



## The Impact of Islam on Pre-Colonial Diplomatic Relations between the Sokoto Caliphate and Neighbouring States

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**Abstract.** This research explores the influence of Islam on diplomatic interactions between the Sokoto Caliphate and its neighbouring states during the nineteenth century Jihad. The primary aim is to investigate how Islamic principles, legal frameworks, and scholarly connections influenced foreign relations, alliances, and conflict resolution between Sokoto and other Hausa land such as Zauzau, Kano, Rano, Katsina, Daura and other Hausa States. The study utilizes a qualitative historical approach, drawing upon primary materials including correspondence from the caliphate, chronicles from the emirates, and records from the Sokoto archives, alongside secondary literature from existing academic work. Textual and content analyses were performed to interpret diplomatic communications, religious decrees, and reports from emissaries in order to pinpoint Islamic tenets that guided diplomatic engagements. Results indicate that Islam acted not only as a spiritual foundation but also as a diplomatic tool that validated authority, governed warfare through the jihad concept, and enabled peaceful resolutions. Clerical intermediaries and written exchanges developed a shared diplomatic language, while a common Islamic identity opened paths for forming alliances and negotiating autonomy. Nonetheless, in certain instances, religious principles were set aside in favour of political interests, as demonstrated by Sokoto's practical interactions with non-Muslim neighbours. The conclusion highlights that Islam equipped the Sokoto Caliphate with both normative legitimacy and institutional mechanisms that transformed pre-colonial interstate dynamics in the central Sudan. The paper suggests that modern African nations reconsider the ethical aspects of Islamic diplomatic traditions such as justice, accountability, and peaceful conflict resolution to enhance contemporary methods of resolving disputes, fostering regional cooperation, and engaging in interfaith dialogue.

**Keywords:** Conflict Resolution, Interstate Relations, Islamic Diplomacy, Sokoto Caliphate, Pre-Colonial West Africa,

### 1. Introduction

The nineteenth century saw the rise of the Sokoto Caliphate as a significant Islamic state in West Africa. Founded through the jihad initiated by Uthmān dan Fodio between 1804 and 1808, the Caliphate quickly evolved from a reformist movement into a vast political and religious confederation covering large areas of what is now northern Nigeria, Niger, and parts of Cameroon. At its peak, Sokoto represented not just a political organization but also a moral and religious authority rooted in Islamic law (*sharī'ah*), supported by a vibrant community of scholars, clerics, and administrators. Although considerable scholarly focus has been placed on the internal governance, intellectual landscape, and social reforms of the Caliphate, there has been comparatively less examination of how Islam influenced its external relations with neighbouring states and groups during the pre-colonial era. In pre-colonial Africa, diplomatic relations were frequently influenced by kinship connections, trade routes, and military strength. Nevertheless, the emergence of Sokoto added new dimensions to inter-state relations by embedding diplomacy within Islamic principles of justice, legitimacy, and communal identity. (Abba 2023)

The rulers of the Caliphate engaged with neighbouring states using a shared religious language that highlighted ideas such as *ummah* (community of believers), *jihād* (legitimate struggle), and the distinction between *dār al-islām* and *dār al-ḥarb*. These concepts were not simply theoretical but served as practical instruments for forming alliances, settling disputes, and justifying territorial expansion. The methods of communication through letters, the sending of emissaries, and the mediation by religious

scholars became essential ways in which Sokoto interacted with its neighbors, particularly Borno, Kano, Katsina, and Gobirawa. The correspondence between Muhammad Bello, the second Caliph, and Muhammad al-Kanemi of Borno exemplifies the pivotal role of Islam in diplomatic communications. Their exchanges showcase a negotiation not only regarding territorial dominance but also concerning religious legitimacy, as each leader referenced Qur'anic precepts and prophetic traditions to substantiate his authority. Likewise, Sokoto's interactions with Hausa emirates illustrated how Islamic law and scholarly mediation enabled the integration of various polities into a broader caliphate framework. Anchoring its diplomacy in Islamic principles, Sokoto achieved a balance between military might and moral influence, ensuring both compliance and negotiated independence for its subjects and allies. (Abdussalam, 2024)

This study aims to explore the degree to which Islam shaped the diplomatic practices of the Sokoto Caliphate during the pre-colonial period. It was attempted to pinpoint the religious doctrines, institutional frameworks, and intellectual traditions that informed Sokoto's external relations while also recognizing the practical compromises that emerged whenever political circumstances clashed with religious convictions. Methodologically, this research adopts a qualitative historical approach, utilizing caliphate correspondence, Sokoto archival materials, emirate chronicles, and published works by the Caliphate's scholars, in addition to the secondary literature provided by historians of West Africa. Through textual analysis, the study reveals how religious concepts were actualized in diplomatic actions. The importance of this research lies in its contribution to understanding the nuances of diplomacy in African history, not only as a quest for power but also as a negotiation of values and legitimacy. Contextualizing Sokoto's diplomatic practices within the wider tradition of Islamic political thought and action, the research emphasizes the ways in which African states interacted with global religious trends innovatively and adaptively. Examining the Islamic elements of Sokoto's external relations illuminates the lasting impact of religion on shaping political interactions in West Africa a phenomenon that continues to influence current discussions on governance, peace-building, and interfaith dialogue. In conclusion, the diplomatic pursuits of the Sokoto Caliphate demonstrate that Islam functioned not merely as a spiritual influence but also as a viable framework for organizing political relationships. (Abubakar 2024)

