

Forms and Perspectives on Nigeria's 1960 Independence Celebrations: Kano State Experience

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FORMS AND PERSPECTIVES ON NIGERIA'S 1960 INDEPENDENCE CELEBRATIONS: KANO STATE EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

This study assesses the mood of select social categories in Kano State with respect to Nigeria's 1960 independence. Proceeding with the suggestion that the celebrations were underscored by hopes and subdued concerns, the study also investigated the perspectives of grass root elements about independence in 1960 and now 50 years later. During the survey, primary data was generated through specialised interviews and focus group discussions with individuals and groups purposively sampled for having lived those times. Archival materials such as newspaper reports, photographs and radio coverage were content analysed for secondary data. The dialectical materialist perspective was the framework adopted to explain contemporary thinking on Nigeria's independence phenomenon².

Background

Before the nineteenth century and the coming of British colonialism, Northern Nigeria was in tumult. Inter-state wars for conquest and slave raiding made ordinary living hard and uncertain. Due to general instability, people lived in fear. Famine, ignorance and disease were rampant. Many scholars unite on the view that the Sokoto Caliphate which a loose federation of about thirty emirates (1804-1904) provided temporary reprieve. Its pioneer leaders who were renowned paragons of piety and ascetism entrenched a system of law, order and good government with well organized fiscal system, definite code of land tenure, regular system of local rule and trained judiciary administering tenets of Mohammedan law. Hugh Clapperton, the British explorer, reports the whole country when not in a state of war was so well regulated that a woman might travel with a casket of gold on her head from one end of the Fellata (Fulani) dominion to the other³. It was generally attested that there was security of life and property in all the territories and people in those days lived in harmony, peace and tranquility⁴.

However after the demise of pioneers of Sokoto Jihad, their successors relapsed into tyranny and despotism. By the middle of the nineteenth century, when founders of the caliphate had passed away,

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³ Gwandu (Kurawa 2001:34, Rashid 1988:39)

⁴ Ostien (2007)

their heirs and successors had become altogether something different. Their conduct and general comportment had become identical in practically every respect with those of the pre-jihad Hausa rulers, and by the time the British conquered the country, there was not one emirate, throughout the Sokoto caliphate, where the principles, the methods and procedures of (Sokoto) government was applied⁵. Examples were the slave raiding exploits of Emir of Kwantagora, Ibrahim Nagwamatse and his son Umaru who made surrounding lands fallow, the sacking of Offa in 1891 by the rulers of Ilorin and the enslavement of free Muslims from Gwaram by the Emir of Bauchi. The story was not any different in Bornu Empire as Rabeh (the ruler then) was at the same time making “merry hell of the place in his unrestrained mission of murder, looting, slave raiding, destruction and brigandage”. Indeed, the British conquerors were “virtually liberators of the masses in almost the whole of Northern Nigeria, hence, in most places; they met with “puny and token resistance”⁶.

Within its years of imperialism, British colonialism stabilised the polity and ushered era of peace and progress. British colonialism facilitated the transition of Northern Nigeria from traditional backwaters of simple agrarian society that is feudal in character to social and political modernity that periodically experience campaigns, elections and voting and which recorded monumental upswings in virtually all spheres of life; judicial and administrative infrastructure, literacy, healthcare and even (warts and all) the economy.

Thus after 60 odd years of British rule, news of impending independence from colonial administration understandably evoked mixed reactions from the general public in Northern Nigeria. The word independence conjures different meanings to different social categories. Whilst the burgeoning newspapers in the region (i.e Kano based *Sodangi* and Zari’a based *Gaskiya Tafi Kwabo* Hausa vernacular newspapers) regaled and pontificated on freedoms from colonial bondage and the burden falling upon successors of departing colonialists to improve life standards, musicians such as Aishatu Fellatiya, a sensational singer from Sudan and *Sarkin Taushin* Katsina were said to have instantly transformed into vanguard social agents that induced the liberating feeling that Nigerians would become masters of their own destiny. The Sarkin Taushin Katsina’s song: *Duniya tayi kyau arziki yayi, tunda mun sami yancin kasar tamu* (The world would be significantly better since we have achieved independence), which wafted (and still do) through the airwaves courtesy of National Broadcasting Corporation Kaduna and the radio relay services in Kano demonstrated the joyous reaction of grass root people at the momentous occasion of independence and did a lot to boost the euphoric ambience of self fulfillment.

