nigeria's Muslim population in the precolonial period. Evidence for this can be drawn from the number of Nigerian Muslims who walked across the border, bound for the holy cities of Islam in Arabia via Sudan and the countries along the Red Sea.

Besides these Muslim pilgrims, we have the Nigerian students who went to Arab countries in search of knowledge of the Arabic language, and of the *Quran* and *Sharia* of the faith. We know of course, that many of these students and pilgrims decided, for one reason or the other, to stay in the towns along the road to Mecca and Medina. In fact, it is this long-established practice among many Nigerians that gave rise to what George Shepherdson would call "Nigerian diasporas" in Chad, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia. As early as the late medieval period, a Nigerian monarch would set aside money for the purchase of a building in Cairo to accommodate students from Kanu Bornu. Yet, in registering these facts, we still have to point out that Nigerian-Arab relations were at this time confined to a limited space, and only people professing Islam and living in certain parts of the country were within the framework of such relationships.

To return to the Nigerian citizens who overstayed their religious welcome in Arabia or in the Sudan, one can argue that they were, and are still following tradition that dates back to the early beginnings of Islam in the country. Determined to obtain *baraka* (blessings) and conscious of the fact that the road to success is paved with good intentions, Nigerians who made it to the Red Sea area saw themselves as persons blessed by Allah (God). Thus a large number of Nigerian Muslims, in the years before the end of colonialism, moved towards the Sudan. The most historically recognized group among these Nigerians were those who

moved in anticipation of the arrival of Mahdi.¹

Earlier precolonial contacts between Arabs and Nigerians took a significant form of intellectual borrowing and cultural transplantation. Arabs did not only bring wares from the Arabo-Islamic world, but they also introduced new concepts and new ideas to the African's mental horizon.² In fact, the successful transplantation of Islamic ideas and values has been best symbolized by the life and career of Shehu Usman Dan Fodio. As Marvyn Hiskett puts it,

... although these scholars were Africans, born and bred in the Sudan, the culture they so enthusiastically espoused was not native to Africa. It stemmed from the Middle East, and it had much more in common with the Judaeo-Christian tradition than with any African culture indigenous to the Sudan.³

It was men like the Shehu who sowed the seeds for Afro-Arab relations and today modern Nigerians are asked to make the best of these legacies. As we shall see shortly, the decolonization of Africa and the greater participation of African states in world affairs would bring the Africans south of the Sahara closer to the Arabs of the North and to the Arabs of the other side of the Red Sea.

B. Nigerian-Arab Relations Under the First Republic

When Nigeria attained independence in 1960, she joined a group of Afro-Arab states at the United Nations. These states were united by a common concern for decolonization and the end of racial and white settler domination. But this united front with the Arabs was threatened by Nigeria's interest in the Islamic state whose diplomats were bending over backwards to win African support. Encircled and isolated by most states in Asia and the Middle East, but determined to survive in the face of Arab hostility, the Israelis decided, in the words of former Israeli ambassador Gidon Rafael, "to leap over the Arab wall." The newly independent African states, according to Rafael, needed new supporters and helpmates who were not going to put them in a state of dependence. Because of Israel's size and her non-imperial tradition she became ideally fitted to meet these conditions. As Rafael puts it, "From its early beginnings it felt ideologically committed to international cooperation

¹For details on this historical background of Islam in Nigeria, see J.S. Trimmingham, *Islam in West Africa* (London, 1959); John Paden, *Religion and Political Culture in Kano* (Berkeley, 1973).

²See Sulayman S. Nyang "The Impact of Islam on Black Africa", *UNESCO Courier*, Aug./Sept., 1981.