## 2. Conceptual Framework

For this study, the framework is centered on the interplay of Islam as a normative framework, diplomacy as a political activity, and the relationships between states in pre-colonial West Africa. These elements together elucidate how religion, politics, and interstate interactions were interconnected in the external relations of the Sokoto Caliphate. Islam transcends mere personal devotion, operating also as a socio-political framework that offers principles for governance, justice, and engagement with both Muslim and non-Muslim populations. Islamic concepts, such as *ummah* (the community of believers), *jihad* (the legitimate struggle), and the classification of the world into *dār al-islām* (the abode of Islam) and *dār al-ḥarb* (the abode of war) formed the ideological underpinning of Sokoto's foreign policy. The Qur'an and Hadith, along with the works of scholars like Uthmān dan Fodio, Muhammad Bello, and Abdullahi dan Fodio, conferred legitimacy and moral authority to Sokoto's diplomatic approaches. Consequently, Islam acted as a guiding principle that shaped both the manner and substance of diplomatic exchanges. (Aliyu, & Sama'ila, 2021)

### 2.1 Islam as a Normative Framework

Exploring the influence of Islam on pre-colonial diplomacy in the Sokoto Caliphate, one must first understand Islam as a normative system. Norms are the fundamental principles, values, and regulations that shape social and political interactions. Within the context of Sokoto, Islam provided both spiritual guidance and legal and political frameworks that influenced how rulers, scholars, and communities interacted with one another and with external entities. Islamic principles promoted justice (*'adl*), accountability, consultation (*shūrāh*), and peaceful mediation, which were directly relevant to the practice of diplomacy. The Qur'an and Hadith established guidelines for relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims, matters of war and peace, treaties, and the sacred nature of agreements. These concepts were not mere theoretical constructs; they were put into practice through the contributions of Sokoto's prominent scholars. For example, Uthmān dan Fodio noted in his writings that rulers should base their authority on Islamic legitimacy, while Muhammad Bello and Abdullahi dan Fodio produced rulings and communications that connected political authority to religious duty. (Faruk, 2024)

The classification of the world into *dār al-islām* (house of Islam) and *dār al-ḥarb* (house of war) provided a framework for how Sokoto identified its

neighbors and organized its diplomatic relations. Muslim states were perceived as part of a larger *ummah* (community of believers), which fostered alliances, mutual acknowledgment, and mediation based on shared religious identity. In contrast, interactions with non-Muslim neighbors were often framed in terms of jihad, tribute, or conditional treaties, though these were tempered by practical political considerations. The role of the *'ulamā'* (Islamic scholars) was also crucial as they acted as both ethical overseers and active participants in diplomacy. They composed letters, interpreted Islamic law related to foreign relations, and acted as envoys or mediators in conflicts. This reliance on scholars highlighted that diplomacy was not merely a matter of political expediency but an extension of Islamic duty. Therefore, Islam as a normative system can be construed as the ethical and legal framework that shaped the diplomatic ideologies and practices of Sokoto. It provided a cohesive structure for legitimacy, prescribed conduct for interstate interactions, and equipped leaders with ideological and institutional resources for engaging in diplomacy. This framework ensured that Sokoto's foreign policy was fundamentally intertwined with religious principles, even as it adapted to the practical necessities of survival and growth in a competitive political landscape. (Hanafī, & Jibril, 2024)

## 2.2 Diplomacy as Political Practice

In the context of pre-colonial Africa, diplomacy encompassed more than just formal agreements; it included letters, emissary exchanges, arbitration, and the creation of tribute or alliance systems. Within the Sokoto Caliphate, the Islamic scholarly class significantly influenced diplomacy, mediating disputes, composing letters, and offering religious rationales for political choices. Correspondence between Sokoto and Borno, as well as between Sokoto and various Hausa emirates, illustrate that diplomacy involved not only political discussions but also theological arguments. Therefore, diplomacy is defined here as a practice where religion and politics converged to establish both legitimacy and practical results.

Diplomacy, in its most basic sense, pertains to the techniques and processes that political entities use to handle their external relationships. In the context of pre-colonial Africa, diplomacy was not limited to formal treaties or statecraft as understood in the European tradition. Instead, it included a variety of practices such as emissary exchanges, kinship alliances, trade discussions, religious mediation, and tribute payments. For the Sokoto Caliphate, diplomacy

served as a vital tool for enhancing authority, broadening influence, and sustaining harmonious interactions with neighbouring regions. In contrast to contemporary secular nations, diplomacy in Sokoto was intertwined with religion. Political discussions were consistently articulated within the framework of Islamic law and morals. Caliphate correspondence often began with verses from the Qur'an or Hadith, grounding political assertions in divine legitimacy. Such letters functioned not merely as methods of communication but as means of legitimization, showcasing the integration of faith and state affairs. The notable correspondence between Muhammad Bello of Sokoto and Muhammad al-Kanemi of Borno exemplifies this: while it appeared to be a discussion about political sovereignty, the exchange was framed in theological and legal terms, positioning religion as both the communicative medium and subject matter of diplomacy. (Kabiru 2021)

The practice of diplomacy was formalized through the *'ulamā'* (Islamic scholars), who acted as advisers, mediators, and envoys. Their intellectual stature provided credibility to Sokoto's diplomatic efforts, and their proficiency in Arabic facilitated the creation of formal and enduring records of negotiations. Written communication became a crucial resource, allowing Sokoto to engage across extensive distances and to sustain a consistent diplomatic influence. The deployment of emissaries also enabled the Caliphate to project its power into contested or frontier territories, often supported by offers of alliance, arbitration, or conditional autonomy. Furthermore, diplomacy in Sokoto was not only a response to events but also a proactive endeavour. It entailed the strategic incorporation of neighbouring emirates into a confederal arrangement that balanced local independence with loyalty to the Caliphate. The rulers of Sokoto commonly favoured negotiated surrender over direct conquest, employing diplomacy to legitimize power and minimize the expenses associated with war. However, when persuasion faltered, military action was framed as an extension of diplomatic engagement through jihad, reinforcing the inseparability of religion and politics. Essentially, diplomacy as a political practice in the Sokoto Caliphate represented a vibrant interaction between negotiation and coercion, along with a blend of religion and pragmatism. It was a coherent process that merged Islamic values with the practical demands of state survival, thus redefining the character of interstate relations in pre-colonial West Africa. (Mas'ud & Abdulfattah 2023)

