The Chad region as a crossroads

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in collaboration with
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The Lake Chad region, which is a savanna zone, has been inhabited by pastoral and agricultural peoples since before the beginning of the Christian era. To the north, where the savanna gradually merges into desert, nomadic peoples predominate, though there are also oases with settled communities. To the south, especially along the banks of the rivers that flow into Lake Chad, mainly sedentary cultures are found. The desiccation of the Sahara and the shrinkage of Lake Chad drew peoples from various directions towards the diminishing lake. The coming together of peoples from various no longer viable areas and their attempts to adjust to the changing environment and circumstances form the background of the history of the area.

For a clearer insight into the significance of the historical facts, a precise account of the climatic changes which occurred during the period under review would have been desirable. In fact very little is known about the climate of the Sahel during the first millennium of the Christian era. However, there are several indications that climatic conditions during that period were, on the whole, better than those now prevailing. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that, between the third century and the beginning of the thirteenth century of the Christian era, the waters of Lake Chad flowed almost continuously into the Bahr al-Ghazāl, which presupposes that the lake level exceeded 286 m. Moreover, J. Maley considers, in the light of various data, that a wet period occurred in the middle of the first millennium, and that the Sahelian region underwent an arid phase in the eleventh century. The area of contact between sedentary and nomadic peoples must therefore have extended further to the north than at present.

Moreover, it cannot be taken for granted that the Lake Chad region was always a crossroads for trade and fruitful interactions. Currently available dates for the spread of iron-working techniques suggest that some populations in the region long remained cut off from the major innovatory trends. The main divide in this regard would seem to be between west and east rather than between north and south of Air, at Ekne Wan Apara, as early as −540 ± 90, a date closely obtained at Taruga (Nok culture). Iron-working techniques were adopted in Lake Chad and Tibesti, the vestiges of which have been discovered. Known as a smith, this culture flourished only during its Christian period. Oth the southern shores of Lake Chad, iron was not to be found or smelted until the sixth century. The iron-working techniques were adapted to the natural conditions of the terrain. The camel made long distance transport relatively heavy loads to the Lake Chad region, the natural for crossing the Sahara: a whole new trade route opened up, mid-way, the vast oasis of Kūr. Another opportunity for contact with the Dairif and Kordofan. In the 16th century, the routes linking the Nile valley and the Red Sea were linked to the caravan routes.

1. J. Maley, 1981, pp. 65, 101. Lake Chad's present level is situated at 282 m.
2. Ibid., pp. 65, 278.
7. G. Connah, 1971, p. 57. Having proposed +50 as the date of the iron-working techniques, P. Connah would have the existence of an ancient trade route.
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...rather than between north and south. Indeed, it is now known that, to the south of Air, at Ekne Wan Aparan, iron-smelting techniques were known as early as \(-540 \pm 90\), a date closely concordant with that of \(-440 \pm 140\) obtained at Taruga (Nok culture) in central Nigeria. In the region of Zinder, between Air and Lake Chad, iron-working would seem to have been practised in the seventh century before the Christian era. Elsewhere, iron-working techniques were adopted much later. At Koror Toror, between Lake Chad and Tibesti, the vestiges of a culture based on iron metallurgy have been discovered. Known as hadaddar after the Arabic term for ‘blacksmith’, this culture flourished only between the fourth and eighth centuries of the Christian era. The painted pottery found on the same sites points to affinities with two major civilizations of the Nile Valley: Meroe and Nubia during its Christian period. Other data are available for the region around the southern shores of Lake Chad. According to relatively unreliable datings, iron was not to be found on the major site of Daima until the fifth or sixth century of the Christian era, and it was later still before iron-smelting techniques were adopted. These few indications concerning the archaeology of iron show that, prior to the foundation of Kano, the Lake Chad region was remarkable more for its divisions and unequal levels of development than for any unifying factor.