³See M. Hiskett, *The Sword of Truth. The Life and Times of the Shehu Usman Dan Fodio*. New York, London, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 36.

and development aid.”⁴

Because of the Arab-Israeli struggle in Africa, Nigeria and all other independent sub-Saharan states found themselves in the thick of Middle Eastern politics. This international issue began to affect the nature of domestic politics in individual African states. Under the Balewa government, Nigeria tried to take a neutral position towards the two contending sides. But such a federal policy of neutrality was unacceptable to certain regional leaders in Nigeria. The Sarduna of Sokoto, Sir Ahmadu Bello, and his entourage were not pleased with neutrality. Actively involved in Pan-Islamic and Afro-Arab conferences, the Sarduna found it politically embarrassing to tolerate an Israeli diplomatic tent in a land with a sizeable Muslim population. But such a logic from the Northern Muslim leadership was deeply resented in both eastern and western Nigeria where the Israelis had already penetrated.

Under the first republic, three critical issues dominate Nigerian-Arab relations. This was the constitutional wrangle over the extent to which the regional governments in Nigeria could pursue their own ties with either the Arabs or the Israelis. Because of the ambiguities in interpretations the pro-Israeli Eastern and Western regions and the pro-Arab North under Sir Ahmadu Bello, went their separate ways. The governments of the south opened up to Israeli agricultural and technical assistance. Premiers Michael Okpaka of the Eastern Region and Samuel Akintola of the Western Region made pilgrimage to Israel and the Israeli government extended the red carpet treatment to the Nigerian supporters of the Jewish state. In the Western Region of Nigeria the Israeli construction company, Solel Boneh, signed an agreement to help develop the water resources of that area. In the eastern region, Israelis were involved in a wide range of activities. They helped in agricultural development along with the American Peace Corps and the British VSO. They also provided first aid services and agricultural training in rural areas.⁵ Additionally, they gave a number of scholarships to Nigerians to study either at the Histadrut Institute for labor studies or at one of the Israeli universities.

During this time, the Northern Nigerians were also having their own political and cultural honeymoon with the Arab states. The Sarduna was invited to Arab states where he often made politically charged statements which were not liked by the Foreign Ministry people. One

⁴For details on Rafael's account of Israel's efforts in Africa, see his *Destination Peace. Three Decades of Israeli Foreign Policy. A Personal Memoir.* (New York: Stein & Day 1983). P. 81.

⁵ For details on Israeli aid to Africa, see Leopold Laufer, "Israel and the Third World," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. LXXXVII, No. 4 (December 1972). See also Shimeon Amir, *Israel's Development Cooperation with Africa, Asia and Latin America* (London, Praeger, 1984).

such statement was his declaration, that Nigeria would support, and if need be join the proposed Pan-Islamic grouping King Faisal of Saudi Arabia was promoting. This idea was immediately challenged by the Nigerian press, particularly the southern press. As a result of the editorials and commentaries, the government of Balewa retracted the claim.

But while the political/international forays of the Sarduna triggered hostile responses from both pro-Israeli Nigerians and others interested in keeping religion out of politics, he succeeded in laying the basis of trust and confidence between Nigerian Muslim leaders and their Arab counterparts. Indeed, so respected was the Sarduna in the Arab and Muslim world that the Saudis nominated him to the governing council of the *Rabatah al-'alam al-Islami* (The World Muslim League). His influence and power also enabled many young Muslim Nigerians to receive scholarships from individual Arab states.

C. Nigerian-Arab Relations Under Military Rule

When the military seized power in Nigeria on January 15, 1966, Nigerian foreign policy towards the Middle East conflict was neutral. The old policy of Balewa's regime was maintained and as on many other issues, Nigeria reflected what was at this time identified with the mainstream of African diplomacy. Things began to change with developments within the domestic system of Nigeria. The most critical factor that was destined to put the Arab states in good light was the eruption of the Civil War and the international offer or denial of moral and diplomatic support to Nigeria's secessionist-opponent, Biafra.