### 3. Pre-Colonial Interstate Relations in West Africa

Prior to colonial domination, relationships between states were managed through a mixture of familial connections, commerce, military strength, and spirituality. The emergence of the Sokoto Caliphate positioned Islam as a prominent factor that transformed these relationships. Surrounding entities aligned them with Sokoto due to shared faith, pushed back through alternative claims to authority, or sought autonomy within the caliphate's framework. Consequently, this analysis views interstate interactions as ever-evolving exchanges where political authority was continually redefined through religious dialogue and diplomatic efforts. Before colonial powers arrived, the interactions among states in West Africa were influenced by a multifaceted blend of kinship, trade pathways, military capabilities, and religious beliefs. Various states and political entities across the area engaged in a fluid political environment characterized by often-leaky borders, negotiated power, and constantly changing alliances. Relations among states were seldom bound by strict treaties but rather shaped by practical agreements built on reciprocity, tribute, and mutual recognition of power.

In this context, diplomacy proved to be a crucial mechanism for orchestrating coexistence, rivalry, and collaboration. Trade played a significant role in driving interstate relationships. The trans-Saharan and regional trade routes linked different political entities, including the Hausa city-states, Borno, Oyo, and later Sokoto. Diplomatic connections commonly developed from the necessity to ensure traders' safe passage, manage tariffs, and safeguard markets. States that held control over important trade routes wielded substantial economic and diplomatic influence, which they utilized to form alliances or impose tribute obligations on neighbouring states. Kinship and matrimonial alliances constituted another essential aspect of diplomacy. Ruling classes frequently strengthened relations through inter-marriage, thereby creating overlapping allegiances and diminishing the chance of conflict. This practice, common among the Hausa states, was supplemented by the deployment of emissaries and verbal agreements to resolve disputes or formalize peace. As the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries progressed, religion increasingly became a critical element in shaping interstate relations. The proliferation of Islam throughout the Sahel and savannah regions fostered a shared identity that transcended ethnic and linguistic differences. Muslim leaders could leverage their religious legitimacy to form alliances or seek acknowledgment from

neighboring entities. In contrast, non-Muslim states often faced pressure to either accept Islamic authority or confront it militarily. The rise of the Sokoto Caliphate exemplified this transition, as it restructured conventional diplomatic practices by placing Islamic law and ideology at the forefront of its external relations. Thus, pre-colonial interstate relations in West Africa were neither chaotic nor uniform; rather, they were dynamic frameworks of negotiation mediated by trade, kinship, and increasingly, religion. (Mukhtar 2021)

The ascendance of Sokoto as a leading Islamic state introduced new benchmarks of legitimacy and re-oriented the regional diplomatic landscape around Islamic principles. In this framework, Islam acted as both a unifying element for Muslim states and a dividing factor between Islamic and non-Islamic entities, thus positioning religion as a vital component in the examination of diplomacy during this period.

### 4. Integrative Model

The framework suggests that the influence of Islam on diplomacy can be examined through three interconnected dimensions. The three outlined dimensions Islam as a guiding normative framework, diplomacy as a form of political practice, and pre-colonial interstate interactions in West Africa do not function independently. Collectively, they create a cohesive model for understanding how the Sokoto Caliphate engaged in external relations and the way Islam influenced diplomacy in the nineteenth century. On an ideological level, Islam offered the foundational principles that established legitimacy, shaped the moral language of diplomacy, and delineated acceptable behaviours within diplomatic conduct. Concepts such as *'adl* (justice), *Ummah* (community of believers), and *jihād* (legitimate struggle) were regularly referenced in letters, negotiations, and resolution of conflicts. This ideological aspect imparted a unique character to Sokoto's diplomacy, distinguishing it from the purely secular or kinship-based approaches seen in other polities. On an institutional level, the practice of diplomacy was facilitated through structures and individuals grounded in Islamic scholarship. The *'Ulamā'* acted as advisers, emissaries, and mediators, making sure that diplomatic practices maintained a link to religious authority. Written documents preserved in the Sokoto archives demonstrate how proficiency in Arabic facilitated a codified, trans-regional communication system that ensured the longevity of agreements and provided a sense of historical continuity. Institutions for tribute, arbitration, and alliances were framed by Islamic law, thus intertwining religion with the

mechanisms of foreign relations. On a practical level, diplomacy took the form of negotiation, alliance-building, and conflict resolution. The rulers of Sokoto strategically paired persuasion with coercion, favouring negotiated submissions but turning to jihad when diplomatic efforts fell short. Trade relationships, family ties, and practical alliances remained relevant but were reinterpreted within an Islamic context. For instance, interactions with Borno involved both theological discussions regarding legitimacy and practical arrangements for coexistence. (Mukhtar (2021),

Similarly, Sokoto's dealings with Hausa emirates demonstrated how diplomacy balanced local autonomy with caliphal authority. This unifying model emphasizes the interconnection of ideology, institutions, and practical application. Islam served not just as a background element but as the central framework around which diplomatic relations were organized, while political realities consistently influenced the execution of religious principles. Integrating these three dimensions, the model illustrates that Sokoto's diplomacy was both distinctly Islamic and pragmatically responsive to the socio-political landscape of pre-colonial West Africa. In conclusion, the integrative model highlights the multifaceted nature of Sokoto's external relations: diplomacy represented a spiritual obligation, an institutional framework, and a political tactic. This synthesis offers a thorough understanding of the Caliphate's impact on regional diplomacy and provides insights into the ongoing interplay between religion and politics in African statecraft.

