

Bornoan Civilization before the Sayfawa

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Abstract

This paper examines pre-Kanuri Borno societies focusing more on the ‘So’ that were not given much relevance historically. It is in this view that the paper attempts to examine the place of the pre-Kanuri inhabitants of Borno in the history of the area and bring to the fore their contributions to human civilization, particularly in the Chad Basin Area before the arrival of the Sayfawa into Borno. It appears like the history of Borno started only with the coming of the Sayfawa into the area as documented in most reference materials. The ‘So’ were the most notable pre-Kanuri inhabitants of Borno. Perhaps there were many ethnic groups who probably dispersed to other locations in the Benue Valley, Bauchi Plateau and some parts of Hausa land. These groups of people left some imprints in terms of civilization that we are able to understand through archaeological and ethnographical researches. The Method that was adopted in writing this paper is documentary analysis, using a multidisciplinary approach that cut across history, ethnography, archaeology and oral tradition. Data collected were critically analysed and interpreted. Findings revealed that the area was well inhabited long before the arrival of the Sayfawa, although, little was known about the pre-Kanuri inhabitants due to lack of enough sources to contend with. In conclusion, the area is noted for a civilization that flourished for thousands of years. As such, there is the need for more research on the area to reveal more on the pre-Kanuri Sayfawa people.

Keywords: Civilization, Borno, Kanuri, Sayfawa and So.

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INTRODUCTION

In a sense, the history of Borno has become identified with the history of the Kanuri. Yet the history of the Kanuri in Borno does not go beyond the thirteenth century A.D., when the Sayfawa were forced out of Kanem, where they were known since the ninth century A.D. Thus, we find that much of the book *Studies in the History of Pre-colonial Borno* [4] is not dealing with Borno at all, but rather with Kanem. This trend is also found in virtually every work which features the history of Borno [11]. The wrong impression is thereby formed, that prior to the arrival of the Sayfawa, Borno had no history worth studying. This is certainly not true. It must not, however, be construed that those who have written historical works on Borno have intended to dismiss the pre-Kanuri inhabitants as of no historical consequence. What has led to the neglect of this aspect of Borno history has been the paucity of material on which to work.

In contrast to Sayfawa history, there are no written sources on which to work, except for certain references made during the Sayfawa period. These are mainly references to the ‘So’, and their opposition to

the *Mais* as the rulers of the Sayfawa were titled. Imam Ahmad Ibn Fartuwa [9] is particularly valuable in this respect, for he records, in detail, some of the campaigns of Mai Idris Alauma against the ‘So’. However, such reports are not particularly reliable, coming as they do from the victorious adversaries of the peoples in question. Another source which is related to the first is oral tradition of the Kanuri people [8]. Generally, these oral traditions refer to the pre-Kanuri peoples of Borno as ‘So’ (or Saw. Sau, or even Sago), and describe them in such terms as to make the modern mind sceptical of oral tradition as an authentic source of the history of the area. These ‘So’ are described as a race of giants who used palm trees as walking sticks, and who could kill an elephant and sling it casually on their shoulders to bring them home from enormous distances [ii]. Those oral traditions were probably intended to enhance the glory of the *Mais* and their warriors, who were able to defeat such larger-than-life natives.

If one could not get enough material to work on from the Kanuri sources, what about from the ‘So’ themselves? There is, first of all, the problem of identifying this “spurious tribal grouping [15]. The

Kanuri apparently refer to all the peoples living in Borno prior to their arrival as 'So'. Now, as a result of the activities of the Kanuris in Borno, some of these peoples have been assimilated into the Kanuri culture. Others have simply left the area to avoid subjugation. This mass migration has sent peoples far into the Mandara hills, Benue valley, Hausa land and the Bauchi Plateau [16]. Even if one were able to locate them therefore, the 'So' would have forgotten practically everything about Borno except their having been once there [iii].

These problems have, therefore, left the historian with only one source of really reliable information. That source is archaeology. In this field, there had been some considerable work done on surface collections, progress reports on digs that were still in progress [7], before 1981 when Graham Connah published his *Three Thousand Years in Africa* [7]. The bulk of Connah's work rested on intensive digs at Daima and Yau, supplemented with light work on other sites. What has come to light from this work is extremely tantalising, conjuring up very wide prospects, which were then followed up in the 1990s by German scholars. These latter works not only confirmed Connah's tentative conclusions, but also threw a little more light on the subject [3, 5, 6, 13].

With these rather daunting problems, it is not surprising that historians have tended to avoid a systematic study of pre-Kanuri Borno, and even the present attempt is rather tentative. It is hoped that a serious attention will in the future be given to this area [i].