Because of the outbreak of the conflict between secessionist Biafra and the federal government of Nigeria, the Middle Eastern countries began to take sides. The Israelis, trying to reciprocate Ibo support for their country, found it diplomatically useful to rally to Biafra. This act infuriated the federal leadership. Apparently, the Israeli Foreign Ministry officials erroneously calculated that the Biafran venture would succeed and that in a free, independent Ibo State, they could develop a springboard for greater penetration in Africa. This logic of Israeli planners was thwarted, less by faulty historical analysis than by the unpredictable turn of events. Ibo leaders like Okpara and Azikiwe had strong feelings for Israel, and literate Ibos who lived under the journalistic influences of Azikiwe's newspapers clearly remembered his celebrated statement that "Ibos are the Jews of Africa." It was the Zikist analogy and murderous empirical evidences that led Israel's diplomacy in Africa to argue for support for Biafra.

This Israeli support for Biafra was countered by general Arab support for the federal government. In the Arab media, especially those with Islamic leanings, Nigeria was portrayed as a land with a Muslim majority threatened by Zionist forces acting through local agents within

the non-Muslim community.⁶ Because the Arabs feared that Nigeria, the most populous African state, was about to be dismembered through the chicanery of Israel, they made it a point to offer at least diplomatic support to the federal government. This fact was not lost to the military commanders at the helm of affairs in the embattled republic. Writing many years after the civil war, former head of state, General Olusegun Obasanjo put it this way:

In the Middle East, Israel was also more forthcoming, though covertly, in supplying arms and ammunitions to the rebels through a third country such as Tanzania or Gabon. Israel obviously would have liked to counteract the Arab influence on the Federal side. Naturally Israel cast her lot with 'Biafra' — the Persecuted Jews of Africa.⁷

He continued to examine the various regions of the world and the attitudes of their leaders to the secessionist case of Biafra. On the Maghreb he has these words to say:

All the Maghreb states with the exception of Mauretania were on the Federal Government's side. Algeria gave materials and medical personnel and equipment in support. At one point in the war some of our troops in the field depended almost entirely on the Algerian medical team, most of whom had served as doctors in the Algerian war of independence, bringing with them the experience of medical care based on scanty resources. They did fine work.⁸

Though General Obasanjo gave credit to the Algerians for their role during the civil war, he said nothing about the other Arab states. Despite this reticence on the part of Nigeria's commanders, at the height of the conflict, Biafrans and their international backers blamed Egyptian pilots for the napalm bombs dropped on Ibo villages and towns. Arab states and various Muslim organizations in the Arab world made sure that some semblance of solidarity was shown to the Northern Nigerian brethren and the federal government. They funnelled their aid through the Muslim organizations based in the North or West.

Because of the compromised nature of Israel's role in the Biafra crisis, the Nigerian leadership began to take a more critical look at Israel. This was destined to coincide with other developments in Africa. By 1967 Israeli ties to Guinea (Conakry) were snapped, and her occupation of the Sinai was certainly not endearing her to other African states. But on

⁶This was particularly true of publications of the *Rabetah 'al-alam al-Islami*.

⁷General Olusegun Obasanjo, *My Command, An Account of the Nigerian Civil War 1967-70*. (London, Ibadan & Nairobi: Heineman, 1980). p. 154.

⁸*Ibid.* P. 156.

balance, one can argue that Israel was still tolerated although African states were beginning to blame her for intransigence.⁹ At the OAU and at the United Nations, Nigeria still projected a neutral position with occasional support for the Arabs. This position was abandoned after the committee of wise men failed. Nigeria's President Gowon was one of Africa's representatives selected by the OAU Summit to work a peace arrangement between the Israelis and the Arabs. The African delegation, interestingly, visited only Egypt and Israel. The main concern was the reclamation of the Sinai. Because of Israeli intransigence, Nigeria soon took a position that Israel was not ready for negotiation. Though there was significant support for Israel in certain parts of Nigeria in the early 1970s, the Nigerian military leader felt that diplomatic relations with the Hebrew state had reached a breaking point, and efforts ought to be made to influence Israel in the Middle East. Hence President Gowon decided to sever ties with Israel. This pattern of diplomacy was evident through the last days of military rule. In fact, under Murtala's brief rule, Nigeria became more radicalized and also at this time Israel's connection with South Africa became a regular feature in the Nigerian media.