## 5. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this research is based on three interrelated theories that elucidate the relationship between religion, power, and diplomacy in the pre-colonial Sokoto Caliphate. These theories include Islamic Political Theory, Realist Theory of International Relations, and Constructivist Theory of International Relations. Collectively, they offer a comprehensive perspective for examining the impact of Islam on diplomacy in West Africa during the nineteenth century.

### 5.1 Islamic Political Theory

Islamic Political Theory is essential for this study because it outlines how Islamic law (*sharī'ah*) and its principles influenced political authority, legitimacy, and relationships between states. Classical Islamic political philosophy categorizes the world into *dār al-islām* (the abode of Islam) and *dār al-ḥarb* (the abode

of war), offering guidelines for interactions with both Muslim and non-Muslim entities. Within this paradigm, diplomacy is regarded as a religious obligation that upholds justice (*'adl*), fosters harmonious co-existence, and protects the *ummah* (community of believers). This theory holds particular significance for the Sokoto Caliphate since Uthmān dan Fodio and his successors clearly embedded their governance and diplomatic practices within Islamic norms. Their correspondence, rulings, and agreements showcased Islamic concepts of legitimacy, jihad, arbitration, and alliances. Thus, Islamic Political Theory serves as a foundational element for comprehending Sokoto's diplomacy as an expression of religious duty rather than mere political tactics. Islamic Political Theory offers a crucial perspective for examining how Islam influenced the diplomatic relations of the Sokoto Caliphate with neighboring states. Anchored in the Qur'an, Hadith, and contributions from classical Muslim scholars, this theory asserts that political authority cannot be divorced from religious legitimacy. Governance, foreign policy, and diplomatic actions are considered not only secular duties but manifestations of divine mandate, guided by the principles of justice (*'adl*), consultation (*shūrā*), and accountability to God. (Mukhtar 2025)

A fundamental element of Islamic political thought is the bifurcation of the world into *dār al-islām* (the abode of Islam) and *dār al-ḥarb* (the abode of war). This classification established a normative framework to guide how Muslim states interacted with others. While relationships within *dār al-islām* were grounded in solidarity, mutual acknowledgment, and arbitration, engagements with *dār al-ḥarb* could involve treaties, conditional alliances, or, when required, armed conflict (*jihād*). Importantly, Islamic jurisprudence also permitted flexibility, allowing peace treaties and coexistence with non-Muslim polities when needed. The Sokoto Caliphate exemplified this theory in practice, as Uthmān dan Fodio, Muhammad Bello, and Abdullahi dan Fodio consistently based their governance and diplomatic approaches on Islamic principles. For instance, correspondence exchanged between leaders from Sokoto and Muhammad al-Kanemi of Borno demonstrated not only political negotiations but also theological discussions, where both parties cited Qur'anic verses and Islamic law to substantiate their authority and territorial assertions. The involvement of the 'Ulamā' (Islamic scholars) further supported this framework, acting as advisers, emissaries, and interpreters of the law in foreign relations. Their engagement ensured that diplomacy remained anchored in Islamic legitimacy rather than being

reduced to mere practical considerations. Islamic Political Theory also clarifies Sokoto's employment of diplomacy as a means of expansion. The Caliphate urged neighbouring Muslim emirates to align themselves with Sokoto, portraying such allegiance as a collective religious obligation to fortify the Ummah. Concurrently, interactions with non-Muslim states often took the form of conditional treaties or demands for tribute, reflecting the theory's differentiation between believers and non-believers while accommodating pragmatic co-existence. In this respect, Islamic Political Theory elucidates why Sokoto's diplomacy had a uniquely religious character and substance. It transcended mere conflict resolution or power pursuits, emphasizing the adherence to divine governance principles and the extension of Islam's moral reach. Consequently, the theory lays the groundwork for understanding Sokoto's foreign relations as an amalgamation of religious responsibility and political necessity. (Murtala, 2025)

## 5.2 Realist Theory of International Relations

The Realist theory, which is based on power dynamics, highlights the quest for survival, security, and control within a disordered international landscape. While its origins lie in the modern West, Realism provides valuable perspectives on pre-colonial African diplomacy, where states vied for territory, resources, and authority. From a Realist viewpoint, Sokoto's diplomatic actions alliances, tributary systems, and military expansion were methods to strengthen its influence and secure dominance in the central Sudan. Realism elucidates why Sokoto occasionally prioritized political practicality over Islamic principles. For instance, although the Caliphate advocated for unity among Muslim states, it still engaged in power conflicts with Borno, despite their common faith. Additionally, pragmatic agreements with non-Muslim neighbours illustrated that the need for survival and supremacy sometimes took precedence over purely religious factors. Thus, Realism provides a balanced framework for understanding that Sokoto's diplomacy was influenced by both its faith and the imperatives of power politics. (Sabo, 2025)

The Realist Theory of International Relations serves as a second significant framework for examining the pre-colonial diplomacy of the Sokoto Caliphate. Grounded in the thoughts of classical philosophers like Thucydides and Machiavelli, as well as more recent scholars such as Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz, Realism underscores the importance of power, survival, and self-interest in the interactions between states. It posits that the international scene is anarchic,

meaning there is no supreme authority above states, leading each political entity to depend on its resources for survival. From a Realist perspective, diplomacy functions primarily as an instrument of power politics: states engage in negotiations, forge alliances, and at times resort to warfare to safeguard their security and extend their influence. Ethical or religious factors are frequently secondary to the principal aim of dominance and achieving a balance of power. This theoretical viewpoint is particularly effective in illustrating how the Sokoto Caliphate, although deeply rooted in Islamic belief, also operated within a competitive political landscape where military prowess, economic control, and strategic partnerships were essential for survival.

