

The Role of Military Superiority, Weaponry, and Tactics in the British Conquest of the Kano Emirate, 1903



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Abstract

The British conquest of the Emirate of Kano in 1903 was a defining moment in the colonial subjugation of Northern Nigeria. This article investigates the decisive role of British military superiority in the 1903 conquest of the Kano Emirate by the British colonial forces. By drawing a clear research problem: how did disparities in weaponry, tactics, and logistics determine the outcome of the battle? This paper uncovers, firstly, the extent to which Maxim guns and field artillery outmatched traditional cavalry and flintlock muskets. Secondly, the systematic use of disciplined line formations and coordinated infantry and artillery assaults and thirdly, the employment of psychological warfare and surprise maneuvers and attack during Emir Aliyu Babba's absence from Kano. The analysis demonstrates that these factors not only minimized British casualties but also ruinously emasculated Kano's defensive preparations. We conclude that battlefield innovation and organizational efficiency, rather than mere manpower, strengthened Britain's efficient victory. And that, the understanding these dynamics casts more light on the mechanics of imperial expansion in Northern Nigeria.

Key Words: Military Superiority, Weaponry, Tactics, Conquest

Introduction

The British conquest of the Kano Emirate in 1903 was part of the broader colonial expansion into Northern Nigeria. The military campaign was driven by Britain's strategic interest in subjugating the Sokoto Caliphate's vassal states to consolidate its imperial authority. The British justified their invasion under the pretext of abolishing slavery and bringing "civilisation" to the region.¹ Kano, a major commercial and political hub, resisted the invasion but was ultimately overpowered due to British military superiority. While literature abound on the 1903 colonial military campaign on Kano that has richly described its political and administrative aftermath. Few studies have conducted an operational-level analysis that highlight frontline military assault on Kano Emirate. It is the premise of this paper to fill that gap by systematically comparing British and Kano military strengths and tactics to quantify their force differentials, avail their tactical doctrines and practices.

The fall of Kano to the forces of the British imperial army on Friday, 3rd February 1903 was the beginning of the imposition of British colonial domination on the Emirate of Kano. It was only by taking over the political control of the Emirate as well as restructuring its institutions that the exploitation could be successful. The economic prosperity and population of Kano made it famous in central Sudan and attracted a large number of people across the region and beyond. It was a major commercial centre long before the major events of the nineteenth century in Hausaland.² It was, without doubt, the wealthiest Emirate in the Sokoto Caliphate.³ There had been a long desire to conquer Kano by the British since the second half of the 19th century. The British contact with Kano dates to the early periods of the exploration across the Sahara desert,⁴ which was a spying activity of the European imperialist to ascertain the viability of their interest in the region.

The economic potential and influence of Kano in Western Sudan in general and in the Sokoto Caliphate made her to be of interest to the British who had long contact with the area since the period of explorations by Europeans in the early parts of the 19th century. Kano had been described by the accounts of the European explorers who regarded it as the wealthiest and the most populous city in Sokoto Caliphate, revealing her potential in both human and capital resources.⁵

The Conquest of Kano

The first and foremost reason for the British conquest of Kano was economic exploitation. Beyond the superficial and unsound reasons put forward by the British to justify the conquest

¹ Frederick Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (Edinburgh: Blackwood & Sons, 1922), 143.

² The 19th century Jihad in Hausaland and subsequent establishment of Sokoto Caliphate.

³ Oboro Ikime, *The Fall of Nigeria: the British Conquest* (Heinemann, London, 1977), 190.

⁴ Saad Abubakar, *Northern Provinces under Colonial Rule, 1900-1959*: In Oboro Ikimi, (ed), *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, 1980, 449.

