



Economic Change and Islamic Statecraft: Karamoko Alfa and the Foundation of Futa Jallon Imamate 1726-1751

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the formation and consolidation of the Muslim theocracy initially established on the ideal of Islamic law and an economic system based on the internal production of non-slave commodities. It highlights the rapidly changing condition marked by the shift of European demand from trade in non-slave commodities to the trade in slaves as a result of increasing demand for slave labour in the New World. It demonstrates the significant structural transformation instituted by the new regime of the Futa Imamate to optimize its participation through Muslim militancy, thereby extending influence and control over strategic coastal markets during the development of the Atlantic slave trade in the mid-eighteenth century. It also discusses how the commercial shift accelerated by the rapid development of peanut production and new export-import trade attracted the territorial and commercial interest of the French in the River Pongo and Nunez, the southern Rivers situated in the northern Futa. This further demonstrates the French territorial and commercial ambition to monopolize legitimate trade in these strategic rivers.

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Futa Imamate and the Rise of Fulani Dominance

The successful establishment of Fulani dominance over their host Jallonke and Susu landlords culminated in the creation of an Islamic theocracy. Futa Jallon had to lay a new foundation of social relations to reaffirm Muslim Fulani domination and overcome the internal political conflict of regional and family interests.¹

The Imamate of Futa Jallon was a federation comprising seven administrative provinces, locally referred to as Diwal. The capital of this theocratic state was established in Timbo. The rulers of the state were elected from the Soriya and Alfaya dynasties. The constitutional eligibility that legitimized the Soriya and Alfaya dynasties was based on military strength and Islamic scholarship.

Therefore, it is understood that the legitimacy of the Soriya dynasty from the province of Labe was connected to their role in the Muslim uprising against the Jallonke. According to tradition, the militarized Fulani of Labe played a key role in overthrowing and ending Jallonke's power, which led to Fulani dominance.

The prominent Alfaya party secured its legitimacy through a deep understanding of Islamic scholarship, and its rise to power was largely due to its proselytization efforts, which emphasized the religious duty to engage in Jihad against the oppressive animist Susu Kafu chiefs. The Fulani widely regarded Karamoko Alfa's preaching as the spark that ignited the revolution, ultimately ending the political and social subjugation of Muslims. It is important to recognize that the main goal of the Muslim uprising was to overthrow the dominance of the non-Muslim Jallonke aristocracy and establish an Islamic theocratic state based on Islamic jurisprudence principles. After the successful overthrow of the Jallonke aristocratic regimes in Futa Jallon, there was a strong call for creating a theocratic state led by a learned jurist. As scholarship became the main qualification for leadership in this new theocracy, Fulani clerics made wise political decisions. Karamoko Alfa, the head of the Sedianke lineage of the Barry family from Timbo, was unanimously chosen because of his extensive Islamic knowledge. The drive to create an Islamic theocracy in Futa Jallon was further

¹ Rodney, Walter. "Jihad and Social Revolution in Futa Djallon in the Eighteenth Century." *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 4, no. 2 (1968): 269–84. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41856749>. p. 277.

quicken and supported by the region's mountainous geography. Its remote location also limited outside contacts, strengthening the cohesion that allowed Muslim Fulani elites to take power from the early Jallonke and Susu Kafu chiefs.

Futa Jallon Muslims belong to a Muslim sect whose ideological goal was linked to Wahhabiyya. The sect emphasized human intellect and openness to technological innovations and political mobilization. They recognized the democratic system through electoral processes. Conversely, any challenge to sharia law was unacceptable. They successfully established an Islamic theocracy within the national borders and became a foundation for an Islamic confederation.