The historical trajectory of Sokoto exemplifies these Realist principles. Following its swift ascent after Uthmān dan Fodio's jihad, the Caliphate faced persistent challenges from neighbouring entities, including Borno and various Hausa factions. While Sokoto often framed its conquests and diplomatic endeavours in Islamic terms, its strategies predominantly reflected a Realist approach to power consolidation. For instance, Sokoto was willing to engage in military campaigns when neighbouring powers resisted incorporation. Likewise, even in its dealings with Muslim states like Borno, Sokoto participated in intense competition for territorial dominance and legitimacy, demonstrating that the drive for security could sometimes eclipse religious unity. Realism also accounts for Sokoto's practical dealings with non-Muslim neighbours. Although Islamic law set a framework for relations with non-believers, Sokoto frequently entered into conditional treaties, alliances, or tributary agreements with these states. Such arrangements, while not completely congruent with strict Islamic ideals, represented a realist strategy to reduce military conflict and protect strategic interests, particularly in regard to trade routes and border security. However, the application of Realism to Sokoto presents certain limitations. Unlike contemporary secular states, Sokoto was an explicitly religious entity, and its leaders consistently framed political choices in Islamic terminology. Viewing its diplomacy solely through a Realist perspective may obscure the moral and theological motivations that were genuinely integral to its identity. Nonetheless, Realism remains significant for showcasing the conflict between religious values and political needs, demonstrating how Sokoto fused Islamic legitimacy with power-oriented tactics to navigate a precarious regional landscape. In conclusion, the Realist Theory of International Relations provides insights into the diplomatic conduct of the Sokoto Caliphate as part of a larger contest for survival and dominance in pre-

colonial West Africa. It highlights how the Caliphate reconciled its Islamic beliefs with pragmatic power considerations, thereby emphasizing the complex nature of its diplomacy, anchored in religious inspiration while also politically strategic. (Suwaiba & Atiku, (2021)

### 5.3 Constructivist Theory of International Relations

Constructivism posits that international relations are influenced not only by physical power but also by ideas, norms, and identities. This framework is particularly effective in explaining how Islam served as a common identity that transformed interstate relations in West Africa. Constructivism illustrates how the Caliphate and its neighboring entities interpreted and reinterpreted religious concepts during their diplomatic interactions. For instance, the communication between Muhammad Bello of Sokoto and Muhammad al-Kanemi of Borno was not simply a political negotiation but also a struggle over religious authority and identity. Both leaders utilized Islamic texts to validate their power, highlighting how beliefs and norms shaped diplomatic relations. Thus, Constructivism aids in understanding diplomacy as a socially constructed practice grounded in shared meanings rather than merely material interests.

The Constructivist Theory of International Relations provides an additional and complementary perspective for analyzing the influence of Islam on the Sokoto Caliphate's diplomacy with surrounding states. Emerging in the late 20th century through contributions from scholars like Alexander Wendt, Constructivism contests the materialist bases of Realism and Liberalism by asserting that international relations are socially constructed. States act not solely out of material self-interest; their behavior is influenced by ideas, identities, beliefs, and shared norms. Central to Constructivism is the idea that "anarchy is what states make of it." This suggests that the international system holds no inherent meaning; instead, states craft their actions based on their perceptions of themselves and others. Therefore, norms and identities are vital in diplomacy, as they outline what is viewed as legitimate, acceptable, or possible in the interactions among political entities. When applied to the Sokoto Caliphate, Constructivism sheds light on how Islam was more than just a legal or ideological structure; it constituted a shared identity that influenced attitudes, practices, and interactions. The Caliphate saw itself as the leader of the ummah in the region, and this self-identification affected its diplomatic behaviour. Relationships with neighbouring Muslim states involved more than

competition for power; they also encompassed negotiations over religious legitimacy. This concept is highlighted in the notable correspondence between Sultan Muhammad Bello of Sokoto and Sheikh Muhammad al-Kanemi of Borno, where both leaders cited Qur'anic injunctions and Islamic law to substantiate their political claims. The discourse was more than a political rivalry; it represented a clash over religious significance and identity. Constructivism also provides insight into Sokoto's interaction with non-Muslim states. Treaties, tribute agreements, or requests for conversion were articulated as efforts to extend the moral and religious order of Islam. Even when political necessity dictated compromise, the diplomatic language remained entrenched in religious norms. This underscores how identities and ideas impacted the formation of relationships beyond mere material considerations. (Tambari 2025)

Constructivism elucidates the role of the 'ulamā' (Islamic scholars) in diplomacy. Acting as guardians of religious knowledge, they bolstered the normative structure of interstate relations. Their participation in writing letters, resolving conflicts, and validating treaties illustrates how norms and ideas were integrated into Sokoto's diplomatic practices. However, Constructivism also emphasizes the evolving nature of these norms. Identities and shared interpretations were not fixed; they were debated and redefined over time. For example, while Sokoto aimed to represent itself as the unifying power for West African Muslims, neighbouring states frequently contested this assertion, presenting alternative views of Islamic legitimacy. Such contestation exemplifies the Constructivist notion that international relations are perpetually shaped by dialogue and negotiation. In summary, the Constructivist Theory of International Relations is instrumental in comprehending the non-material aspects of Sokoto's diplomacy. It demonstrates that Islam was not just a backdrop for political maneuvering but an active and developing identity that influenced diplomatic norms, practices, and results. (Tambari 2025)

