

Kanem-Bornu Empire

VINCENT HIRIBARREN

King's College London, UK

Renowned as one of the most powerful empires of Western Africa with Ghana, Mali, and Songhai, Kanem-Bornu (Kanem-Borno) is often cited as an archetypal example of an ancient African pre-colonial kingdom. The empire reached a certain degree of fame not only because it was mentioned in the narratives written by Arab geographers such as al-Idrisi (Lange 1984: 239) but also because its history has been taught in schools and universities as an example of the wealth of pre-colonial Africa.

THE LONGEST EMPIRE IN AFRICAN HISTORY

The empire of Kanem-Bornu finds its roots between Lake Chad and the Bahr el-Ghazal in the region of Kanem (modern-day Chad). It was based on the state of Kanem created around the 8th century and was ruled by the Duguwa, an aristocracy who chose a king among themselves (Barkindo 1985: 230). Gathering together agriculturalists and pastoralists, this kingdom consisted of various ethnic groups able to use iron-working techniques and horsemanship. These different populations gave birth to the Kanembu ethnic group who spoke a Nilo-Saharan language. Located at the crossroads between northern Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, this region benefited from trade contacts with different parts of Africa (Barkindo and Lange 1988). The early history of Kanem is not well known but it appears that Kanem sought to control

trade routes towards Tripoli and Egypt and based its power on trans-Saharan trade. However, it would not be possible to envisage the creation of an empire before the expansion of Kanem towards the northern oases of Kavar during the 11th century. These conquests led to the creation of a trans-Saharan empire that survived until the 19th century.

During the 11th century, the Duguwa were replaced by another dynasty, the Sayfawa who ruled the empire until the 19th century. However, the territorial extent of this 800-year long hegemony greatly varied. At first based on Kanem, the center of empire shifted to the west of Lake Chad during the 13th and 14th centuries as a result of deteriorating climatic conditions. Indeed, the continued progression of the Sahara was responsible for the migration of the Kanembu to the more fertile lands of Bornu. This region had already become the economic centre of the empire in the 14th century despite the fact that the Sayfawa still resided in Njimi the capital they had built in Kanem. Furthermore in the second half of the 14th century after two centuries of civil war, Kanem was captured by the Bulala warrior aristocracy. Fleeing their enemies, the Sayfawa managed to re-establish their power in Bornu. This second empire reconquered Kanem in the 16th century but Bornu remained the economic and political center of the country, hence the name Kanem-Bornu to designate this polity. This migration from Kanem to Bornu was a slow and sometimes violent process integrating various populations known under the collective name of So (or Sao) to the Kanembu. This merging gave birth to a new ethnic group known as the Kanuri who became the main ethnic group in the empire. As a consequence,

their Nilo-Saharan language, Kanuri, became the lingua franca of the empire.

Kanem-Bornu was also a major diplomatic power in the Sahara area and boasted embassies in both Morocco and the Ottoman Empire via Tripoli. Its links with the rest of the Muslim world were also significant and a hostel for Bornoan students and pilgrims en route to Mecca was built in Cairo during the reign of Sultan, or according to his Kanuri title, *mai*, Dunama Dibalami (1203–1242). One of the most famous episodes of Bornoan history was the correspondence between *mai* Idriss Alooma and the Ottoman Sultan Murad III during the 1570s, as Mai Idriss desired to renew an alliance with the Ottomans. Their conquest of Tripoli in 1551 had already given the empire of Kanem-Bornu access to Ottoman mercenaries who has migrated across the Sahara. Their firearms and tactical superiority resulted in victories which facilitated the conquest of territories located at the south and west of Bornu (Hunwick 1985: 360–361). The introduction of gunpowder in sub-Saharan Africa was short-lived as by the end of the 17th century the Bornoan armies had ceased using such weapons. However, the contacts with Tripoli never totally ceased as embassies were exchanged until the 19th century.

To understand how the empire of Kanem-Bornu dominated and invaded its neighbors, it is necessary to highlight the importance of its cavalry, as the empire relied heavily on the strength of its horsemen for its conquests and slave raids. Divided between heavy and light cavalry and a large number of infantry, the Bornoan army could still count 10 000 horses when the German explorer Heinrich Barth visited Kanem-Bornu in 1851. The Bornoan army was not a professional organization and could only be deployed every year during the dry season. However the reorganization of the army by *mai* Idriss Alooma enabled the

domination over a vast territory in order to obtain tributes from conquered regions. Nonetheless, facing Tuareg and Tubu incursions from the north during the 18th century, the empire gradually lost its grip on territories in the desert and on the eastern side of Lake Chad.