Karamoko Alfa established standard Islamic doctrinal practices and played a leading role in promoting peaceful Islamization through the creation of learning centers. Importantly, his goal was to foster harmony that would embody the ideal of Islam. The theocratic state of Futa transformed the status of the Fulanis from tribute-paying aristocrats to land-owning aristocrats. Since slavery was both canonical and non-egalitarian in nature, Fulani Muslim political elites had to create a rigid hierarchical structure to reinforce inequality between Muslims and the conquered non-Muslims. Before colonial domination, the trade centered on the trans-Atlantic slave trade. However, the inland areas under Islamic influence were limited by the need to meet internal economic demands, which formed the basis for the minimal supply of slaves during the trans-Atlantic slave trade by Muslims in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Paul E. Lovejoy's argument traces the Muslim resistance to the trans-Atlantic slave trade to the mode of production that required the integrated enslavement, the slave trade, and the use of slaves on a large scale. Hence, the formation of Islamic theocracy in Futa Jallon coincided with this phenomenon in the Muslim-dominated areas of West Africa's interior. The Muslims were constrained by cultural, religious, and political factors from trading with the Atlantic world. Accordingly, the new political transformation that established Islamic policies and internal reliance on slave production limited active Muslim participation in the Atlantic slave trade. Futa Jallon, under this new administrative system, centered around the framework of Islamic ruling ideology. Non-Muslims were assigned slave status, while Muslim Fulani were classified as free men.

Scholarship needs to highlight the ironic situation that appeared within the doctrinal framework of the administrative law adopted by the Muslim theocracy led by Fulani Muslims in Futa Jallon. The Islamic doctrinal stance regarding holy war against non-Muslims was only endorsed in certain circumstances involving insecurity, warfare, and the pursuit of a positive religious duty. When victorious, Fulani political elites used this new situation to promote the conversion of the conquered Jallonke aristocracy.

However, historiographical focus is silent on the question of the legitimacy of enslaving the Jallonke and pastoral Fulani populations. To challenge the legitimacy of enslaving the Jallonke Muslim population, it is important to assess the reasoning behind internal enslavement. What motivated the enslavement of non-Fulani and Pulli converts? Was there any doctrinal justification? The doctrinal interpretation of Sharia law strictly forbids any Muslim from enslaving a fellow Muslim. Therefore, the motivation for creating internal social divisions under Muslim Fulani rule was linked to the rising demand for slave labor in agriculture, and since they were located in the hinterlands, it was also strategic for Futa's long-distance trade with Freetown. The Fulani Muslim elites' effort to manipulate conversion was aimed at Islamizing non-Muslims and creating a peaceful society. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the Muslim world struggled with the illegality of enslaving fellow Muslims and applying pressure on non-Muslims. The Islamic doctrinal stance on slavery, based on the Sunnah and the Quran and adopted in the 17th and 18th centuries, was difficult for Muslim communities to accept because of the global economic conditions. The Futa Imamate did not always follow these doctrinal principles regarding the treatment of prisoners of war, as clearly illustrated in the work of Fisher and the school of law.

While the school of law varied somewhat in details of the correct treatment to be accorded to prisoners of war, there were six principal alternatives: execution, usually only in exceptional circumstances; ransom; exchange against Muslim prisoners; and the *jizya*.²

In this situation, there emerged a change of dependency in which Fulanis were well positioned to exploit the labour of the agriculturists.³ The intensification of the slave trade resulted in the massive enslavement of the Jallonke and the creation of a slave settlement called *Runde*. The Fulani clerics utilized the slave settlements as sources of domestic labour to facilitate their devotion and clerical studies.⁴ Therefore, this condition facilitated the clerical concentration on the promotion and production of religious scholarship, which generated clerical competence and, later, the discovery of Fulani literature.⁵

The most important social institution that emerged was the *roundé* - a village of conquered Djallonkés often referred to as a "slave village". The number of its inhabitants (*rimaibé*) might vary from 200 to over 1,000, all producing for the benefit of the Fulani overlords. They comprised a large percentage of the population, being held down by the Fulani minority.⁶

² Fisher, Allan G. B. and Humphrey J. Fisher, *Slavery and Muslim Society in Africa*. p. 18.