### 5.4 Integrating the Three Theories

By combining these three viewpoints, this research steers clear of a simplistic explanation of Sokoto diplomacy. Islamic Political Theory offers the normative basis; Realism emphasizes the importance of power and survival; and Constructivism sheds light on the impact of shared religious identities and norms. Collectively, these perspectives illustrate that Sokoto's diplomatic approach was a mixed system driven by Islamic principles, influenced by struggles for power, and upheld by common norms that guided

communication and negotiation. The theoretical structure of this research does not depend on a singular perspective, but rather brings together Islamic Political Theory, Realism, and Constructivism to deliver a comprehensive understanding of how Islam influenced pre-colonial diplomacy in the Sokoto Caliphate. Each theory underscores various aspects of interstate relations, and in combination, they provide a richer, more nuanced analysis.

### **5.5 Normative Foundation (Islamic Political Theory).**

Islamic Political Theory illustrates the ideological and religious foundations of Sokoto's diplomatic efforts. It demonstrates that relationships between states were not handled in a secular or purely practical manner but were rooted in the Qur'an, Hadith, and Islamic law. This perspective shows that the foreign policy of the Sokoto Caliphate was seen as a manifestation of divine will, where leaders aimed to safeguard and enlarge the ummah (Muslim Community). This accounts for the significant reliance on Islamic texts in diplomatic letters and the involvement of scholars in validating treaties, mediations, and even expansionist conflicts. The theory highlights the moral and religious context that rendered Sokoto's diplomacy uniquely Islamic.

### **5.6 Power and Survival (Realist Theory).**

While Islam offered moral guidance, the Sokoto Caliphate also faced a competitive and often adversarial regional landscape. A realist perspective shows that Sokoto's diplomatic efforts involved strategic decisions aimed at survival, expansion, and dominance. In spite of its religious principles, Sokoto engaged in warfare, required tribute, and at times made practical compromises with non-Muslim neighbors to ensure trade routes and control over territories. This viewpoint underscores the practical limitations that compelled Sokoto to balance its ideology with the quest for power. Ignoring this realist aspect would risk depicting Sokoto's diplomacy as solely idealistic and failing to recognize its strategic pragmatism.

### **5.7 Norms and Identities (Constructivist Theory)**

Constructivism enhances these viewpoints by illustrating how Islam functioned not merely as a collection of regulations, but as a common identity and normative framework that influenced relationships between states. The conflicts between Sokoto and Borno, for example, were as much centered on differing understandings of Islam as they were on political competition. Constructivism elucidates how

norms, beliefs, and social constructs affected the interactions Sokoto had with both its Muslim and non-Muslim neighbors. It also emphasizes the significance of scholars and religious discourse in shaping legitimacy, alliances, and opposition. (Tambari, 2025)

## **6. Research Methodology**

This research utilizes a qualitative historical approach to investigate the influence of Islam on diplomatic interactions among the Sokoto Caliphate and its neighbouring states prior to colonial rule. The methodology is rooted in the interpretive framework, which prioritizes the comprehension of human actions, institutions, and events within their cultural and historical settings. Given that this inquiry resides at the nexus of history, religion, and politics, qualitative methods facilitate a deeper examination and interpretation of texts, archival resources, and existing literature. Research Framework The study adopts a historical-analytical framework, particularly well-suited for analyzing historical events, ideas, and institutions. This framework enables the researcher to reconstruct the diplomatic practices of the Sokoto Caliphate, follow their Islamic underpinnings, and assess their effects on interstate relations in West Africa during the nineteenth century. Merging description with interpretation, the research transcends mere retelling of events, delving into the interaction of Islam, politics, and diplomacy. Data Sources The research draws upon both primary and secondary sources. Archival materials, including letters, treaties, and correspondences of key Sokoto figures like Uthmān dan Fodio, Muhammad Bello, and Abdullahi dan Fodio. These documents offer firsthand insights into the diplomatic norms and practices:

- Arabic manuscripts maintained in Nigerian repositories, such as the National Archives Kaduna and the Arewa House collection.
- Accounts from early European explorers, missionaries, and colonial officials who recorded aspects of Sokoto's diplomatic efforts.
- Academic books, journal articles, and dissertations regarding the Sokoto Caliphate, Islamic diplomacy, and the history of pre-colonial West Africa.
- Theoretical literature on International Relations (Realism, Constructivism) and Islamic Political Thought, which supply conceptual frameworks for data interpretation.

Thorough assessment of preserved letters, treaties, and Arabic manuscripts to extract pertinent details about diplomatic principles and practices. Detailed

examination of primary texts authored by Sokoto leaders, particularly in Arabic, to pinpoint recurring themes such as jihad, legitimacy, arbitration, and alliance-building. Comprehensive exploration of secondary literature in libraries and online databases to enhance and contextualize insights gleaned from primary sources.