A process of more rapid and spectacular changes appears to have begun around the middle of the first millennium of the Christian era. It was triggered off probably indirectly by the introduction of the camel into the area either from North Africa or – as seems more probable – from the Nile Valley, and its adoption by the Zagawa and the Tubu. Being far better adapted to the natural conditions prevailing in the Sahara than was the horse, the camel made long desert crossings perfectly feasible, and could transport relatively heavy loads into the baggage. Between the Fezzan and the Lake Chad region, the natural conditions were particularly propitious for crossing the Sahara: a whole series of small oases and natural waterholes and, mid-way, the vast oasis of Kauwar, provided an ideal caravan route.

Another opportunity for commerce was with the Nile Valley through Darfur and Kordofan. In the absence of any precise archaeological data concerning these routes one can only conjecture; it would seem that in the earlier period trade with the Nile Valley was more important. On the other hand the existence of the ancient kingdom of the Garamantes in the Fezzan was undoubtedly a major factor in the organization of long-distance trade.

7. G. Connah, 1971, p. 57. Having reassessed previous datings, the same author now proposes +50 as the date of the introduction of iron to Daima (G. Connah, 1981, pp. 148–149).
but again the absence of evidence concerning the southern oases of the Fezzān and Kawār, where remains of fortifications of uncertain date are visible to the naked eye, makes any positive conclusion uncertain.9

It would seem, however, that as early as the seventh century of the Christian era the central Saharan route was plied by small caravans from the Fezzān, since the celebrated Arab conqueror ‘Ukba b. Nāfī would have found it difficult to penetrate as far as Kawār—which third/ninth century sources assert he did—had the trail not been blazed before him by either Berber or Zaghāwī traders.10 The Kawār oasis11 was certainly not the final destination of these caravans and the traders had undoubtedly already passed beyond it, to reach the Lake Chad region. In later times the central Saharan route became more important following the establishment of regular trade between the Lake Chad area and the Mediterranean coast which followed the Islamic conquests and the rise of Muslim states in North Africa and later in the Sahara.

In the south, around Lake Chad, a whole series of factors, including not only trade expansion but also the development of better weapons and tools and the evolution of new ways of life to deal with changing circumstances, were to lead to the foundation and expansion of a vast political entity, Kānem-Bornu, whose unifying power and capacity for innovation helped to shape the destiny of the entire region up to the beginning of the colonial era. However, before describing the foundation and early development of that political entity in greater detail, it is proper to give a concise, chronologically balanced account of the principal peoples or, where precise knowledge of them is lacking, of the linguistic groups dwelling between the middle Niger and the Dārfūr mountains.

Peoples and languages of the Chad region

The Arab geographers provide information that throws a revealing light on the early history of Africa. Concerned as they were to recreate as accurate as possible a ‘word picture’ (ṣirat al-arḍ), these authors gathered geographical data on the Muslim countries and on the lands situated beyond Islam’s boundaries. Their information should, however, be treated with caution since most of them had never visited black Africa but gathered their information from traders who were not unbiased and from black African pilgrims many of whom had left home a long time before and may therefore not have been in a position to observe with the naked eye, make any positive conclusion uncertain.

when describing foreign peoples. Our clichés and the names given by us to them are, however, invariably encountered in descriptions general terms, a few authors. Thus we invariably encounter references to the Habash in Ethiopia and the Sāh in North Africa, although the geographical placing of these references from one author to another. It was not until the seventh/thirteenth century, however, that the Lake Chad region became available as an equivalent.

Before Ibn Sa’d, most Arab authors when referring to the Central Sudan use the term ‘Chad region’ but the modern use of the term is a result of research by informed Arab authors such as al-Iṣrāḥi, who used it in the present-day Tuareg of the region, without identifying it with the present-day Tuareg of the region, without identifying it. Therefore, we can say that the present-day Tuareg, who are a group of pastoral nomads, are the main source of information about the people who lived in the region in the thirteenth century. The term Kayakau is a generic name used by the Kanuri. The name Kayakau is a generic name used by the Kanuri.

10. See, for example, Y. Urzy, 1966; M.-J. Tubiana, 1964.
11. See, for example, Y. Urzy, 1966; M.-J. Tubiana, 1964; D. Lange, 1977.
The Chad region as a crossroads

The Chad region

As the seventh century of the Hegira plied by small caravans from the oasis of ʿUqba b. Nāfiʾ, the Küwaʾr—which third/ninth century was certainly not the traders had undoubtedly reached the Chad region. In later times the Küwaʾr formed the establishment of the Lake Chad region became available. Only in modern times do we find its equivalent.