The general masses were festive and displayed their rich cultural heritage through songs, dances and drama plays. The celebration was considered as an affirmation of their belief that democratic representation, still regarded then as new and sudden element in society, would be deepened with independence⁷. Conversely however, the event was not greeted with uproarious exultations

⁵ Kumo (Alkali 2001:34)

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Miles (1994).

everywhere. If anything, the general expectations of Kano public was manifest in the pledge of the main opposition party in Kano Province, the Northern People's Progressive Union (NEPU), whose campaign platform was that independence should stop the brutalities of *sarauta* (aristocracy) system. "Ordinary folks would no longer fear of being thrashed, forced to do some very hard work (like farming in *Gandun Sarki* and carrying the baggage of the colonial officers as porters) or have something taken away. No longer would the *sarakai* (aristocrats) or *dogarai* (bodyguards of traditional rulers) come to the villages at will to demand for whatever they wanted (house, food etc) and levy illegal taxes, the era of extortion and exploitation of the poor will be over"⁸.

All considered, the attainment of independence by Nigeria on 1st October 1960 was a watershed development. The levels and degrees of Nigeria's independence celebrations of course varied between different rungs of government and from urban centres to rural communities. The top profile independence celebrations such as the flag lowering ceremony, exhibitions and state dinners were held in Lagos, while the North too had its share of celebrations. Kaduna, the regional headquarters, all provincial cities and communities everywhere in the North region were agog with numerous activities: school children and police parades, drama and radio discussions, mini durbars were held. There was general excitement everywhere.

This research focuses on both the known celebratory forms of Nigeria's 1960 independence celebrations in Kano State and other less known details like the reactions of some target grass root social groups in three local communities (Doguwa, Dawakin Tofa and Gwarzo) and the impact of independence upon social and power relations. It specifically seeks

- to discover and document these ecstatic moments of history as captured in photographs, songs, artistic imagery etc
- to collate reminiscences from people in rural and urban centres that experienced the moment of independence on their expectations and fears as well as impact on social and power relations
- to attempt in-depth theoretical interpretations to narratives of social and power relations in past and present Kano State.

The research was premised on the assumptions that rather than being heralded entirely by joyous liberating feelings and great expectations, the celebrations from British colonialism, even though marked peacefully, were strongly underlined with trepidation and cross purposes by the target social groups.

Archival materials comprising colonial records, newspaper cuttings and photographs were inspected at Kano State History and Culture Bureau and the National Archives of Nigeria, Zonal Office Kaduna. Primary data was generated through personal interviews with 7 respondents and 18 participants of focus group discussions that comprised veteran politicians, school teachers, senior civil servants and erstwhile government ministers. The interviews and discussions were held in Kano Municipal, Gwarzo, Dawakin

⁸ Interview with Lili Gabari, a veteran politician in Kano on 21/3/2010.

Tofa and Doguwa villages. These communities were selected for being geographically located at different ends of the state and each has sizeable number of people that witnessed the moments of independence.

Archival search was not easy. No souvenir of the independence celebrations such as textile materials or plastic tokens to school children was discovered because of poor record keeping habits. Official records about preparations and conduct of independence celebrations in Kano also do not exist. The State only came into existence following states creation exercise in 1967. Rioters gutted premises of the State Radio Corporation during the 1981 rampage when Governor Abubakar Rimi served the Emir of Kano with a query, as such radio materials of discussions and programmes on independence celebrations were all lost. Fire also had gutted the Kano Printing press where copies of indigenous vernacular newspapers; *Sodangi* and *The Comet* were being kept. Gaskiya Corporation Zaria similarly has no records of early editions of *Gaskiya Ta Fi Kwabo*, particularly of those material times. Important documents like staff personal files of even the pioneer editor of the paper and famous author of many Hausa books, Abubakar Imam have been lost to 'termite infestation' in its stores. The newspaper copies discovered at Kano History and Culture Bureau and National Archives in Kaduna are incomplete and in very poor shape. Their pages are 'yellow' with age and have to be handled with extra care otherwise they just come apart at the slightest touch.

The search at the National Archives Kaduna was more positive. It yielded filings (hereby attached) of southern newspapers, *The Daily Service* and *Daily Times*, which extensively covered the activities and celebratory events in Lagos, the nation's capital. Multitudes of photographs of activities concerning the Northern Regional Government were discovered at the Kaduna State Ministry of Information. Only about five concern Princess Alexandria's visit to the region during the celebrations.

Field Visits to the grass root communities of Dawakin Tofa, Doguwa and Gwarzo were far more productive. Once the people are satisfied there were no hidden agenda, they were very forthcoming with information.