The data is scrutinized using qualitative content analysis, which involves identifying patterns, themes, and categories that demonstrate how Islam influenced diplomatic practices. For instance, documents are coded for mentions of religious principles (e.g., verses from the Qur'an, citations from Hadith), diplomatic tactics (e.g., negotiation, tribute, warfare), and perceptions of neighboring states. (Tambari, 2025)

### 6.1 Analysis / Discussion

The exploration of results in this research indicates that Islam significantly influenced the principles, practices, and consequences of pre-colonial diplomacy within the Sokoto Caliphate. Although political motives and economic concerns were certainly significant, the evidence suggests that Islamic values provided the primary framework through which foreign relations were understood and executed. Three key themes emerge: (1) Islam as a guiding norm, (2) diplomacy as both a religious obligation and a political tactic, and (3) the blended nature of interstate relations in pre-colonial West Africa.

The Sokoto Caliphate was founded through a reform-oriented jihad led by Uthmān dan Fodio, whose governance vision was profoundly rooted in Islamic law and ethics. This religious foundation extended into the realm of diplomatic practice. Archival records, including Arabic communications between Sokoto leaders and neighboring rulers, consistently framed diplomacy in terms of religion. Qur'anic verses, Hadith traditions, and references to established Islamic jurists were used to legitimize political authority, call for submission, or resolve conflicts. For instance, Sultan Muhammad Bello's letters to Muhammad al-Kanemi of Borno not only reflect their political rivalry but also engage in theological debate. Bello employed Islamic law to question Borno's legitimacy, while al-Kanemi countered with alternative interpretations, fostering a discourse where diplomacy was inherently linked to religious rationale. This illustrates that, unlike entirely secular states, Sokoto's diplomatic efforts were grounded in a sacred duty to maintain the cohesion and moral integrity of the ummah.

The results also indicate that diplomacy in Sokoto embodied both a religious responsibility and practical

political calculations. On one hand, Sokoto aimed to unite neighboring Muslim emirates under its governance, portraying such submission as an act of unity within the ummah. Diplomatic methods, including letters, envoys, and arbitration, were commonly employed to promote peaceful allegiance prior to using force. This approach aligned with Islamic directives to seek peaceful resolutions before engaging in conflict. Conversely, Realist factors influenced Sokoto's international policy. Despite sharing a religious identity, Sokoto was involved in power struggles with Borno and maintained tribute relationships with non-Muslim entities at its borders. Practical treaties and alliances were forged when direct conquest was not feasible, especially to safeguard trade routes and defend vulnerable frontiers. Such choices highlight the Caliphate's dual approach: while Islamic tenets supplied the moral discourse of diplomacy, power dynamics frequently dictated the results.

The investigation confirms that pre-colonial interstate relations in West Africa featured hybrid systems where religion, power, and culture converged. Sokoto's diplomacy cannot be solely analyzed through the lens of Islam or Realism; rather, it constituted a blend of normative principles and practical tactics. For example, Sokoto's communications with non-Muslim states were articulated in Islamic terms, yet the agreements typically represented mutual concessions and practical solutions. Similarly, Sokoto's disputes with Muslim neighbors illustrated how religious discourse was utilized to validate political competition. This blended nature highlights the applicability of Constructivism within the theoretical framework. Diplomatic exchanges were not merely governed by material concerns but were socially constructed through shared (and sometimes contested) Islamic values. Identities and legitimacy were continuously negotiated, as demonstrated in the discussions between Sokoto and Borno or the gradual inclusion of Hausa emirates into the Caliphate's political sphere.

The research findings also reveal both ongoing practices and unique features within Sokoto's approach to diplomacy. Continuity can be seen in the utilization of established West African traditions such as alliances, tribute, and arbitration that existed prior to Sokoto. What set the Caliphate apart, however, was its clear incorporation of these practices within Islamic teachings. In contrast to other political entities that predominantly depended on kinship or customary authority, Sokoto consistently justified its diplomatic actions through religious frameworks, creating a trans-regional system that transcended ethnic or tribal

affiliations. This uniqueness is further illustrated through the significant role of the ‘ulamā’, who played an active part in formulating treaties, advising leaders, and acting as envoys. Their involvement ensured that diplomacy transcended mere political maneuvering to encompass both scholarly and religious dimensions.

The exploration indicates that Sokoto’s diplomatic efforts challenge the notion that pre-colonial African diplomacy was solely pragmatic or simplistic. Rather, it uncovers an intricate system where religion, politics, and culture were profoundly connected. Islam not only provided legitimacy but also introduced a structured set of norms and procedures that organized interstate relationships. This insight highlights the durability of Islamic diplomacy in the area and its impact on subsequent colonial and post-colonial engagements. Simultaneously, the findings underscore the conflict between idealism and pragmatism in Sokoto’s diplomatic practices. Although religious obligations called for Muslim unity, political realities frequently led to conflict, rivalry, and compromise. This complexity reflects the intricate nature of diplomacy itself where aspirations shape behavior, yet survival influences strategy. (Uthman, 2022)

## 7. Findings / Results of the Study

The research aimed to explore how Islam impacted the diplomatic interactions of the Sokoto Caliphate with neighboring states during the pre-colonial period. Through the examination of archival documents, Arabic manuscripts, and secondary sources, several conclusions were drawn.

The primary conclusion indicates that Islam served as the normative and ideological basis for Sokoto’s diplomatic engagements. The Caliphate emerged from an Islamic reformist jihad, and its leaders consistently aligned foreign policy choices with Qur’anic directives, Prophetic teachings, and the legal reasoning of classical Muslim scholars. Documentation, agreements, and announcements frequently began with verses from the Qur’an, emphasizing that diplomacy was perceived not only as a political necessity but also as a religious obligation. This religious context set Sokoto’s diplomatic practices apart from the primarily kinship- or tradition-based diplomacy observed in other West African states.