Before Ibn Saʿīd, most Arab geographers mention the Zaghawa people when referring to the Central Sudanic peoples (an expression used here synonymously with the 'Chad region'). Until the fourth/tenth century, well-informed Arab authors suggest that the Zaghawa held sway over Kānem; however, al-Idrīsī, writing in the sixth/seventh century, gives particulars that bring out their purely nomadic nature. Disregarding the lessons to be learned from earlier sources, modern authors have frequently played down the role of the Zaghawa, either regarding them as a marginal group or, on the contrary, treating them as an extremely extensive group, identical to the present-day Tuubi. As will be seen, the Zaghawa did in fact undergo radical transformations as a result of a dynastic change which occurred in Kānem in the middle of the second half of the fifth/eleventh century. The ethnic balance and the ratio of sedentary to nomadic peoples ceased to be the same after the advent of the new dynasty in Kānem.

The main internal source, the Dīwān al-Salām Barnū, contains an ethnic nomenclature that cannot be checked against that of external sources. For until the end of the seventh/eighth century, the chroniclers of the royal court took pains to indicate the names of the ethnic groups from which the successive queen mothers had originated. We know, for example, that in the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries the kings of Kānem married women of the Tomaghra, the Kay and the Tuubi. Today, the name Tomaghra is applied to a clan dwelling among the Teda, the Kānemba and the Kanuri. The name Kay denotes a Kanuri clan, while Tuubi is the generic name used by the Kānemba speakers to refer to the Teda-Daza.

Therefore not have been in a position to know the current situation at home. When describing foreign peoples the Arab geographers often used literary clichés and the names given by them are in many cases generic terms. Thus we invariably encounter references to the Zandji in East Africa, the Ḥabash in Ethiopia and the Sudān in West Africa, without the defining characteristics of these 'peoples' ever being properly established. In addition to general terms, a few authors also mention ethnonyms passed on by travellers; however, their identification often poses problems. Moreover, the geographical placing of these ethnic entities varies considerably from one author to another. It was not until Ibn Saʿīd produced his Geography in the seventh/thirteenth century that highly precise information on the Lake Chad region became available. Only in modern times do we find its equivalent.

12. Concerning the merits of the Arab sources of this period, see Unesco, General History of Africa, Vol. I, ch. 5.
15. See, for example, Y. Urvoy, 1949, p. 16; A. Smith, 1971, pp. 168–9.
According to the most likely hypothesis, the traditions recorded in the Dīwān refer to the successive matrimonial alliances between the kings of Kānem and the various nomadic groups whose martial prowess the earlier kings found useful in sustaining their power.

Further to the east, between the Zaghawa and the Nūba, al-Idrīsī situates the Tādjū, whose existence, probably already dating back to the remote past, seems to have been overlooked by earlier authors. According to oral traditions collected by the German traveller Gustav Nachtigal, the Dādjū – probably identical to the Tādjū – gave rise to the first development of Dārfūr as a state structure. The nomadic influence was less perceptible in this region than around Lake Chad. The present distribution of the small Dādjū communities between the Wadai plateau and the Nūba hills, as well as their traditions concerning their origins and their sedentary way of life, indicate rather that they are of Nilotic origin. Nevertheless, in the seventh/thirteenth century, they appear to have been under pressure from the Zaghawa who, having been excluded from power in Kānem, apparently sought to re-establish a coherent political entity at the southern extremity of the great trans-Saharan route linking the Dārfūr region to Egypt. In fact, the Dādjū surrendered power not to the Zaghawa but to the Tundjur, resisting assimilation only by withdrawing into areas of refuge. The Zaghawa, by contrast, were able to preserve their ethnic cohesion, despite the fact that their grazing area had been considerably reduced by the expansion of the Teda-Daza (Tubu). Even today, the Arabs of Chad and the Sudan recognize the specific identity of the Zaghawa (who call themselves Beri) and the Gorhan (Daza), despite the fact that they survive only in the form of small residual communities, which no longer seem united to anyone but an outsider observer.