Research findings confirm that independence celebrations in local communities of old Kano province (now State) were joyous. 1st October, 1960 the Independence Day, mainly people dressed up like it was *Sallah*. Mini durbar involving colourfully dressed horse riders with much drumming and trumpet blowing was held in front of the Village Head's houses during which local singers exhibited their talents and extolled the virtues of freedom and liberation. Film shows in cinema vans were also staged later in the night depicting boundless opportunities in education and health care⁹. The spectacular performance of the famous trumpet blowers from Dawakin Tofa during the Independence Day horse racing even won them a trip to England on the courtesies of the British Council¹⁰.

Primary school pupils at the time of independence remember rehearsing and participating in parades and sporting competitions, football and sack racing, at the Kano Festival Stadium. They recalled listening

⁹ Discussions with FGD participants in Doguwa and Gwarzo villages.

¹⁰ Discussions with FGD participants in Dawakin Tofa.

to the Prime Minister's radio speech, being hosted to cocktail parties at their school compounds and receiving gifts of plastic cups and balloons¹¹. One of them confessed to still harbouring special memory of *Sarkin Taushin* Katsina's inspiring and specially composed independence song in which he listed African countries that had achieved independence earlier, praising the Sardauna's efforts and the expectation that with independence, Nigerians would freely practice their religion and traditions. The musician also forecast that one day white men will serve under the supervision of Nigerians¹².

On the specific perceptions and expectations of grass root elements about independence, rural dwellers believed that British colonialism was coming to an end, but feared Southern Nigerians would step into their shoes to dominate Northerners. They also explained that most *talakawa* (the poor) were fearful that with independence, the tyrannical rule of traditional authorities will return as they would once more regain control over the criminal justice system i.e. Native Authority Police, Judiciary and Prisons. *Talakawa* prayed for peace and development was seen in other countries that gained independence much earlier¹³.

Another respondent admitted to this researcher that Northern Emirs did not relish the prospects of independence. According to him, they abhorred the idea of taking instructions from Nigerian politicians whom they regard as ordinary common folks socially beneath them in status. "The Emirs devised a strategy to maintain their influence and therefore bestowed traditional titles upon Ministers from respective chiefdoms to maintain their hold upon them"¹⁴. The interviewee further recalled a critical comments made by one Shehu Kazaure (*Mai Unguwar Mundubawa*) a courtier at Emir of Kano's palace who rhetorically sought to know if Emir Sunusi would stop the traditional Sallah homage to Residents at Government House in Nassarawa GRA, a precedence started by his great grandfather Emir Abbas at 1903, since Nigerians were going to replace white men as Residents. The idea was however forthrightly rejected by senior councilors of the emirate and never implemented.

It is on record that the poor were also not enthusiastic about independence either. They were frightened that once Nigerians assume power, slave raiding warfare would resume. According to a respondent, a notable town crier called Gizo Kakakin Katsina, created quite a stir during the Self Government durbar in Kaduna on March 15th 1959 when he made the astonishing announcement in the presence of the powerful Emirs of the North that "*Turawa kada ku yi nisa. Karya muke yi, ba za mu iya ba* (Don't go too far, white men. We are lying, we cannot rule ourselves). An action that obviously prompted the *Nigerian Comet*, a Kano tabloid, to publish a cartoon depicting a *dogari* (emir's palace bodyguard) violently

¹¹ Separate interviews with Abdurrahman Abdullahi and Alasan Dawaki on 18/3/2010 and 21/3/2010 in Kano and Dawakin Tofa respectively.

¹² Alasan Dawaki (*ibid*).

¹³ Discussions with FGD participants at Doguwa on 17/3/2010.

¹⁴ Interview with Alhaji Sule Gaya, Sarkin Fadar Kano and formerly Minister of Local Government Affairs in Northern Regional Government on 20/3/2010.

whipping the poor with the caption read: Independence will return the status quo and once more unleash *dogarai* on the poor.

The source also told this researcher that Ministers serving at the federal and northern regional government were equally not happy with the treatment meted out on them at some Emir's palaces. They detested being made to sit on the floor during courtesy calls.

The Ministers eventually prevailed on the Premier to allow Ministers to demonstrate that they are now in charge. He issued instructions that whenever Ministers undertake official tour of the region, they were to sit on chairs in the Emir's palaces.

An alarming report reached the government one day that many ordinary folks were skeptical and believed independence would be a failure. It indicated that some Fulani clans have perfected plans to migrate to neighbouring French West African countries of Niger and the Cameroons should law and order breakdown. In response, the northern regional government quickly constituted a committee which toured the region and reassured the restive Fulani that contrary to doomsayers, independence would usher peace, progress and harmony¹⁵.