³ Rodney, Walter. *Jihad and Social Revolution in Futa Djallon in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 277.

⁴ Martin Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule in West Africa*, p. 45.

⁵ Bernard Salvaing, "Colonial Rule and Fula Literature in Futa Jallon (Guinea)." *Sudanic Africa* 15 (2004), p. 111.

⁶ Rodney, Walter. "Jihad and Social Revolution in Futa Djallon in the Eighteenth Century." pp. 277-288.

The craftsmen included workers involved in iron. Cloth and leather were distinguished from rimaibe, the inhabitants of slave villages. They also lived in their own village and, as an endogamous group, they were compensated for their labor. Under Fulani dominance, the previous Jallonke hereditary chiefs and nobility, called Satige under Jallonke rule, were not free as craftsmen. Instead, they supervised agricultural production for their new Fulani overlords. The new Fulani converts were free and granted all the privileges available to citizens. There were rural Fulani, Pulli, who were professional pastoralists managing herds as clients of Fulani elites. In the social hierarchy, they were known as “Foulbe Bourouri” or “cow Fulani”.

Politically, the consolidation of the Muslim theocratic regime required structural transformation as a precondition to illustrate eminent Muslim dominance over the erstwhile Jallonke Kafu regime. The condition forced the regime of Karamoko Alfa to create a new political structure dominated by a handful of wealthy interrelated Fulani families.⁷ The Fulani Muslim regime instituted an elaborate administrative system centred on the observance of strict adherence to Islamic doctrinal law. At the initial formation of the Islamic theocracy, the Almamy was elected as the “Commander of the faithful”.⁸

The constitution of Futa gave the right to the chief of the province of Kollade to crown the Almamy. The constitutional mandate conferred the right of prominent Fulani families in the state administration of Futa. Under the theocratic dispensation, the provincial chief of Fugumba had the constitutional mandate and powers to consecrate the Almamy and served as the Jurist and supreme guardian of the laws of Futa Imamate. They supervised and ensured that the strict prescription of Sharia law was observed in the governmental and socio-political life of Futa. The right to furnish the insignia of Almamy was given to the province of Buria. The remaining heads of the four quarters within the jurisdiction of Timbo had the constitutional powers to nominate. Fagumba was the religious centre where the assembly of the council of learned jurists and nine provincial leaders constrained the power of the Almamy based in the administrative capital of Timbo.⁹

Conceptually, politics is analyzed as a phenomenon of conflict, and constitutes the ability of people to design a power structure that may function to serve the overall interest of the dominant faction, and may be disadvantageous to other individuals who are affected by the dominant force.¹⁰ The Fulani Jihadists in Futa Jallon were motivated by the Islamic concept of creating a single unified political entity to thwart collective insecurity, deprivation, and constant warfare. The concept demonstrates the need for Muslims to create an abode of peace under a single ruler who could be an individual, the Caliph, the deputy, or a successor of the Prophet in both religious and political functions.¹¹

The rise of Fulani Muslims as the new dominant political and economic power in Futa Jallon allowed Fulani clerics to develop new political structures and power relations to strengthen their position strategically for the Atlantic trade. Karamoko Alfa governed the state of Futa according to the doctrinal standards. After Muslim dominance was established, his main focus was to pacify and stabilize the entire Futa Jallon region for lasting security as a prerequisite for religious practice. Under Karamoko Alfa, Futa did not attempt any major territorial expansion until he died in 1751.

He death of Karamoko Alfa and the rise of the Soriya party in 1751 marked the start of political upheaval in the Futa Jallon region. It also signifies the end of the rule of the religious leader of the Jihad, who was succeeded by the Commander-in-Chief of the army. The new leader was Ibrahim Sori Mawdo. The new Almamy was known for his military strength and desire for worldly wealth. When he took the throne of Futa in the mid-1700s, his goal was to launch a military campaign aimed at capturing many prisoners and loot. The demand for captives was a key part of the Futa Imamate’s political economy.

