

CHAPTER 1

MY FIRST HOME

IN THE NAME OF GOD THE COMPASSIONATE,
THE MERCIFUL, I BEGIN THE STORY OF MY LIFE
AND OF THE POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT OF
NORTHERN NIGERIA THUS—

ACROSS the northwest corner of Nigeria the Sokoto River describes a vast semicircle of nearly four hundred miles, from its source near Zaria to its junction with the River Niger; a point on that mighty waterway about six hundred miles from the sea. About half-way along this flashing arc, in its green farm land and swamps, is the modern town of Sokoto. Here the river is about a quarter of a mile wide in the rains and even in the dry season carries quite a substantial volume of water. Sokoto was founded in 1809 by my distinguished great-grandfather, Sultan Bello. I will tell you about him and the circumstances of its founding later on.

About twenty miles upstream of Sokoto and on the north bank—that is, on the opposite side of the river from Sokoto—is the little town of Rabah. It was here that I was born in 1910. My father was the District Head. There are forty-eight District Heads in Sokoto Emirate and he was one of them. Only seven years had passed since the British drove out the Sultan Atahiru from his own capital, chased him across Nigeria and eventually caught up with him and his devoted followers on the borders of Bornu. Here he made a last stand, on a deserted hillside, and died fighting, far from his people and his home.

His standard was found near his body. It was folded up and taken to England. Only this year, after Independence,

was it brought back and formally restored to the present Sultan at a distinguished ceremony. It had been very well preserved and was given back in a large and handsome frame.

Native administration in its present form was, of course, in its infancy and my father and the other District Heads were feeling their way. The handful of British officers were in full control. Rabah, being so near to Sokoto, and my father being regarded as heir to the throne of Sokoto, was constantly visited by them. I do not think that there was any particular antipathy against them. It was the will of Allah that they should be there; they were not evil men and their administration was not harsh; in fact, we gained much from contact with them though, of course, the real gains were to come in later years. In those early days there were hardly any technical officers, and those available seldom left headquarters—there was so much to do there.

My father was responsible for some sixty villages in eight village areas, containing about thirty thousand people. In those days there was not very much paper work. There were lists of taxpayers for each village, for the District Heads were responsible for counting the people and for the collection of their tax, though this was in practice in the hands of the Village Heads. He was responsible to the Sultan for the suppression and prevention of crime and here again he worked through the Village Heads. There were no police in these rustic places, any more than there are now. He had to use his followers and servants to arrest criminals, and so did the Village Heads.

On the other hand there was an Alkali, a native judge, in the village. It was he who heard all cases and to him my father would hand over wrongdoers. He was a good old man and very wise in the law, but we children were frightened of him and kept out of his way. The women of the house always threatened to send us to him if we misbehaved. The court was just across the little square from our house. It was a mud building; it had great thick walls and a flat mud roof; inside it was quite plain except for a little raised dais on which the old man sat to hear his cases and to give judgement. It was possible to appeal to the

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-09268-5 - My Life
Alhaji Sir Ahmadu Bello
Excerpt
[More information](#)

Sultan in Sokoto if you didn't like the result of the case, but most people were content and didn't appeal. Anyhow, what poor man wanted to go into Sokoto and face a lot of haughty strangers round the Sultan's gateway?

Down a little lane to the left of our big entrance was the river. There were sheets of still water here; backwaters of the main river they were. On them grew pink and blue water-lilies. They were full of fish and that was very useful to us. But they were also full of mosquitoes and that was a bad thing, though we didn't realise it at the time. We thought that they were just a nuisance. We did not realise that they brought malaria in their sting.

There were canoes on the river and we used to go out whenever we could. We would swim there and play in the water when it was hot. In the rains the river came up and up, and sometimes would lap the walls of the lowest houses. It could be quite frightening then and the roar of the water was heard a long way away.

Our farms were up the valley behind the village. They were not far from where the motor road comes in now. We spent a lot of time on the farm. My father, being an important man, had many acres of land, very fertile land it was too. He wanted all the help he could get when the corn was ripening. I mean by this, guinea corn of course, and millet: we used to get wonderful crops of corn, for the ground was rich and not far above water. Even in the terrible years before 1914, when hundreds of thousands of people died of starvation, we didn't do too badly. I was too young to remember this, but I was told that for three years there had been little rain and the ground was parched and barren.

What we children really liked was the harvest. Then we cut off the heavy heads of corn—and each head could weigh a pound—and tied them in bundles to be pounded to separate the grain from the stalks; then they were winnowed and put into big leather sacks and taken back to the house to be poured into the huge granaries there. These were about ten feet high,

with a round hole in the shoulder through which a man could slip—they used to scare us by dropping us in on to the slippery corn until we screamed to be pulled out. These granaries were about six feet across at the shoulders, and when they were filled the hole was sealed with a clay plug and a little thatched roof was popped on top, just like a funny hat. By the way, they were built on big stones clear of the ground so that the white ants couldn't get into them. The grain would keep a long time in these granaries.