⁵ For details see Heinrich Barth, *Travels and Discoveries in Northern Nigeria* (London, 1965).

of Kano and other areas, the primacy of the economic factor becomes clear.⁶ The superficial and unsound reasons were that of extending "civilisation" and the decoy of the death of Captain Maloney, which gave them immediate justification of the conquest. It was a strong conviction of the British that the death of its colonial officer, Captain Maloney⁷ must be avenged to save the face of British supremacy in the making of colonial Nigeria. Much larger southern parts of the Caliphate like Ilorin, Kabba, Kontogora, Nupe, Zaria, and Borgu⁸ were taken by the British.

Kano was conquered by the British colonial government unlike other areas in the north such as Nupeland which were taken by the Royal Niger Company. On January, 1st 1900, the British proclaimed protectorate over the vast territory of Northern Nigeria, which gave her the sole right to conquer and administer the area. The proclamation was the harbinger of the British colonial conquest of the whole Northern Region, and indeed it was an act of provocation and declaration of war on the region by Lugard. To justify this, Lugard convened a ceremony "in the presence of some 1000 troops commanded by three colonels, Willcocks, Morland, and Lowry Cole, as well as civilian staffs."⁹

The conquest of Kano by the British was through the use of military force, as the British were aware of the military strength and might of Kano and its readiness to fight. The British were said to have military intelligence on Kano which was why adequate preparation was made with regard to the expedition. The expedition was put under the charge of Colonel Morland with the composition of heavy contingents consisting of 26 officers, 13 non-commissioned officers, 2 medical doctors, and 800 African rank and file with heavy weapons like 75mm guns and maxim guns.¹⁰

Britain could not afford to fail in securing Kano, in particular, to British imperialism. It was a race against time for a Britain not afford to lose the territory to the French and the situation was pointing to "now or never" owing to the preparation of Kano as a resisting entity and the encroachment of the French in the "Nigerian" borders from the North.¹¹ The fear of losing Kano by Lugard can be seen in his efforts to convince the Colonial Office that using military force was necessary because as he claimed Kano was seeking to provoke war against the

⁶ Mansur Ibrahim Ibrahim, *The Impact of Colonial Domination on Kano c1903-1950 A.D. A Study of Colonial Change* (Ahmadu Bello University Press, Zaria, 2013), 35.

⁷ He was a British colonial Resident in Nassarawa Province whose death was attributed to Magaji Danyamusa of Keffi, who was the representative of the Emir of Zazzau at Keffi. Maloney died in October, 1902 and Danyamusa fled to Kano and sought for asylum which was granted to him with honour by the reigning Emir of Kano, Aliyu b. Abdullahi known as Aliyu Babba.

⁸ Rowland Aderemi Adeleye, *Power and Diplomacy in Northern Nigeria 1804-1906, the Sokoto Caliphate and its Enemies* (New York and Ibadan, 1971), 265.

⁹ Oboro Ikime, *The Fall of Nigeria: The British Conquest* (London: Heinemann, 1977), 77.

¹⁰ Asmau Garba Saeed, *The Establishment of British Colonial Rule in Kano During the Reign of Emir Abbas B. Abdullah 1903-1919*, in Hambolu, M.O. (ed), *Perspectives on Kano-British Relations*. 2003. p.56

¹¹ Muhammadu Mustapha Gwadabe, , *Land, Labour and Taxation in Kano Native Authority 1903-1953: the case of Kumbotso District*, PhD Thesis, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, 2007. , p.49

white man.¹² It was also reported that the use of force in the conquest of Kano by the British was a recommendation by the committee on Niger considering the power of the Caliphate and its Emirates, especially of Kano.¹³ Whatever excuses attached to the conquest of Kano by the British, the City proved to all what had been attributed to her in terms of preparedness and resistance to foreign occupation.

Kano was also in good preparation ahead of the planned British invasion. The fortified walls of Kano were rebuilt and stronger gates were put on the 13 entrances¹⁴ to the town. Other towns and villages in the Emirate were instructed to adequately fortify and resist the British. The Emir of Kano secured the supply of arms and ammunition from North Africa with which they were in close contact through the Saharan trade route.