The survey also revealed that because of the massive illiteracy and absence of media outlets, there was little appreciation of the significance of independence. Very few enlightened individuals in local communities understood that through "northernisation policy, Africans would be appointed Residents and District Officers. A source told this researcher that even though the foremost opposition party in Northern Nigeria, NEPU, purported that independence would liberate the country from foreign domination, ordinary people don't understand what that meant. The poor also found the claims that the new dispensation would enable their sons to become Governors, Prime Ministers and so on, difficult to believe. Nor do they believe that Nigerians would someday replace the British as Residents and District Officer's (D.O's). All their life, ordinary folks have lived in stratified society where social mobility is determined by ascription (birth or provenance). Many were startled when Malam Aminu Kano, the NEPU leader, got elected into the federal House of Representatives. The dreams he talked about were finally becoming true¹⁶.

The respondent, Lili Gabari, explained that himself and his brother Awaisu (he pointed him out in the crowd in front of us) registered as NEPU members because "We come from poor background and saw our parents being persecuted simply because they were nobody. We celebrated independence because NEPU leaders told us that when Nigerians assume political and administrative control, *Dogarai* (palace bodyguards) and members of the royalty would be stopped from maltreating the poor and confiscating their wives and property, the rich will be equally protected from extortions and inheritors of estate of the deceased would not have to pay unjust *ushura* levy".

¹⁵ Sule Gaya, *ibid*.

¹⁶ Lili Gabari, *ibid*.

FGD participants at Dawakin Tofa explained that the principal concern of rural dwellers at independence was that various development works going on during colonialism, i.e. social provisioning of roads, pipe borne water, schools, and health clinics might stop when Nigerians take over. "Given the choice, they would have voted for white men to remain behind with Africans providing them support". According to them, although many people "feared" white men mostly because of their skin pigmentation, they were widely respected and secretly admired. Evidence of the regard given to white men could be seen in the descriptions and reverence given to Nigerians appointed as agricultural and educational officers. People continued to refer to them as *baturen gona* and *baturen makaranta*.

A veteran journalist who actively covered the independence celebration at Lagos race course for the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) stated that he was personally involved in implementing an integrated communications campaign about the promise of independence. It involved radio publicity, publications in *Nigeria Citizen* and *Daily Mail* newspapers, handbills development and distribution, newsreels and the assembling of artistes who produced befitting songs, drama and paintings for the occasion.

According to him, Nigeria with her 40 million population was expected by almost all black men to become the greatest and most influential country in Africa. Everyone, businessmen, civil servants and foreigners thought Nigeria would make a success of independence. That was why the departing colonialists agreed to leave some of their colleagues behind to guide the expanding public services. As he puts it, civil servants measured up to the task. They heartily accepted the grooming by white men, kept the bureaucracy running, provided sound and qualitative policy inputs and faithfully implemented those policies once the political overloads adopted them.

He lauded the northernisation policy whose high points included reserving some civil service positions for Northerners, various training programmes to prepare Northerners for those posts and the filling of some of these positions with officers from any other source on contract basis. He lamented the ruckus that followed the introduction of northernisation policy, lambasted as "divisive and not being in national interest and lauded the Sardauna's counter claims that national unity would be in far greater danger when enough qualified northerners are available without jobs.

CONCLUSIONS

On account of this research, several facts have come to light. First is Nigerian's very poor culture towards documentation and storage. It is almost impossible to lay hands on any written record about independence celebrations in Kano State, and even if it exists, the document is not easily accessible. Many acknowledged that souvenirs were produced during the occasion, but nobody could produce any. Secondly, archival documents are equally stored under deplorable conditions. I don't know whatever happened to microfilms.

Thirdly, grass root people, indeed great many people across society, did not understand what 1960 independence entailed and still find what is happening now, fifty years later, too abstract to understand. Independence and self rule has not abated the ideologically antagonistic relations between poor who

sought to be liberated from the shackles of oppression and those who wished to preserve the privileges and interests of the status quo. Everyone is still fighting to protect his needs and interests. The intention of the post colonial rulers may have been to decolonize in both polity and spirit. Independence has changed little. European whites were replaced by black African rulers, yet for the *talakawa* (the poor) exploitation is still continuing. Instead of public resources to be utilized for general welfare, the elite convert it to their selfish purposes. The change has not been qualitative. Independence still, has neither assuaged the fears and hopes of grass root people nor measurably altered class social relations. If anything, exploitative relations between social classes only worsened by assuming new dimensions.