One of the largest threats came in 1808 when the jihad proclaimed by Osman dan Fodio tried to conquer Bornu to integrate it within the Sokoto Caliphate. This largely Fulani invasion followed an 18th-century demographic expansion on the western marches of Bornu. After a defeat and the destruction of the capital, Birni Gazargamo, Mohammed El Kanemi, a learned man from Kanem, organized the defense of the empire and won a military, diplomatic, and religious battle against Osman dan Fodio. Indeed, in his correspondence with the sultan of Sokoto, El Kanemi proved that there was no reason to pursue the jihad in Bornu since its inhabitants practiced a pure form of Islam. El Kanemi, who was subsequently called *shehu* of Bornu, managed to establish his own power and founded a new capital in Kukawa in 1814. However, the nature of his power seems uncertain as the Sayfawas were not totally supplanted before 1846 (Last 1996). The dynasty which took power in the 11th century was then ended by Umar, the son of Mohammed El Kanemi, in 1846 (Brenner 1973). These events are relatively well known because of narratives written by European travelers in the 19th century such as Dixon Denham, Hugh Clapperton, Heinrich Barth, and Gustav Nachtigal. The third Kanem-Bornu dynasty of the Kanemis was relatively short-lived as Rabih az-Zubayr, a Sudanese warlord, invaded Bornu in 1893 and put an end to the independence of the empire. European conquest at the end of the 19th century then divided Bornu between the German colony of Cameroon and the British colony of Nigeria. After

World War I, the territory of Bornu was reunified under British administration and was officially reunited within independent Nigeria in 1961. Without formal political power in Nigeria, descendants of Mohammed El Kanemi are still *shehus* of modern Borno at the beginning of the 21st century.

ISLAM AS IMPERIAL CEMENT

Kanem rulers were among the first to be Islamized in sub-Saharan Africa in the 11th century. The empire of Kanem-Bornu became rapidly renowned for its Islamic culture with some of its *mais* undertaking the *hajj* and building mosques in the country (Barkindo 1985: 235). Islam had an important political role in Kanem-Bornu as the change of dynasty between the Duguwa and the Sayfawa in the 11th century seems to have been triggered by political and religious factors. Indeed, Hummay (r.1075–1080) became ruler of Kanem and founded the Sayfawa dynasty with the help of a pro-Islam faction in the Kanem court (Lange 1993: 265). Moreover, Islam had an influence on the expansionist policies of the state as the development of the kingdom could be justified by the conversion of non-Muslims. Islam also influenced the discourse of state-creation as rulers during this period claimed to be descended from a Yemenite ancestor, the 7th-century figure Sayf ibn Dhi Yazan of Himyar (Smith 1983). Moreover, since the end of the 15th century, and maybe since an earlier date, the *mai* (the head of the empire) assumed the title of “caliph” (Lavers 1993: 257) and the Sayfawa throne was also supposed to be the *degal lisalambe*, the “cradle of Islam.” As a consequence, the *mais* used Islamic advisors and, in theory, their power could not exceed the prescriptions of the Sharia. This creation of a Muslim religious

ancestry was a common practice through which trans-Saharan African empires could assert their religious and kinship ties with Arabia.

As a Muslim empire, Kanem-Bornu was not radically different from other “Islamicate” polities in sub-Saharan Africa. Indeed, whilst it was dominated by Islam, there were many pre-Islamic features that shaped political and cultural life. A perfect example of the importance of this pre-Islamic culture was the cult of an undefined sacred object, the *mune*, until its destruction by *mai* Dunama Dibbalemi (1203–1242). The *mune* might have been a pre-Islamic symbol of unity in Kanem-Bornu but was still honored until the 13th century, more than two hundred years after the introduction of Islam in Kanem. Furthermore, the practice of recording orally the names and genealogies of the kings of Kanem seems to have existed since the 9th century. The introduction of Islam and the Arabic script codified this tradition by making it possible to write down the names of the kings. This list or chronicle of kings, the *diwan* or *girgam*, was written from the 13th or 16th century until the 19th and contained the names of 67 kings from the 9th to the 19th century. It constitutes one of the most important sources for the history of Kanem-Bornu and has been extensively used by historians of the empire. This is a rare type of document in sub-Saharan Africa, because of the lack of precise written sources but also because of the period that the document covered. As such it has attracted a relatively large number of publications since it was sent to Europe by the German traveler Heinrich Barth in 1851. Different authors have tried to recreate the precise chronology of the *diwan*, since it covers nearly 1000 years, which makes the history of the empire of Kanem-Bornu one of the best-documented histories of the African continent.