In this study, it is intended to look at the history of the area from the earliest times to around the thirteenth century. The work would appear to be too ambitious, but it must be remembered that, firstly, the sources are rather few and, secondly, the emphasis will be on cultures and trends rather than on peoples. This last is dictated by the nature of the evidence. Archaeological data cannot tell us about the identity of the peoples that have left artefacts, or of their social and political organization. We would know rather more about their technological development as well as their contact, if any, with the outside world. We would, therefore, be able to cover the ground without being bogged down in discussions of customs, wars and succession disputes.

Bornoan civilization before (and, for that matter, during and after) the Sayfawa was, so to speak, a 'Chadic' civilization to the extent that it depended on and was shaped, by the Lake Chad and the environment it created. The paper will, therefore, survey briefly the history of Lake Chad and the formation of the Borno Landscape. The peopling of the area will then be considered, followed by a consideration of the development of technology and trade. It is intended in the end to demonstrate that by the time of the arrival of

the Sayfawa, the material and sociological character of Borno had already been established, though the new comers are to be credited with the establishment of a large state and the creation of a uniform identity.

Formation of the Environment

It is well that the geographical area under consideration is properly defined at this juncture. In plain language, we are dealing with the Nigerian portion of the Chad Basin. It is bordered by the Lake Chad in the north and the Mandara highlands in the south. The two rivers, Yobe and Chari, demarcate its boundaries with Hausa land and the Republics of Chad and Camerouns. Needless to say, this demarcation is only for practical purpose and the 'borders' do not indicate a historical divide. This area has been in constant interaction with the Sahara and the highlands to the south. Infact, it is this interaction that has made possible the history of our area, as will become clear in due course.

The environment under consideration was created in the course of the evolution of Lake Chad. It is has now been established [2] that this inland Lake has been the subject of dramatic fluctuations in the past. The chronology of these fluctuations has been worked out as follows:

Between about 55,000 and 22,000 years ago the whole of our area of study was inundated by the Lake. Indeed, Biu hill was only an island, and the Lake even overflowed into the Benue. This was an extremely wet period. However, there was a dry spell between about 21,000 and 12,500 years ago when the Lake dried up, probably completely. In this period, sand dunes formed in many parts of the lake floor, the most extensive later becoming the Bama ridge and the one jutting in from Hausa land. Then from about 12,000 to about 7,000 years ago, the lake filled up again, recovering its former size. This was followed by yet another dry spell, this time leading to the formation of the Ngelewa ridge between about 7000 to 5,000 years ago. The Ngelewa ridge and the Bama ridge together formed a lagoon, ponding up the entire southern section of our area. This lagoon held back the water when the lake receded to its present size from about 5,000 to 2,500 years ago. Thus while the northern section was completely drained and became sandy, the southern section retained water and became marshy. With time, the Lagoon silted over and formed the *firgi* (or clay) soil of southern Borno, while in the north we have the *cesa* or sandy soil. When human habitation became possible round about 10,000 years ago, therefore, we find the environment dictating their activities.

Human Settlement

Although hominids must have roamed the area during the dry spells in search of game and edible plants, it was not until about 8,000 years ago that we have definite evidence of actual human settlement [7].

This leads us to wonder where the people came from. There are two obvious directions from which the area was populated. There are the highlands to the south and west and there was the Sahara whose own alternate spells of wet and dry climates occasioned human migrations. West-east migrations were also possible as has been the case with the Fulani in more recent times.

The nature of our evidence suggests that human settlement in the area started sometime around the 7th millennium B.C. as a result of the fusion of pastoralists with hunters, fishermen and cultivators [iv]. The possible origin of the pastoralists is the Sahara, which also probably contributed the art of pottery. The hunters came from the southern highlands and brought with them the art of making stone implements, while the riverside areas along the Chari, Yobe and as far south as the Benue probably supplied the fishermen who followed the receding Lake Chad. It is almost certain that the Chad Basin evolved its own agricultural techniques independently. Certainly, it was here that sorghum and millet were domesticated, later to spread to Hausa land and the Bauchi plateau.

It is possible that the suggestion of the role of the Saharan pastoralists and pottery makers will conjure up the spectre of the now discredited Hamitic hypothesis, but this needs not deter us at all. It has been recognized by all who have worked on the area, and on the basis of every type of evidence, that the Sahara and the savannah have been in constant interaction from time immemorial [vi]. This interaction has involved the movement of people from both sides. Even of recent there has been an influx of people from the Saharan region as a result of the prolonged draughts of the 1970s, and it may be remembered that the Sayfawa had moved into Borno and established an empire in historical times. In the face of all this evidence, any objections, to the idea that people could come with certain techniques from the Sahara can be overcome.