D. Nigerian-Arab Relations Under Shehu Shagari

When Shagari became President in 1979, he found Nigeria locked in an embrace with the Arab states. Although he was generally viewed by some analysts as favorably disposed towards the Israelis, the fact remains that he did not wish to drag his government into religious and ethnic turmoil.

His assumption, under conditions of compromise and bargaining within the NPN and the country, led him to a moderate position in both national and international affairs. Another point to be noted, with regard to Nigeria's present relations with the Middle Eastern and Arab states, is the attitude of the civilian regime. During the first three years Shagari's government exhibited an easygoing attitude toward the Arab states. There were only two issues that featured prominently in Nigerian-Arab relations during this period. The first was the question of Chad and Libya's involvement. The Nigerian authorities at one point wanted an immediate cessation of hostilities. But when it became clear that President Woddeye wanted to use OAU troops to protect his regime, the Nigerians pulled back their troops. And Nigeria's relations with Libya were also affected when it became clear that Libya was bent on

⁹For details on the African attitudes towards Israel at this time, see Sulayman S. Nyang "African Opinions and Attitudes to the Palestine Questions," *The Search, Journal of Arab/Islamic Studies*, vol. 2, no. 8 3/4 pp. See also Abdul Aziz Jalloh "The Policies of African States Towards the Arab World: An Overview," *Indian Journal of Politics*, 14 (1-3), 1980, pp. 1-19.

having her way in Chad. They decided to resist this adventure of Qaddafi because of their growing suspicion. They joined the French and others in calling for Libyan withdrawal, although Shagari was careful not to be perceived as a faithful tool of French imperialism in Africa.

Another issue of importance in the realm of Nigerian-Arab relations was the question of the Polisario. Having lived through a civil war, and being conscious of her status and stature in contemporary African diplomacy, Nigeria decided to take a cautious move when the Secretary-General of the OAU acted on what he thought was the majority decision to seat the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic delegates (i.e. Polisario members) at the OAU meeting in Freetown. This decision, however, opened a deep wound in the organization. Nigeria's role in the whole conflict had been low-keyed and watchful. This was evident during the abortive Tripoli One Summit. President Shagari kept the world guessing whether he would or would not go to Tripoli. His failure to show up was seen as an act of opposition to Qaddafi and his possible assumption of the chairmanship. This can be argued on the basis of the absence of diplomatic ties with Tripoli.

This point is significant on two counts. First, Nigeria broke ties with Libya because of Qaddafi's decision to convert his embassy in Lagos to a People's Bureau. This revisionist position of Qaddafi was made known to the Africans at a time when Libya's diplomatic stocks went down sharply. Qaddafi was identified with West African activists such as the self-styled Ayatollah of Kaolack, and Shaykh Ahmed Niasse, and also was charged in 1980/81 with training guerrilla terrorists who could go back and overthrow certain African governments hostile to Qaddafi's African policy. Secondly, Nigeria's suspicions of Libya were heightened by the 1980 Kano uprisings led and fomented by a religious leader, Muhammad Marwa who was later slain. Though Libya's innocence was professed and then supported by Northern Nigerian intellectuals such as Dr. Bala Usman, the fact is that Nigerian-Libyan relations have remained strained. Since the overthrow of the Shagari government in December, 1983, Qaddafi's number two man has paid a visit to Lagos but no new agreement has been reached.

Conclusions

As we have seen above, Nigerian-Arab relations have gone through three distinct stages in the contemporary era. During the early post-colonial period Nigerian leadership was divided along regional lines on the Arab-Israeli conflict. This internal split led the federal government to take a continuous neutral position on this issue. By the time the military came to power, the conditions began to change. The civil war was a decisive factor, and it also made it possible for Nigerian military leaders to take a more critical view of Israel.

Finally, in the third stage, especially during the last two years of President Shagari, Nigeria's ties with Arab states depended on matters relating to Libyan efforts in the sub-Saharan region. In light of these developments we can conclude that Nigerian-Arab relations would now depend on the behavior of Arabs in the North and their attitudes towards the political issues within Africa and the OAU.