AN ENDURING POLITICAL AND SPATIAL STRUCTURE

Even though it is difficult to generalize the nature of political power for more than 1000 years of history, some features seem to have been present throughout the history of Bornu. The royal family was at the heart of the political system meaning that the head of the Sayfawa family was also the *mai*. It seems that to prevent wars of succession, the *chir-oma*, generally the eldest son or the brother of the *mai*, was designated during the lifetime of the *mai*. Members of the royal family were also important office-holders. For example, the *magira*, the queen mother, held for a long time the highest number of fiefs in the kingdom while the first wife of the *mai*, the *gumsu*, was responsible for the palace duties with the three other wives of the *mai* (Cohen 1967). As a consequence, the stability of the empire was synonymous with the stability of the royal family. However, political power was not solely in the hands of the ruling family as members of the council were also in charge of political affairs. It appears that there were around twelve members in this council and that apart from the descendants of the close advisors of the first Sayfawas, their office was not hereditary. It would be difficult to attribute a specific role to each of the members of the council over the centuries but some office-holders seem to exert the same roles. For example, the *mainin kenandi* was the Islamic advisor of the *mai* whereas the *kaigama* was in charge of the armies of Kanem-Bornu. This highly structured political system could also be found in the territorial organization of the kingdom. Indeed, the empire of Kanem-Bornu was organized territorially and divided into different administrative regions. For example, the *galadima* was supposed to be the viceroy of the Western part of the kingdom. He had his own capital at

Nguru and when present in Birni Gargarmo was a full member of the council (Alkali 1983).

One of the striking features of the empire of Kanem-Bornu was its complex territorial organization which allowed it to survive for more than a millennium. Diplomatic correspondence and oral history confirm that the Kanem-Bornu Empire was an empire with different types of borders. Some of them may have been rather vague, such as those along the Saharan trade route, whereas others could have been precisely delimited, such as the borders south of Lake Chad with the Bagirmi or westwards with the Hausa states. Moreover, the core of Bornu and the newly conquered regions had sensibly different territorial structures. In metropolitan Bornu, a double fief system enabled the *mais* and later the *shehus* to levy taxes and troops in their empire. The first one was a personal fief where the fief-holder, the *chima jilibe*, owned a fief over people, the second one was territorial: here the fief-holder, the *chima chidibe*, was in charge of a specific territory. This system enabled the empire to control its sedentary population as well as incorporating its nomadic or semi-nomadic subjects such as the Shuwa Arabs. This administrative structure was present in metropolitan Bornu whereas the satellite regions were still administered by a local ruler. For example, the sultanate of Zinder was semi-autonomous but still part of the Kanem-Bornu Empire until the middle of the 19th century.

TRANS-SAHARAN TRADE AS A SOURCE OF POWER

The tribute paid by satellite regions such as Zinder to the Kanem-Bornu Empire were not its sole source of income. Bornu was for example known for its horses. In addition,

since the 15th century, the commerce in salt was also profitable. Indeed, it is striking that the capital of Kanem-Bornu, Birni Gazargamo, was located at the heart of a salt-producing region in Bornu. This salt was sold throughout the Central Sudan and was used in the textile industry and for medicinal and culinary purposes. The salt trade did not reach the same trans-Saharan dimension as slave trade but it was still possible to evoke a regional market for this product.

The trans-Saharan links of the Kanem-Bornu Empire were central to this economic growth. As it controlled the trade route through the Fezzan towards northern Africa, Kanem-Bornu was one of the main actors of the internal African slave-trade. However difficult it may be to give an estimate on the number of slaves sold by Kanem-Bornuan traders from the 6th to the 19th century, it is certain that the empire mainly derived its wealth from the slave trade. As Muslims could not enslave each other, the empire of Kanem-Bornu benefited from its geopolitical position because it was located at the frontier of Islam and therefore could enslave non-Muslims. Slave trading affected political decisions since military expeditions were undertaken with the aim of slave-raiding. As a consequence, it is certain that Kanem-Bornu as an empire built its strength on slavery and slave trading. Caravans crossing the Sahara were thus the main providers for goods which could be bought in exchange for slaves. The profits they generated for the *mais* and later the *shehus* were considerable and enabled them to levy powerful armies. This source of income was interrupted by the European colonization and finally ceased in the 1920s.

SEE ALSO: Fulani Empire (Sokoto); Ghana, Empire of; Mali Empire; Morocco: 1. Medieval empires; Ottoman Empire; Songhai Empire

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