Amidst this situation, Emir Aliyu Babba embarked on a trip to Sokoto on the eve of the British attack and subsequent conquest of Kano. It did not help matters as far as the situation of Kano at that period was concerned. The trip had a profound impact on the success of the British expedition to Kano. The Emir was accompanied on the trip by all his principal officials and headmen of the western districts of the Emirate and their forces.¹⁵ The military strength of Kano had been eroded and weakened, and this might be a strong reason for the fall of Kano to the British. At his departure to Sokoto, Emir Aliyu Babba left the affairs of Kano in the hand of *Sarkin Shanu*¹⁶, who was among the principal officers in the Emirate. The Emir called and advised him before the trip. He said;

Oh Sarkin Shanu, the time for travel has come, that is to say, I wish to travel to Sokoto to visit our fathers and grandfathers, and you, I have put this land in your charge, its urban and its rural areas, and all its districts heads (aqyál). This is my house(hold) which I put in your hands. I have made it a trust in your charge, so protect this trust to the utmost degree. I have ordered ma'aji Usman to assist you in protecting the city together with the Arab community..... If enemies come from any direction, act in concert and with one mind, and take counsel with the Arab community so they may assist you with advice.¹⁷

¹² Ikime, "The Fall of Nigeria", 19.

¹³ Muhammadu Mustapha Gwadabe, *Land, Labour and Taxation in Kano Native Authority 1903-1953: The Case of Kumbotso District* (PhD Thesis, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, 2007), 47.

¹⁴ The 13 entrances to Kano are Kansakali, Kabuga, Gadon Kaya, Dukawuya, Adama, Kofar Ruwa, Mazugal, Wambai, Dan Agundi, Na'isa, Waika, Dawanau and Kofar Mata.

¹⁵ Ikimi, "The Fall of Nigeria", 193.

¹⁶ The *Sarkin Shanu* during the reign of Emir Aliyu Babba of Kano was Muhammadu Dan-Gwari, see Asmau Garba Saeed, *The Establishment of British Colonial Rule in Kano During the Reign of Emir Abbas B. Abdullah 1903-1919*", in Hambolu, M.O. (ed), *Perspectives on Kano-British Relations*, 2003 ., P. 56

¹⁷ Muhammad Sani Umar and John Hunwick, *Your Humble Servant: The Memoirs of bd Alláh Al-Ghadámisi of Kano, 1903-1908. Part 1: the British Conquest of Kano*, in *Sudanic Africa*, 1996, PP. 82-83

In compliance with this instruction, the Sarkin Fulani of Bebeji¹⁸ opposed the British on their onward march to Kano from the direction of Zaria. Unfortunately, he was killed by the British and the town was sacked as well.¹⁹

The British continued their march to Kano, and on the morning of 3rd February 1903, Morland led his force against Kano. The British chose the *Zaria* gate of Kano and found it strong and fortified and was, therefore, abandoned. The British again chose the *Kabuga* gate which was at the western side of Zaria gate. There, they were successful in forcing their way into the city of Kano. The battle continued inside the city down to the Emir's palace, which was under the protection of *Sarkin Shanu*. He (*Sarkin Shanu*) died fighting to protect the palace, a trust given to him by his Emir.

Kano fell to the British, and they announced the immediate deposition of Emir Aliyu Babba from the throne. New laws were spelt out to the people of Kano, like bearing firearms. Slaves were told to report any maltreatment from their masters to the British officer. The deposed Emir Aliyu Babba after learning about the happenings in Kano preferred to make *Hijra* (Holy Migration) than to be caught by the British for fear of humiliation. He followed the teaching of Islam which enjoined Muslims to flee for fear of persecution and humiliation by 'the infidels'.