Then back on the farms we started cutting the thick reeds on which the corn grows. These were stacked until they were wanted; we always admired the skill of the craftsmen in the many uses they had for these reeds, making, for example, doors and beds and excellent fencing—it would even keep a goat out—and dye was made from a pigment in its skin and the leaves were used for wrapping food and so on.

The mat-makers with their sweet-smelling grass fascinated us and so did the carpenter with his simple tools. But the best of all was the blacksmith turning the cold black iron into such useful things with a few hammer blows here and there—or so it seemed to us.

When the great moon rose over the wide valley we danced, in imitation of our elders, through the nights. There were drummers and a few pipers from the village, but sometimes we got real experts from Sokoto: they were expensive but well worth it. And the men with the tame hyenas used to come and put their ugly charges through their tricks.

You must remember that all round us in the bush were many wild animals. Big hyenas came near the villages and would steal the sheep and goats if they could do so, but they never touched human beings, unless they were frightened or cornered. There were plenty of antelope of all kinds; we used to go out with the hunters to kill them. Their meat was very good. It was fun to do this, but rather a strain since we had to be so very quiet when we got near the animals, or they would run away and the hunters would say that they would never take us with

them again. But of course they did, for they were kind-hearted people. Some of them were very brave.

The hunters used to say: if you met a lion when you were alone in the bush, do this—stand quite still and then put down your weapons; move two or three paces slowly towards the lion and make obeisance on your knees. After all, he is the King of the Bush. Then you can go back and pick up your arms and the lion will take no notice of you.

They used bows and arrows and spears, and carried long knives in their belts. They had strange charms sewn up in leather to protect them from the dangers of the chase. There were other dangers than those from the animals, for they believed that the bush, or certain parts of it, was haunted by spirits, most of them evil. We were frightened of them too, but much more so of the great wind-devils that you could see sweeping across the plains, lifting great clouds of dust and even small animals and household stuff in their track.

We had to make our own amusements. There were, of course, no toys or games, so we loved the times when the story-tellers would come and sit in the dusk and tell us stories that I shall never forget.

As I have said, our house stood at the lower end of the town by the river. It had a big square entrance, with a domed roof. My father used to sit here with the elders and his personal servants. Here the affairs of the District were settled, and here the messengers from the Sultan were received.

Behind this was an irregular open compound with the horses tethered by the foot to wooden pegs driven into the ground. Beyond that again was another entrance passage, stacked with fodder for the horses, and beyond that my father's own house. Round this, and shut off from the front part of the house, were the women's quarters where my mother and the other wives lived with their children. Through all this wandered many clucking chickens, as they do to this day in many houses. My grandmother was a daughter of Dabo, Emir of Kano, and my mother was a Sokoto woman.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-09268-5 - My Life
Alhaji Sir Ahmadu Bello
Excerpt
[More information](#)

By the time I went to school—that is, when I was ten—there were ten half-brothers and fifteen half-sisters of mine in the house. My nearest half-brother, Shehu Malami, was six weeks older than I. On the whole we kept fairly well, but if one fell sick there was nothing that could be done about it, beyond the offering of prayers and drinking of water in which the correct charms had been washed. Some of the children died, but though I was sick from time to time God's destiny lay before me and I was brought through it. Of us all I now have only three half-brothers and seven half-sisters alive, mostly living in Sokoto or Rabah, or in Kaduna with me.

Just outside the town to the north was a round rest-house in its own compound with boys' houses behind it. It was here that the white officers used to stay when they came on tour. My father and his people used to go out along the road to meet the District Officer or sometimes the Resident, and to escort them in, in a fine cloud of dust raised by the many horses. Then he would come down to the house to greet my father and the villagers, and often they would go up to the rest-house and sit under the trees and discuss things.

The District Officers varied a great deal and some of them were very helpful, but some thought too much of their own position to think properly of others. They were always very keen on the tax being collected properly and, of course, the villagers thought that the reason for this was that they took a good deal of it, if not all, for themselves when it got to Sokoto. It wasn't till quite recently that the ordinary people really understood that the tax money went into the Native Treasury and was spent on the people of the area. Sometimes the District Officer would become ill and we were sorry for them, but there wasn't much that we could do. We children used to hang around in the bush outside the rest-house compound and watch everything that went on.

Complaints to the District Officer were the really funny things. In any village there are always a number of people who are dissatisfied about something or who feel they have been badly

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-09268-5 - My Life
Alhaji Sir Ahmadu Bello
Excerpt
[More information](#)

treated, though it may have been many years ago. These people think nothing of going to the D.O. and spending the whole day waiting for an interview and, indeed, in spending quite a lot of money on bribing the messengers to let them in. We naturally knew them all very well and also knew that they went every time a new D.O. came round.