Taking as his basis a source dating back to the first half of the seventh/thirteenth century, Ibn Sa‘īd provides some extremely valuable particulars concerning the Lake Chad region. It is indeed clear from his Geography that, in the time of Dūnāma DiBALAM (c. 607/1210–646/1248), the Kānem people had not yet driven the ancestors of the Buduma back to the Lake Chad islands, and it is reasonable to suppose that the area inhabited by the Kotoko extended beyond the clay lands (firki) of the alluvial plain of the lower Chari. Situating several ethnic groups with great precision, Ibn Sa‘īd gives the impression that the Komadugu Yobe valley was still settled by Bede communities (later assimilated by the Kanuri or driven back on to the territory of the Ngizim) and that, on the other side of Lake Chad, the Kurī (today assimilated to the Buduma in the north of the entrance to the Bahrs Kotoko, under a name that appears. In all these regions, the Kānem accepted that in earlier times the peoples extended over a large part, ever, be rash to claim that the region languages only, and it would be a faction of all speakers of Saharan languages, was animal husbandry.

South of Lake Chad, in the region the Kānem came into contact for its remarkable figurative art. Excavations conducted by G. Connah of the fierce plains engaged in a mixed economy, when agriculture and fishing. According to the same author, at the beginning of the Christian era, iron-working techniques, this made possible the transport of goods from the interior to the coast through traders. The emergence of a distinct culture reveals that the inhabitants of this area, which is still inhabited by the inhabitants of the region as the main occupation, was the construction of earth mounds for the defense of the area. The earth mound, which was erected on the site of a defensive wall, was not simply a defensive structure, but also a sign of the passage of an external threat.

22. J.-P. Lebeuf and A. M. Detournay, Archaeological work of J.-P. Lebeuf is used for chronology.
the traditions recorded in the
alliances between the kings of
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other side of Lake Chad, the Kuri

English translation by A. G. B and H. J.

See also Unesco, General History of

dark al-arba'i ('forty-day route'). It is
points out its importance for more re-

archaeological work of J.-P. Lebeuf is unfortunately characterized by a total lack of concern
for chronology.
23. This account of the chronological sequences of the 'Daima culture' closely follows
PLATE 15.1 Bronze objects from excavations at Houlof (North Cameroon)

PLATE 15.2 Primitive anthropomorphic earthenware jar from Houlof (North Cameroon)

PLATE 15.3 Deguesse hill, in the far north

farmers of the Chari plain to a readily identified as the expansion

After many centuries under Bornu, the present-day inhabitants term Sao or So to refer to their every region in which the Kanem-Bornu, it is reasonable to support nomenclature, and was used ev-

ations which were unable to resist the expression ‘Sao civilization’ most well-known culture of the to its established present-day Komadugu Yobe and the sou-

tectural terms, however, these Linguistic kinship alone can c

disparate groups.

Nevertheless, in the case of provides a number of pointers o

24. In the Daima region, the Kot

25. It is worth noting that Conna
farmers of the Chari plain to a marked degree. This threat may be fairly readily identified as the expansion of the Kânem peoples.

After many centuries under the political and cultural sway of Kânem-Borno, the present-day inhabitants of the firki plains, the Kokoto, use the term Sao or Soo to refer to their ancestors. Since the same term recurs in every region in which the Kânem peoples have superseded earlier populations, it is reasonable to suppose that it belonged originally to Kânembu nomenclature, and was used everywhere to denote the indigenous populations which were unable to resist assimilation. In its precise sense, the expression ‘Sao civilization’ must therefore be applied both to the relatively well-known culture of the ancestors of the Kotoko – corresponding to its established present-day use – and to the earlier cultures of the Komadugu Yobe and the southern part of the Bahr al-Ghazl. In architectural terms, however, these three entities seem to have no affinities. Linguistic kinship alone can confer some semblance of unity upon these disparate groups.