As noted in *Talakawa Testimonies* (2008) NEPU/PRP politics remains hugely popular in Kano precisely because, ‘the lives of ordinary people (still) is a sad chronicle of unfulfilled promises, dashed hopes and unrealized expectation. The historical nightmares of the *talakawa* – poverty, ignorance and disease still persist”.

British colonialism has long departed, but 50 years from Nigeria’s independence, the social categories surveyed for this research still yearn for emancipation and empowerment. This situation, and many others not mentioned, continuously begs the question, what perspectives and expectations of Nigeria’s 1960 independence have been fulfilled?

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ANNEXES

ANNEX 1 Newspaper cuttings

1. Independence Prayer, List of the day’s Independence Events from 9.30 a.m. till 11 p.m.; a picture of Yomi McEwen that will present a bouquet of flowers to Princess Alexandra at a reception Daily Times September 26, 1960; p.3
2. Picture of “Lagos School Children rehearsing for Independence Parade”, Daily Times, September 22, 1960; p.9

3. Welcome, Your Royal Highness and a report containing list of some visitors to Nigeria's Independence celebrations, Daily Times No. 16,280 Monday 26, 1960, p.1
4. "Princess visits Exhibition"; "picture of Miss Independence 1960"; Mobil salutes Independent Nigeria and Becks Beer adverts ;' Daily Times October 1, 1960; p.64
5. "Freedom: Pictures of Political Leaders on the map of Nigeria", Daily Times, No.16,284 Saturday October 1, 1960; p.1
6. "The Moment of Freedom" a picture of Princess Alexandra handing over the Constitutional Instruments of Independence to Nigeria's Prime Minister Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Sunday Times, No. 371 Sunday October 2, 1960; p.1
7. "40 million Nigerians are free today" article by Babatunde Jose, Editor and news report about Nigerians in Ghana dancing in celebrations, Daily Times October 1,1960
8. "Long Live Nigeria"(editorial) & "Best wishes to the people of Nigeria on the attainment of their Independence " advert by the Anglo – French Trading Company Daily Times October, 1960; p.5
9. Nigeria's National Anthem and Nigerian Tobacco Company, Limited advert, October 1, 1960; p.21
10. Picture of Oil Painting gift from Tanganyika; and advert by Air France on Nigeria's Independence, Daily Times October 1, 1960; p.20
11. Two special independence Poems composed by Dennis Osadebay and an anonymous Britishman and an advert on Nigeria's Independence by Elder Dempster, a Shipping line, Daily Times October 1, 1960; p.19
12. Full page advert on Nigeria's Independence and an invitation to its stand at Nigeria Exhibition by UTC , Daily Times October 1, 1960; p.22
13. Full page advert on Nigeria's Independence by Unilever Export Limited, Daily Times October 1, 1960; p.4

ANNEX 2: Pictures of Nigeria's Independence Celebrations for Kaduna State Ministry of Information

1. Princess Alexandria visits Maiduguri 1960
2. Princess Alexandria attends Northern Regional House of Chiefs sitting I Kaduna 1960
3. Premier, Sir Ahmadu Bello Sardaunan Sokoto during Princess Alexandria's visit to Northern Legislature in Kaduna 12th October, 1960
4. Sir Ahmadu Bello leading UK Minister to his house in 1960
5. Sir Ahmadu Bello, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa and Dr. Azikwe at independence ceremonies in Lagos

ANNEX 3: Persons Met

NAME	PROFILE	LOCATION	METHOD	DATE MET
Abdurrahman Abdullahi	Television Producer	Kano	Interview	18/3/2010
Maje Ahmad Gwangwazo	Arabic Teacher in Doguwa Primary School, Tudun Wada Local Govt. 25 years at independence and now 75 years old , a writer with 18 books produced	Doguwa	Interview and FGD with 8 persons	17/3/2010
Magaji Dambatta	Veteran journalist and retired Permanent Secretary. 31 years old at independence, now 81 years old.	Kano	Interview	27/3/2010
Sule Gaya OFR	<i>Sarkin Fadar</i> Kano and former Minister of Local Government in defunct Northern region. Aged 35 at independence, now 85 years old and living in retirement.	Kano	Interview	20/3/2010
Alasan Dawaki	Retired School Teacher.16 years at independence, now 66 years.	Dawakin Tofa	Interview and FGD with 6 persons	22/3/2010
Halliru Gwarzo	Community Leader and former radio journalist	Gwarzo	Interview and FGD with 4 other people	23/3/2010
Lili Gabari	Veteran Politician	Kano	Interview	21/3/2010