It may be noted here, however, that our evidence for human settlement in the area is not complete. It is possible to date human habitation of Borno to as far back as 8000 B.C., based on circumstantial evidence [v]. So far the most direct evidence comes from Connah's excavation at Daima, which shows human settlement from about 50 B.C., but Daima may not be the oldest site. Then there is the work of German scholars in the 1990s, and the coincidental discovery of the Dufuna Canoe. However, important as these advances have been, more work needs to be done before we can establish the antiquity of Bornoan civilization with certainty.

Finally, it is not possible to determine with confidence the identity of the peoples who first settled in Borno. As has been pointed out earlier, archaeology cannot give us that information, and we do not have oral traditions going back that far. For the same reasons,

we cannot as yet know anything for sure about their social and political organisations. We are, however, in a position to trace something of their technological history.

Technology and Economy

The economy of Borno in the period under study was directly conditioned by the ecology of the area. The region is roughly divided into two ecozones; the *firgi* zone in the south and the *cesa* of the north. The *firgi* is much more amenable to agriculture because of its water retaining capability, but it is possible that the *cesa* attracted pastoralist because of the ease of movement of livestock. There was, therefore, a possible specialization based on this, with the interface areas forming a zone of contact and fusion. Along the banks of the river Yobe, however, we have an area that was highly conducive to human settlement, because the relative aridity of the area was relieved by the waters of the river. The Yobe therefore has played a role similar to the Nile. It is not surprising, therefore, to see that the area contains a concentration of settlement mounds. Situated right on the fringes of the Sahara, the Yobe area was a point of constant contact with the Saharan peoples, and a centre of trade.

One problem that the early people of Borno had regardless of their ecozone was a lack of stone in an age that was yet to discover iron. However, the *firgi* zone, being nearer to sources of stones, had an advantage over the *cesa*, and it is here that we have the highest concentration of stone implements. It is interesting to note that even in the *firgi* zone, stone had to be transported from relatively long distances. They used coarse-grained stones for the processing of grains and fine-grained stones for the making of edged tools. To obtain these, they had to go to Hadjer el-Hamis near the Chari delta which was about eighty kilometres in a straight line from Daima and about two hundred and ten kilometres if they used water transportation. The other source was near Marwa, about one hundred and eighty kilometres in a straight line [7]. Similar distances were covered from the Yobe area. This problem has led to speculation on the possibility of an ancient trade in stones, though one is at a loss as to how such a trade could be organized in that era [7]. During this age, another extremely important tool was bone, and this was procured from both domestic and wild animals, as well as from fish. These people were, therefore, able to utilize resources that were immediately available to them in order to solve their own problems.

For pottery making, the people did not have to go far, as clay was immediately available. Strong pots were made by firing the clay. Even when these pots were broken, the potsherds were preserved for their re-use value as necklace and other ornaments, such as lip and nose-plugs. Giant pots are evidently visible in Borno depicting the old civilization of the 'So' people excavated in areas around Geidam, Damasak and Ngala

in present day Yobe and Borno States. Moreover, burnt bricks technology added more value to the knowledge of manipulating clay in Borno for architectural and defensive purposes [1].

Stones were chipped into hand-axes, knives and arrow-heads. Undoubtedly, the fashioning of stone tools was the most important technology in the early period, and was to continue even after the acquisition of iron-working techniques, probably because of the relative scarcity of iron ore. The stone and bone tools made by the early people of Borno bore similarities to those made in the Sahara, but the Sahara finds were dated earlier. However, it should be remembered that work on Borno has only just started, and much older sites may yet be discovered. In the meantime, it is assumed that the techniques may have flowed in from the Sahara. The Sahara sites of similar culture but which predate Borno includes Abukar, Kobadi, Bamako, Arouan, Asselar, Tamaya, Mellet, in Fezzan and Taferjit [7].

The Bornoan Iron Age appears to have started around 50 A.D, when iron implements of apparently ritual significance started to appear alongside stone tools. It is possible that magnetite was obtained around Mandara, though it seems Borno too had its own type of iron, as a colonial source indicates:

“Much iron of an inferior quality” had at one time been made at Monguno “from iron stone nodules which were dug out of the black clay around the town” [7].