Nevertheless, in the case of earlier periods, comparative linguistics provides a number of pointers of considerable interest. It is acknowledged

24. In the Daina region, the Kotoko adopted the Kanuri language only a few generations ago.

25. It is worth noting that Connah, drawing a clear distinction between the cultures of the firki plains and those of the Komadugu Yobe, no longer uses the term Sao to refer to a specific archaeologically identified culture.

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today that Chadic languages constitute a branch of the great Afro-Asian (or Hamito-Semitic) family. The coherence of the Chadic group is doubtless to be explained by a lengthy evolution of the proto-languages in a geographical environment conducive to linguistic contacts and exchanges. It may be supposed that conditions in various southern regions of the central Sahara became optimal when these received sufficient rainfall during the wet periods. At the beginning of the third millennium before the Christian era, living conditions began to deteriorate rapidly, and it is possible that the proto-Chadic-speaking peoples were already obliged at that time to withdraw into more southerly regions. However, it is not impossible that their withdrawal from Ténéré and the neighbouring regions occurred during a more recent period. As they entered into contact with black African groups they may have gradually lost their Sudano-Mediterranean characteristics. Today, various groups of Chadic-speakers are to be found settled in refuge areas between the Niger and the Wadai Plateau. Of these groups, only the Hausa developed a new dynamism, resulting in a renewed expansion of their language. However, the history of the 'economic take-off' of the Hausa city-states pertains to a later period.26

The second major language family of the Chad region is the Nilo-Saharan family. In contrast to Afro-Asian languages, the languages of this family do not extend beyond the black African sphere. The most westerly language of this group is Songhay, which is spoken all along the Niger River, from Jenne to Gaya. Further to the north, however, there are also small groups of farmers (Sudanese) cultivating oases and a few groups of nomadic camel-drivers (of Berber origin) who speak different dialectal forms of Songhay.27 The second sub-group of the Nilo-Saharan family consists of Saharan languages (Zaghawa, Teda-Daza and Kanhembu-Kanuri).28 Today, all contact between Songhay and Saharan languages has ceased; however, the many lexical forms common to the two language groups suggest that Sudanese herdsmen (and probably also farmers) speaking Nilo-Saharan languages occupied a large part of the region between the great bend of the Niger and the Ennedi mountains. The geographical continuity of this process of settlement must have been broken by the combined effect of the desertification of the Sahara and the advance of the Libyco-Berbers during the last centuries before the Christian era.29 To

The kingdom of Zaghawa

The first mention of Kānem in the records of Ibn ʿAbī l-Dīnār is in a letter dated 605/1207. This tells the story of a king who was deposed by a group of people led by ʿAbū ʿAmr. The story is told in the form of a letter from Zaghāwā to the king of the Berbers of Mauritania, with whom he was at war. The letter describes the conditions of life in Zaghāwā and the problems faced by the king in maintaining his power. The letter also includes a description of the country's natural resources and its people.

28. The linguistic classification followed here is that of J. H. Greenberg, 1963b. Although the inclusion of Songhay in the Nilo-Saharan family has been disputed by P.-F. Lacroix, 1969, R. Nicolai has shown (in a forthcoming study) that the relationship between the Songhay and Saharan languages is even closer than Greenberg had thought.
29. According to P. Munson, 1988, p. 462, the Dhar Tichit region (Mauritania) was invaded by Libyco-Berber warriors in the seventh century before the Christian era. The arrival of the Libyco-Berber in the Air by −370 ± 40 has been attested (Iwalen site to the south of Mount Greboun: J.-P. Roset, personal communication).
the west, the proto-Songhay-speaking peoples were to initiate the founding of the Kāw–Kāw (Gao), while in the Lake Chad region the proto-Saharan speaking peoples imposed their sway over Kānem. The relatively slight linguistic variation within the Saharan group can be fairly easily explained by the subsequent history of Kānem and, in particular, by the evolution of relations between the central power and the various groups of ‘black Saharan nomads’.  