Some received petitioners very courteously, but others drove them off with blows and curses. Whatever it was, they seldom got what they wanted, but that never stopped them going up again and trying it on. Mind you, sometimes there were genuine grievances and they got a fair hearing; sometimes they were taken in to Sokoto to see the Sultan. This caused a good deal of perturbation in my father's household, as you could never be quite sure what sort of view of things would be taken in headquarters.

In those days there was no school on Western lines in the village. When we were old enough (about five years old), my half-brother and I with three sisters were sent to Mallam Garba, the Liman of Rabah. He sat under a tree or in his porch surrounded by about forty children. He taught us what he knew of Arabic: it probably wasn't very much but it proved helpful later on. We learnt the Holy Koran by heart with his guidance: he did his best to explain the Arabic to us, but sometimes it was far too deep for our young minds, and sometimes we felt that it was rather too deep even for his.

We wrote on wooden 'slates' with reed pens dipped in ink we had made ourselves. When the slates were filled with our youthful Arabic writing, we washed them off and started again.

We never saw a printed book until we went to school; there were no newspapers or magazines: the Europeans had them and sometimes they would show us the pictures but usually of the King and Queen or of soldiers and we really didn't think very much of soldiers. I believe that there were small local papers printed in Lagos, but I know they never reached us.

Our Mallam's fees were paid in kind—in grain, or meat or

cooked foodstuffs, and sometimes someone would give him a piece of cloth or a nearly new mat. He tried to keep discipline and on the whole he succeeded, but when he got angry and tried to beat us, everyone ran away except the one he managed to catch. We were always frightened that he would report us to our fathers, but he was a kind old man and seldom stayed angry for long.

My father died when I was six years old. He was followed as District Head by my uncle. He only survived eighteen months before he was dismissed. Then my half-brother became District Head, but my mother and I continued to live in the house through all these changes.

After two years with the old Mallam, my brother decided to send me to school—that is, to the strange new-fangled school in Sokoto, very different from the one I knew sitting under the tree. Here I was among friends, there I would be among strangers from all over the Province. I was excited at the prospect and my friends were envious and sad. The British had asked my father to send one son before, but I was too young at the time.

At last the day came. My loads were packed up and put on the carriers' heads. We mounted our horses—my mother, the District Head, my half-brother and I—and with my attendants we set off weeping on the twenty-mile journey to Sokoto. We were escorted for a mile or more by the wailing family and villagers, and could hear their lamentations long after we were out of sight. The path followed the foot of the rising ground beside the river, and Rabah was soon lost to sight behind a low spur. We always went on horseback, for the river has, oddly enough, never been used for transport: in the rains it is too wide and swift, and in the dry season it is too shallow. It was infested with crocodiles during flood, and was considered very dangerous in general.

When I reached Sokoto late in the evening I found that I was not the only sad one, but I was not lonely as were so many of the new boys, who had come from great distances: not only

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-09268-5 - My Life
Alhaji Sir Ahmadu Bello
Excerpt
[More information](#)

were there many people whom I had seen in Rabah, but also there were numerous relatives—indeed, far more than I had dreamed of. I must now go back a bit and in the next chapter will tell you about these relatives and about Sokoto itself.



A village street

CHAPTER 2

MY FAMILY

MY father was a son of Abubakar, known as Atiku na Rabah, who was the seventh Sultan of Sokoto and reigned for four years from 1873. During his reign there was no particular incident and life went on much as usual. All Atiku's brothers—that is, my great-uncles—were Sultans: five of them were the Sultans preceding him and the youngest followed him on the throne. Their father was Sultan Bello, the son of the famous and revered Shehu Usuman dan Fodio, the Great Reformer, as we call him. Bello, who took the title of Sultan on his father's death, was my great-grandfather.

To those who are not fully aware of the history of this part of Nigeria, I must explain a little at this point. The Shehu Usuman was a Fulani leader born about 1744 in the country then called Gobir, north of the Sokoto River—an ancient kingdom. He was not only a leader but a great preacher and a man of the utmost piety. To quote a British parallel, he was a combination of John Wesley and Oliver Cromwell. He was among a people who were nominally Muhammadan: I say nominally, for the religion had become very corrupt and many pagan practices had crept in and had taken a firm hold even in the highest quarters.

The Shehu Usuman declared a Holy War against the polluters of the faith. In 1804 he started by attacking the Chief of Gobir, one of the worst offenders, in whose territory he was living. This local war went on for some time, and it was not until 1808 that the capital of Gobir was taken and destroyed; the kingdom of Gobir then disintegrated but by no means did it die. Meanwhile, to cleanse the religion, the Shehu had organised revolts in all the great Hausa states: the Fulani living in them