The new Almamy recognized that Karamoko and the jurists of Futa’s theocracy were dedicated to strictly applying Islamic law, which limited the manipulation of Islam for economic gain. Importantly, his expansionist plans aimed to give the Imamate control over trade between Futa Jallon and the coast. Second, the period coincided with the intensification of the slave trade as the dominant economic activity on the West African coast. Since Futa Jallon was strategically located between the hinterland and the coast, a military expedition was necessary for territorial expansion, centered on gaining political legitimacy and hegemony over neighboring states. Futa became politically well-positioned to forcefully direct the entire trading caravan bound for the coast to pass through Futa Jallon and surrender a percentage of their profits. The apparent motivation that prompted the Futa Imamate to undertake a series of military campaigns was not driven by a desire to facilitate the widespread Islamization of neighboring states dominated by non-Muslims. Instead, it was fueled by a global economic phenomenon understood in the context of the slave trade. Therefore, the massive influx of captives into Futa Jallon was to meet the domestic demand and supply for the coastal markets. From its founding, the Futa Imamate derived revenue from the sale of prisoners. In the late eighteenth century, the Muslim state of Futa

⁷ Barry, Boubacar. *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*, p. 97.

⁸ Rodney, Walter. *Jihad and Social Revolution in Futa Djallon in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 279.

⁹ Klein, Martin. *Slavery and Colonial Rule in West Africa*, p. 46.

¹⁰ Clapham, Martin. “Africa and the International System.” *The Politics of State Survival*, p. 8

¹¹ Turner Johnson, James. *The Tradition on Jihad of the Sword, Counter-Narratives, and Policy: Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 98, No. 4 (2015), p. 441.

intensified its slave raiding. According to Thomas Watt, the Co-Almamy of the province of Timbo, the administrative capital of Futa Imamate, demonstrated that their intense pursuit of slaves was to enable Fulani aristocrats to acquire European goods.¹² The new Almamy recognized that Karamoko and the jurists of Futa's theocracy were committed to strictly enforcing Islamic law, which limited the exploitation of Islam for economic gain. His expansionist plans aimed to establish the Imamate's control over trade between Futa Jallon and the coast. This period also coincided with the intensification of the slave trade, which had become the dominant economic activity along the West African coast. Given that Futa Jallon was strategically positioned between the interior and the coast, a military expedition was deemed necessary for territorial expansion, focusing on gaining political legitimacy and hegemony over neighboring states.

Futa was well-positioned to compel the entire trading caravans destined for the coast to pass through Futa Jallon, requiring them to surrender a percentage of their profits. The motivation behind the Futa Imamate's series of military campaigns was not primarily a desire to spread Islam among neighboring non-Muslim states. Instead, it was driven by a global economic phenomenon related to the slave trade. Consequently, the significant influx of captives into Futa Jallon was meant to fulfill the domestic demand for the coastal markets.

Futa was strategically positioned to require all trading caravans headed for the coast to pass through Futa Jallon, compelling them to surrender a portion of their profits. The motivation behind the Futa Imamate's military campaigns was not primarily to spread Islam among neighboring non-Muslim states. Rather, it was driven by a global economic phenomenon linked to the slave trade. As a result, the significant influx of captives into Futa Jallon aimed to meet the local demand for the coastal markets.

Since its founding, the Futa Imamate has generated revenue from the sale of prisoners. By the late eighteenth century, the Muslim state of Futa intensified its slave raids. According to Thomas Watt, the Co-Almamy of the province of Timbo, the administrative capital of the Futa Imamate, the aggressive pursuit of slaves was intended to enable Fulani aristocrats to obtain European goods.