The contingent that accompanied Emir Aliyu Babba decided to put more resistance against the British. The latter engaged them at a place near Kotorkoshi and they were defeated. The surviving party surrendered to the British under the leadership of *Wambai Abbas* on 6 March 1903.²⁰ The Arab merchants of Kano secured the return of the *Wambai Abbas* to Kano city; and upon their recommendation, the British appointed him the next Emir of Kano on 3rd April 1903 in a ceremony watched by many people.²¹

British Military Superiority: Manpower and Organisation

The British forces, under the command of Colonel Morland, were well-organised and strategically structured. The invasion force included the British regular troops with extensive combat experience, African auxiliaries (mostly Hausa and Yoruba soldiers trained in British military techniques), and Officers with knowledge of West African warfare, enabling efficient battle coordination. In contrast, Kano's defenders relied on traditional warrior formations under Emir Alu, composed of cavalry and infantry drawn from local warriors and conscripts.

The overwhelming firepower of the British comprising firearms and artillery was a defining aspect of the battle. The British forces were equipped with Maxim Guns capable of firing 600

¹⁸ A town at the western part of Kano Emirate, *Sarkin Fulani* was the traditional ruler overseeing the territory.

¹⁹ Muhammad Sani Umar, and John Hunwick, *Your Humble Servant: The Memoirs of bd Alláh Al-Ghadámisi of Kano, 1903-1908. Part 1: the British Conquest of Kano*, in *Sudanica Africa*, 1996, P.84

²⁰ Ikime, "The Fall of Nigeria", 196.

²¹ Asmau Garba Saeed, *The Establishment of British Colonial Rule in Kano During the Reign of Emir Abbas B. Abdullah 1903-1919*, in Hambolu, M.O. (ed), *Perspectives on Kano-British Relations*. 2003. P.56

rounds per minute, devastating the Kano warriors who relied on traditional weapons and outdated firearms. There were Bolt-action rifles in the arsenals of the British which had more accuracy and with greater range than the muskets and swords used by the Kano warriors. The Artillery was used to breach city gates and walls thereby neutralising defensive positions. Kano strengthened and manned its walls but made little resistance once the field guns breached them.²² The British utilized 7-pounder field guns, providing heavy bombardment that weakened the city's defensive walls before the final assault. As one cynic put it, "The Fulani's weapon was the sword; the White Man fights with the earthquake and the lightning".²³

Kano's Traditional Weaponry

Kano warriors relied on Swords and spears which were effective in close combat but rendered ineffective by British long-range rifles. They also relied on Flintlock muskets which were outdated, slow to reload, and inaccurate compared to British firearms. The Cavalry charges used by the Kano warriors, which were formidable in previous wars, were decimated by Maxim gun fire before reaching enemy lines. Firearms were known in Hausaland centuries ago but did not become generally available until the last decades of the nineteenth century. This advent of guns did not at first have a marked effect on warfare and military organization. It appears that these new weapons were incorporated into the existing "feudal" army structure by the formation of small musketeer forces composed of slaves. The tactical possibilities for the employment of these gunmen were limited by the small quantity and inferior quality of the weapons. Such slave units probably served as little more than a complement to the rulers' bodyguards.²⁴

By the late nineteenth century, however, increasing access to firearms, especially from European and American traders via Nupe, provided the opportunity for the emirates of the Sokoto Caliphate to acquire a considerable number of these weapons. Notwithstanding, a report had it that Kano had about 3,000 guns of all kinds in its arsenal during the period of Emir Aliyu Babba.²⁵ The technological gap in weaponry significantly undermined Kano's ability to resist the British occupation. The Tactical Superiority of the British was overwhelming to be countered by Kano. The use of Modern Military Formations employed by the British army on battlefields was incomparable to that of Kano. Including. The British used extended line formations which allowed maximum use of firepower while minimising exposure to enemy attacks. They also have coordinated infantry that relied on artillery assaults which softened enemy defenses before their advancement. The British forces used natural terrain and fortifications to enhance their defensive positions thereby minimising casualties.

²² John Ilife, *Africans: the history of a continent*, Second Edition (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 201.

²³ Joseph P. Smaldon, *Warfare in the Sokoto Caliphate: Historical and Sociological Perspectives*, African Studies Series, 19 (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 122.

