



West Africa in the Age of Revolutions

By Trevor Getz

Was West Africa as “revolutionary” in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as all those other revolutions that were taking place during that time? This article argues it was!

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An Atlantic revolution

Historians describe the late 1700s and early 1800s as an age of revolution. During this time, there was growing conflict between societies and their rulers. In countries such as France and the Americas, the working class paid high taxes. These taxes made the wealthy ruling class even richer. The working class began to exchange new ideas about politics and how to live. This new way of thinking led to great revolutions. Old rulers were overthrown and new forms of government were built.

In 1789, French revolutionaries took over the government and imprisoned the king and queen. The American Revolution of 1776 was an uprising against British colonial rule. The Haitian Revolution that began in 1791 led to the abolition of slavery on the island, and was probably the most revolutionary of them all! Latin American revolutions that extended into the nineteenth century also led to independence from Spain. However, France, America, Haiti, and Latin America were not the only countries to fight for their freedoms. Revolutions happened in West Africa during this time, too. The scholar 'Uthman dan Fodio led a revolution in what is now Nigeria between 1804 and 1811. Yet historians hardly ever mention it when they talk about late eighteenth and early nineteenth century revolutions.



A map of the Atlantic world showing what I would argue are some of the important “revolutionary” states of eighteenth and nineteenth century West Africa. Courtesy and © Henry Lovejoy.

I’m here to suggest that this should change—but you should decide for yourself. We will look at some West African revolutions alongside revolutions in the Americas and Europe. I believe that events in West Africa were as much a part of the changes sweeping across the Atlantic Ocean region as the French and American Revolutions were. Read on and see if you agree with me!

The Atlantic economy — West African wing

The Atlantic economy refers to the growth of trade among West Africa, the Americas, and Europe, regions connected by the Atlantic Ocean. During the 1700s, the growth of trade across the Atlantic created a wealthier merchant class and a poorer working class. This growing social divide led to revolution in those regions. In France, for example, merchants demanded more power as their wealth grew. French peasants supported a revolution because they were denied that wealth and power.



[Wealthy Atlantic merchants](#), many of them women, in Gorée. Public domain..

Atlantic trade also made the ruling classes richer in West Africa. The wealthy sold gold and enslaved people to Europe. West African rulers also collected taxes from their people to fund wars. These wars helped them expand their lands and kidnap more people to sell to European slavers. This system, which is sometimes called the “fiscal-military” state, looks a lot like Europe at this time. Throughout the 1700s, France, Britain, and other European states were also increasing taxes to wage war on each other. This matters to our study of revolution. It was increased taxation that helped spark both the French and American Revolutions.

This fiscal-military system of trade and taxation caused even deeper problems in West Africa than in Europe. West Africans exported goods like gold and copper. These resources were important for keeping economies strong. West Africa ended up with fewer of those goods, while Europe was building up their supply. West African societies were also losing people to the transatlantic slave trade. Wealthy West African rulers imported luxuries such as alcohol in exchange for people. These luxury items were not good for growing the local economy. As a result, West African economies were losing strength against European economies. This caused working class people to suffer.

Jihad as revolution

In Europe, revolutions were inspired by the Enlightenment, a cultural movement that began in the late 1700s. Enlightenment thinkers valued individualism and reason over tradition. However, Enlightenment ideas didn't spread widely in West Africa.¹ Instead, West Africans turned to Islam as a unifying force for change. Rulers and traders introduced the religion to West Africa around the eleventh century. Over time, West African scholars developed a form of Islam that suited many people.

Islam became a revolutionary force in West Africa because it helped the working class. First, although Islam technically allows slavery, it forbids the sale of Muslims as enslaved people. People who converted to Islam were better protected from becoming enslaved. Second, Islamic laws in West Africa restricted the power of rulers over their people. Third, the form of Islam followed in West Africa encouraged education for all. Islam also forbids the consumption of alcohol. This was one of the main goods imported and consumed by their harsh rulers.

West Africans used Islamic ideas to overturn the rule of wealthy groups involved in the slave trade and high taxation. They launched military campaigns to take power from their rulers. These were revolutions, and they were also referred to as *jihad*. That is an Arabic word meaning “struggle.”

The first of these jihad-revolutions was launched in Senegal in the 1670s. Rulers of then-states like Waalo and Jolof raided each other's communities to enslave people. A Muslim man named Naṣīr al-Dīn led an uprising of peasants and herders against the ruling elite. They helped put an end to enslavement in the region.

In 1727, a similar revolt broke out in the highlands of modern-day Guinea. Herders overthrew the military and merchant elite. They created the Muslim state of Fuuta Jalon. In the 1790s, another revolutionary Muslim state emerged in Senegal called Fuuta Toro. In both the revolutions in Fuuta Jalon and Fuuta Toro, the leaders were mostly cattle herders. They had been among the most highly taxed and enslaved people of their regions.

One of the last great revolutionary jihads broke out in 1804. The transatlantic slave trade was expanding during this period. Europeans were trying to buy captives in the Benin and Biafra regions in what is modern-day Nigeria. Many of these people were herders and farmers who were enslaved in the West African interior as the result of a series of wars. A number of the communities suffering from these wars and enslavement turned to Islam. Islam, as mentioned earlier, forbade the sale of Muslims as slaves.

One leader of these communities, 'Uthman dan Fodio, criticized the local rulers. He spoke out against them for high taxes, corruption, and for enslaving and selling Muslims. He brought many communities together to launch a revolution that created one of the largest states in West African history. Known as the Sokoto Caliphate, it existed between 1804 and 1903.

¹ In part, this was because of the language barrier—few West Africans spoke French or English. In part, it was because those ideas weren't really that attractive or familiar to West Africans.



A set of political principles written by 'Uthman dan Fodio, entitled "The Foundations of Justice for Legal Guardians, Governors, Princes, Meritorious Rulers, and Kings." Pages 1-3 of 10. Public domain.

How revolutionary were these West African states? Well, many did increase access to education among the population. And in many regions the ruling powers were restricted by Islamic law. In general, these states also lowered or even stopped participation in the transatlantic slave trade, protecting at least free-born Muslims from enslavement. Still, as in Europe and the Americas, there were limits to the revolution. The new governments still imposed very high taxes and often they continued to allow some form of slavery.

I believe that the new West African states were revolutionary in a similar way to the Americas and Europe at this time. Across the Atlantic, wealth shifted to rulers and merchants while others worked for little or no pay. This caused great anger and resentment among those with little wealthy and power. So those people turned to a belief system that promised change and freedom. Even though the actual results of these revolutions were limited, they were similar to other Atlantic revolutions. What does your inner historian say? Should 'Uthman dan Fodio's revolution make the list?

Further Readings

Toby Green, *A Fistful of Shells: West Africa from the Rise of the Slave Trade to the Age of Revolution*, The University of Chicago Press, 2019.

Paul E. Lovejoy, *Jihad in West Africa During the Age of Revolutions*, Ohio University Press, 2016.

Manuel Barcia, "'An Islamic Atlantic Revolution': Dan Fodio's Jihād and Slave Rebellion in Bahia and Cuba, 1804-1844," *Journal of African Diaspora Archaeology and Heritage*, 2 (2013), 6-17.

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A map of the Atlantic world showing what I would argue are some of the important "revolutionary" states of eighteenth and nineteenth century West Africa. Courtesy and © Henry Lovejoy.

Wealthy Atlantic merchants, many of them women, in Gorée. Public domain. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:SignaresBal.jpg>

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