The critical condition that drove change in West Africa and Senegambia was linked to the dynamics of the global system. In the mid-eighteenth century, major polities in Southern Senegambia had to adapt to the demands of European capitalist nations. This changing situation prompted existing states to mobilize resources thoroughly to strengthen their position for effective control of the market. In this context, political autonomy with strong military capabilities alone was not enough to give states the sufficient means to gain greater control over the markets. Ibrahima Sori Maudo, the successor of the first Almamy, saw an opportunity for territorial expansion through the conquest of neighboring countries and manipulated tactical alliances, such as with the king of Solimana, to avoid the potential threat posed by Konde Burama, the king of Sankaran. The tradition of the Fulani of Futa Jallon explains the justification for militarizing the Imamate of Futa as a way to facilitate conquest against non-Muslim states for mutual security from external threats. This Fulani tradition generally points to Islamic factors as the main motivation for the initial expansion of Futa. However, it is also clear that the atmosphere in the mid-eighteenth century required states to make rational choices to adapt to new conditions, either to maximize their participation or risk opening their kingdoms to insecurity.

Futa Imamate and the Rise of the Atlantic Slave Trade

Scholarly debate that focuses on Africa's participation in the Atlantic trade as voluntary is not relevant in the context of West Africa and Southern Senegambia. To reaffirm its regional influence within the Atlantic trade framework, the imamate of Futa shifted its focus from upholding the Islamic ideal of a theocratic state led by a learned jurist. Instead, it became a powerful militarized state dominated by a military aristocracy. This structural change was driven by European merchants' preference for slaves over Futa's non-slave goods, such as gold, ivory, and hides. This marked the beginning of the slave trade as a key part of Futa Imamate's political economy. The new development gave Imamate a predatory character, masked by religion. In this context, proponents of the predatory state theory identify the slave trade as essential to the state economy. Thus, creating internal conditions for systematic exploitation was crucial. This led to increased social stratification, mainly headed by territorial kings, wealthy merchants, bureaucrats supporting elite power, and professional soldiers. Influenced by this new economic reality, Ibrahima Sori Mawdo asserted the authority of the military over the religious faction. To limit popular and peer oversight of his illegal and excessive raids for captives by the council of learned jurists at Fugunba, Ibrahim Sori Mawdo aggressively suppressed his opponents within the council and replaced the administrative structure to favor himself, as vividly described by Rodney.

When summoned to Fugumba in 1763, Sori turned up with an armed force and executed his opponents on the council. He reconstituted the council to his own liking, and the council thereupon sanctioned his position as Almami.¹³

Since the new structure became strategically advantageous for acquiring slaves for the coastal markets of the Upper Guinea Coast, slave raiding and the sale of captives, which made Ibrahim Sori extremely rich, opened the Imamate of Futa to internal and

¹² Rodney, Walter. *Jihad and Social Revolution in Futa Djalón in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 281.

¹³ Walter Rodney, *Jihad and Social Revolution in Futa Djalón in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 80.

external threats. The new political condition created in Futa Jallon was a direct result of the global demand that heavily influenced the survival of states in the eighteenth century.¹⁴ During this period, states were required to expand the scope of their territorial control to create a bifurcated state. Consequently, the conquered territories of the non-Muslim neighbors offered the Muslim aristocracy of Futa the opportunity to obtain captives in exchange for European goods.¹⁵

State authorities exercise effective governance over the territories assigned to them. These territories are, in turn, legitimately governed by them because their population recognizes that they are privileged with their entitlements as citizens of the state concerned, and the government of that state serves as the binding force of the population through a legal framework. "The recognition of their statehood both internally by their populations and externally by other states entitles the governments of the state in their internal and external transactions."¹⁶ The emergence of a new administrative dispensation dominated by military aristocracy reinforced aristocratic and elite exploitation, which caused political crises accelerated by internal social discontent among a majority of the ordinary free persons and slaves. The period also coincided with the establishment of Muslim reform movements and new religious centers. As the Fulani elites transformed themselves into a military aristocracy and engaged in slave raiding and pillaging, the Jahanke clerical movement, headed by Salim Gassama, seized the advantage of social discontent against the militancy of the Fulani Muslims and embarked on peaceful conversion of the coastal populations.¹⁷ Futa Jallon Imamate and the Fulani aristocrats' initial militancy, organized to extirpate the despotic Jallonke hegemony and replace it with the Islamic theocracy, led to successful pacification, which was significant for harmony and political progress.