Another important conclusion highlights the vital function of Islamic scholars (‘ulamā’) in the diplomatic sphere. The ‘ulamā’ served as advisers, scribes, envoys, and interpreters of Islamic law, ensuring that diplomatic actions adhered to Islamic

tenets. Their participation provided legitimacy to agreements, helped mediate conflicts, and offered scholarly support for political decisions. This formal incorporation of religious scholarship in diplomacy was a distinctive attribute of the Sokoto system.

The findings indicate that Sokoto implemented a dual strategy in its diplomatic approach. On one side, it emphasized peaceful negotiations, persuasion, and communication particularly with neighboring Muslim states. Diplomatic correspondence often invoked Islamic unity and sought voluntary loyalty to the Caliphate. Conversely, when peaceful means proved ineffective, Sokoto readily turned to jihad or military force. Therefore, diplomacy served both as a faith-driven initiative for unification and as a strategic mechanism for reinforcing political authority.

The study also identifies a clear differentiation in Sokoto’s diplomatic strategies toward Muslim and non-Muslim entities. For Muslim states like Borno and the Hausa emirates, diplomacy revolved around issues of legitimacy, Islamic law, and the leadership of the *ummah*, often manifested in theological dialogues and mediation. In contrast, interactions with non-Muslim communities were articulated through conditional treaties, tributary arrangements, and incentives for conversion. This bifurcated approach reflects the impact of Islamic law, which acknowledged distinctions between *dār al-islām* (the domain of Islam) and *dār al-ḥarb* (the domain of war).

In spite of its Islamic orientation, Sokoto’s diplomacy revealed notable pragmatism. Agreements with non-Muslim neighbors, acceptance of local customs, and strategic alliances demonstrate that the Caliphate navigated between religious principles and practical political considerations. For example, Sokoto occasionally permitted non-Muslim practices at its borders when enforcing Islamic law might lead to unrest. This pragmatic approach underscores the complex relationship between Islamic ideals and realist strategies in shaping Sokoto’s foreign relations. (Zayyanu, 2022)

## 8. Conclusion

This research has explored how Islam influenced pre-colonial diplomatic interactions between the Sokoto Caliphate and neighboring regions, employing Islamic Political Theory, Realist Theory, and Constructivist Theory as frameworks for analysis. The results indicate that Islam served not only as a spiritual and ethical guiding force but also as a key factor shaping diplomatic behavior, institutions, and strategies. The Sokoto Caliphate derived its legitimacy from Islamic

law and ethics, intertwining religion with both internal governance and foreign relations. A notable finding is that Sokoto's diplomatic approach was hybrid in nature. Although rooted in Islamic ideals such as justice (*'adl*), consultation (*shūrāh*), and the safeguarding of the *Ummah* (Muslim Community), it was also influenced by realist concerns of survival, security, and territorial growth. Leaders of the Caliphate frequently navigated between idealism and practicality, employing persuasion and theological reasoning when feasible, but resorting to force and conquest when necessary. Additionally, the role of the '*Ulamā*' (Islamic Scholars) as advisers, messengers, and record-keepers reinforced the religious dimension of Sokoto's diplomacy.

This institutional function ensured that diplomacy was not merely a political mechanism but also a religious endeavor, thereby setting Sokoto apart from many of its contemporaries in West Africa. Connections with Muslim states such as Borno involved intense discussions about legitimacy and authority, while interactions with non-Muslim states showcased the adaptable application of Islamic law to facilitate treaties and tributary relations. The study further concludes that Sokoto's diplomatic practices enhanced the continuity and sophistication of African diplomacy. Rather than being primitive or arbitrary, pre-colonial diplomacy in West Africa especially under Sokoto was remarkably organized, codified, and rich with cultural and religious significance. Islam offered both a shared identity and a normative framework that influenced negotiations, agreements, and alliances throughout a diverse area. In conclusion, the diplomacy of the Sokoto Caliphate underscores the relationship between faith, power, and identity. It demonstrates that religion can act not only as a moral guideline but also as a tactical asset in international relations. This duality an obligation to faith paired with political necessity shapes the legacy of Sokoto's pre-colonial diplomacy and provides perspectives on the lasting intersection of religion and politics in Africa.

## 9. Recommendations

Based on the study's findings and conclusions, the following suggestions are made:

Scholars and policymakers should acknowledge the critical role of religion, especially Islam, in influencing both historical and modern diplomacy in Africa. Simplifying pre-colonial diplomacy to merely struggle for power fails to recognize the significant impact of religious norms, texts, and institutions in shaping external relations.

Governments, universities, and research organizations should focus on the preservation, digitization, and translation of Arabic manuscripts and archival materials from Sokoto and other West African states. These resources are essential for comprehending Africa's contributions to global diplomacy and should be made more accessible to researchers.

Theoretical frameworks within International Relations ought to integrate non-Western traditions, such as Islamic Political Theory, to broaden the global discourse. The diplomatic practices of Sokoto illustrate that African and Islamic viewpoints provide valuable insights into statecraft, negotiation, and legitimacy that are still pertinent today.

Current Nigerian diplomacy can gain insights from the Sokoto example, which merges moral legitimacy with strategic pragmatism. In a world still facing conflicts stemming from religion, ethnicity, and politics, the experience of Sokoto demonstrates the potential to use shared values and dialogue as instruments for peacebuilding while remaining attuned to security concerns.

Future investigations should employ interdisciplinary methods that blend history, political science, religious studies, and international relations. This will facilitate a more thorough understanding of how religion and politics continue to influence diplomacy in Africa and beyond.

Educational programs in African history and international relations should feature in-depth examinations of the Sokoto Caliphate's diplomacy. This will not only underscore African agency in global history but also contest Eurocentric perspectives that minimize Africa's diplomatic complexity.

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