²⁴ Smaldon, "Warfare in the Sokoto Caliphate," 111.

²⁵ Smaldon, "Warfare in the Sokoto Caliphate," 111-112.

The impact of Psychological Warfare and surprise attacks played a decisive role in the ability of the British to conquer Kano. Reports reaching Kano of British military superiority had already weakened resistance morale. The warriors and other city dwellers were in constant fear of the British troops. The Emir of Kano, Aliyu Babba, was away to Sokoto paying homage to the Sultan after he acceded to the throne of Kano Emirate. It was on record that Aliyu Babba was not chosen as emir of Kano by Sokoto which was the normal practice. He emerged victorious from the Kano Civil War thereby declaring himself a king. The visit to Sokoto was considered a diplomatic move to normalize his relationship with the Caliphate. The embarked trip to Sokoto on the eve of the British attack and subsequent conquest of Kano did not help matters as far as the situation of Kano at that period was concerned. The trip had a profound impact on the success of the British expedition to Kano. The Emir was accompanied on the trip by all his principal officials and headmen of the western districts of the Emirate and their forces.²⁶

The British strategically launched their attack in early February 1903, catching Kano's defenders off guard when Emir Alu was away with substantial high-ranking officials and his army which left the city vulnerable. The British exploited this by bombarding the city's fortifications before launching a decisive assault.

One of the clearest demonstrations of British military superiority in the conquest of Kano was the stark contrast in casualties between the two sides. Kano Forces estimated to have casualties ranged between 300 and 500 killed, with many more wounded or captured. While the British Forces' casualties were minimal. Reports suggest fewer than 20 dead and around 50 wounded.²⁷ This underscores the overwhelming advantage provided by British firepower, battlefield organisation, and tactical planning. The effective use of Maxim guns, disciplined formations, and artillery allowed the British to inflict devastating losses while keeping their casualties low.

The Fall of Kano and Its Aftermath

The defeat of Kano demonstrated the futility of traditional African warfare against modern European armies. It led to the decline of cavalry-based warfare in West Africa. It also forced the integration of local forces into colonial security structures and ultimately, a shift in power dynamics, with indigenous rulers now reliant on British authority.²⁸ The fall of Kano marked the beginning of direct British rule over the emirate. It highlighted the deposition of Emir Aliyu Babba, the ruler of Kano, who fled but was later captured and exiled to Lokoja.²⁹ The British Authority installed Abbas as the new Emir under indirect rule, ensuring compliance with

²⁶ Ikime, "The Fall of Nigeria", 193.

²⁷ Frederick Lugard, *Political Memoranda: Revision of Instructions to Political Officers on Subjects Chiefly Political and Administrative, 1913-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1920), 219.

²⁸ See John Iliffe, *Africans: The History of a Continent*. 2nd ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

²⁹ Chinedu N. Ubah, *The British Occupation of Kano in 1903: Resistance and Collaboration*, *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 12, no. 1, 1985, P.75.

colonial policies.³⁰ The conquest symbolised the final phase of British military dominance in the Sokoto Caliphate, paving the way for full colonial control.³¹

Conclusion

This study has shown that the British conquest of Kano was informed fundamentally on technological and organizational innovations. Maxim guns and 7-pounder field artillery neutralized the Emirate's fortified walls, while bolt-action rifles and extended line formations shattered traditional cavalry charges. Equally important was the strategic timing of the assault, launched when Emir Aliyu Babba and his senior officers were in Sokoto and the use of psychological operations that debilitated local morale before the conquest. These findings underscore that colonial victories in West Africa were not inevitable but were secured through deliberate adaptation of 19th-century European military doctrines of engagement. Future research should explore how these battlefield lessons influenced subsequent campaigns across the Sokoto Caliphate and altered indigenous military organisation under indirect rule.

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³⁰ Toyin Falola and Matthew M. Heaton., *A History of Nigeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 103.

³¹ Lugard, "Political Memoranda", 120.

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