No doubt the discovery of iron and the subsequent technological revolution led to an increase in economic activity, particularly agriculture and hunting. It is from this time that most of the features of present day agricultural activity as well as of other crafts such as carving are to be dated. It was also from this period (C.50 A.D. – C. 700 AD) that we have definite evidence of the domestication of sorghum and millet, especially the *masakwa* of the *firgi* zone [7].

The agricultural technique of the *firgi* deserves some mention here. The *masakwa* is a quick ripening grain which is planted, not in the rainy season when the land is flooded, but immediately after the rains. The farmer took care to pond up the water by making ridges on the farm just before the rains. In the rainy season the fields are flooded. After the rains the ridges prevent the water from draining away. The farmers then planted the *masakwa*. The *firgi* retained the water long enough for the grain to ripen.

From about 700 A.D. to the middle of the twelfth century, the area attained self sufficiency and a considerable amount of material wealth:

Probably the appearance of huge storage pots, locally known as “So

pots”, was connected with the increased importance of grain growing. Later they were to become of significance as burial pots. It is my guess that they were intended for brewing guinea corn beer, a beverage that is still enjoyed in the area and is an obvious development from sorghum growing” [7].

The economy that developed in Borno was one based on mixed farming, with the cultivators also keeping small animals and living in a symbiotic relationship with pastoralists. They still continued to import grindstones, but bones gradually disappeared as tools, though they continued to be used for ornamental purposes. They exchanged their products for exotic goods. No doubt they exported their grain to the Sahara and obtained trade goods such as salt.

Their settlements were basically rural, since we have not seen the evidence of large towns. This was dictated by the environment. In the *firgi* zone, settlement was only possible on the small mounds that were sufficiently drained to allow continuous habitation. In the sandy plains, the pastoralists prevailed, and they were not famous for the construction of large towns. It was on the banks of the Yobe that towns were formed, and there is evidence that that area is the famous Agisimba of classical antiquity [vii]. By and large, however, the people were rural.

There is also no evidence of the existence of a large state prior to the coming of the Sayfawa. It seems that the people were organized mainly at the clan level only, though it is possible that along the River Yobe, there were the rudiments of states. More work need to be done along these lines.

CONCLUSION

We may conclude with a quotation from Connah, who is responsible for most of our evidence:

“The archaeological evidence... suggests that by the early second millennium A.D. there were in this area not only specialized mixed farmer adapted to the conditions of different ecozones, but also a number of specialized craftsman. Any attempt to identify these must be partly guess work, but they probably included potters, blacksmiths, “bronze-workers, cloth workers, leather-workers, grindstone-makers, salt-makers, natron traders, builders, hunters, fishermen and even priests” [7].

It is obvious that the area had developed its distinctive civilization before the arrival of the Kanuri, who were probably for the most part culturally assimilated, certainly the economic base for the later kingdom of Borno had been established long before. As to the ethnography of pre-Sayfawa Borno, we shall not hazard to go into it in our present state of knowledge. The people were certainly speakers of Chadic languages, and it is possible that the Chadic speaking peoples surrounding Borno today are largely descended from the original inhabitants [10 & viii].

Notes

- I. Perhaps there is a need to co-ordinate the researches of undergraduate and graduate students of the University of Maiduguri, gearing them to the collection of vital information in this area.
- II. Such traditions are not peculiar to Borno. *The Kano Chronicles* describes the pre-Bagauda inhabitants of Kano as giants, with the same qualities.
- III. A lot of peoples on the Bauchi Plateau and the Benue Valley claim origin from around the Chad Basin.
- IV. This conclusion is based on Connah's Daima in a settlement that is quite small.
- V. Connah guesses that man might have lived in the area almost as long as anywhere else.
- VI. It is even possible that most of the inhabitants of today's West African savannah had lived further north in the past. Certainly, this is the general tone of Murray Last's recent work, "The Early Kingdoms of the Nigerian Savannah" in *History of West Africa*, Vol. 1 (2nd edition), pp. 157 – 224.
- VII. Murray Last considers Agisimba to be identical with Ngizim, who had once lived north of the Yobe, M. Last, op. cit, pp. 157 – 224.
- VIII. See Kyari Tijjani, "Political and Administrative Development in Pre-colonial Borno, Vol. 1. Ph.D Thesis, A.B.U) 1980 for a survey in Borno (p. 164–166). He also writes: "The very existence of such settlement mounds as Kursakata and Daima in the Chad Daima in the Chad Basin region which go back at least to the beginning of the second millennium B.C. indicate (sic) to use the prevalence of organized human existence in these regions which must be seriously taken into consideration whenever

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