However, with the rise of the global capitalist demand for slave labour, the acquisition of captives became an important source of wealth for interior states. Consequently, political and administrative functions, which were people-driven, had become state-driven administration. Futa Jallon, under the military regime, shifted its attention from religion to wealth accumulation.¹⁸ The strict adherence to Islamic doctrinal law in the administration of the theocracy was never observed. The new regime failed to measure up to the ideal of statehood centered on Islamic theocracy. Since the regime was dominated by military elites whose ambition was to plunder and constrain the participation of learned jurists, they circumscribed peer and popular constraints and restraints. This provoked an open rebellion organized by the Hubu Islamic movement led by Muhammad Juhe. The movement radically challenged the religious, political, and social status quo under the declining Futa Imamate.¹⁹

CONCLUSION

Economic factors have been a neglected issue as far as the oral tradition of the subject of Muslim militancy within the framework of the eighteenth and nineteenth century economic change is concerned. However, conceptualizing the dynamics of global system offers us the opportunity to rationalize that global capitalism, which constituted the global capitalist class categories of core capitalist class and pre-capitalist African periphery in the nineteenth century, situates the conception that economic change centred on European capitalist demand became a driving force in dictating and influencing social, political and economic phenomena in West Africa and Futa Jallon in particular. Thus, political consolidation through theocracy generated a strategic production system that counterbalanced the Atlantic slave trade. The study found that: whereas, prior to the 18th century, non-Muslim early settlers such as the Jallonke, Susu and the Soninke were the dominant political elite, by the 18th century and specifically after the abolition of slave trade across the Atlantic, Muslim minority groups such as the Fulani, and the Mandinka rose to seize the political space from the non-Muslim Jallonke due to three factors: (a) The liberalization of trade which post-abolition policy of Britain engendered, (b) The inclusiveness of legitimate trade which replaced the slave trade and which permitted the hitherto oppressed people of the region to become active participants in legitimate commerce, and (c) the use of Islam and Islamic proselytization as a weapon of mass mobilization against indigenous non-Muslim rule. Thus, it is clearly confirmed that Islamic militancy developed in Senegambia strictly as a religious movement by puritans who wrestled economic power and control from the Fulani in Futa from the Susu and Jallonke. The study also found that, with their increased liberal participation in legitimate commerce, the Muslim populations of both Futa Jallon became so strong as to mobilize capital for the acquisition of guns and other weapons from the coast, with which they set up several private armies and, thereafter, consolidated their hegemony on the whole of Futa Jallon. Thus, it can be said from these findings that Islamic militancy was used to create a new economic and social class in Futa. This class, which was wholly Muslim and predominantly Fulani, founded a theocracy based on Orthodox Islam known as Whabiyya.

¹⁴ Interview with Omar Jallow, 51, 25th March, 2019, Guinea Trader Residence in Brikama Kombo Central, West Coast Region, The Gambia.

¹⁵ This is elucidated in the work of John Mathew, *A Voyage to the River Sierra Leone* (1788), p.52-88, Rodney, p. 81

¹⁶ Christopher Clapham, *Africa and the International System: The Politics of State Survival*.

¹⁷ Sanneh, Lamin. *Beyond Jihad: the Pacificist Tradition in West African Islam*, p. 178.

¹⁸ Touray,Ensa. *The Rise of Futa Imamate and the Battle of Kansala*, Video Documentary, University of The Gambia Socio-Historical Fact- Finder Society, 2016.

¹⁹ Barry,Boubacar. *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*, pp. 154-155.

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