The kingdom of Zaghāwa

The first mention of Kānem in written sources is to be found in a text by al-Ya’kūbi dated 258/872. This author tells us that in his time Kānem was under the rule of a people called the Zaghāwa. The same people are also mentioned by Ibn Kūtayba (d. 276/889) on the basis of a report going back to the beginning of the second/eighth century. At the end of the fourth/tenth century, another Arab author, al-Muhallabī, gives a great deal of information about the king of the Zaghāwa from which it is clear that the boundaries of his realm were the same as those of the kingdom of Kānem. Zaghāwa ruled from Kānem only came to an end around 468/1075, when a new dynasty, the Sefuwa, came to power in the same state and drove the Zaghāwa eastward, into a region where they are still to be found today.  

But what role exactly did the Zaghāwa play in the founding of Kānem? Al-Ya’kūbi states that the various West African peoples he knew of ‘took possession of their realms’ after a long east–west migration:

The first of their realms is that of the Zaghāwa. They established themselves at a place called Kānem. Their dwellings are reed huts, and they have no towns. Their king is called Kākura. Among the Zaghāwa there is a clan called Ħawdīn: they have a Zaghāwa king.  

From the explicit wording of the text it might be deduced that the Zaghāwa were among the earliest inhabitants of Kānem, but without further evidence this is thought to be quite unlikely. The reference to the Ħawdīn is

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30. The expression is used by J. Chapelle, 1957. Concerning the evolution of relations between Kānem and the nomadic groups, more precise information will be found in Unesco, General History of Africa, Vol. IV, ch. 10. The following articles containing some more recent interpretations may also be usefully consulted: D. Lange, 1972, 1982a.
36. It is possible, as suggested also by other modern writers, that this name refers to the Hausa.
as a particular clan among the Zaghāwa seems to indicate, in fact, that the Zaghāwa were far from being a homogeneous people.

It seems probable that a dominant aristocracy, which produced both the king of Kānem and the king of the Ḥawdīn gave its name to the whole group of peoples settled in both countries.

Al-Muhallabī, a century later, supplies the important detail that the Zaghāwa (using the term in a broad sense) comprised many peoples. While he does not refer to a dominant aristocracy (the ‘true’ Zaghāwa) he lays great stress on their king's omnipotence:

[The Zaghāwa] venerate their king and worship him in place of Allāh the Most High. They imagine that he eats no food. His servants take it to him secretly in his houses: no one knows whence it comes. If any one of his subjects happens to meet the camel carrying the victuals, he is immediately killed on the spot [...] As he has absolute power over his subjects, he reduces to slavery whom he wishes [...] The religion [of the Zaghāwa] is the worship of their kings: they believe it is they who bring life and death and sickness and health.

The great power of the king of the Zaghāwa, already apparent from al-Ya'qūbī's much more concise account, and the very elaborate royal ritual described by al-Muhallabī, must be the result of a considerable number of factors, as has already been mentioned above. It is also unlikely that Kānem was founded as the result of a massive invasion by diverse migrants, as some writers have suggested. The most plausible hypothesis is that a small group of people triggered off state-building development in a region where iron-working techniques had been known since the fourth century of the Christian era (ḥaddād culture) and where the possession of horses was not only the mark of very considerable prestige but also a guarantee of superior fighting power. Equipped with weapons made of iron, and having the advantage of contacts, however rudimentary, with the outside world, this group - doubtless the Zaghāwa - gradually brought under its sway the agricultural and pastoral peoples living in the region south-east of Kawār, between Lake Chad and the Bahir al-Ghazāl, the region later to be known as Kānem. The dominant Zaghāwa aristocracy is not likely to have come into being until later, although according to this hypothesis, the Zaghāwa as a whole may not have been ethnically different from the major groups of cultivators and pastoralists over whom they ruled at first. It seems to have been only at a very much later stage, in the time of al-Muhallabī, that diverse ethnic groups were integrated into one and the same state structure.

Al-Ibrāhīm, in the middle of the sixth/twelfth century, distinguished between the kingdom of the Zaghāwa, but the problem has misled many historians about the region. In reality, if al-Ibrāhīm’s royal courts, if becomes clear that he refers to two different periods in the Zaghāwa domination and the Sāhūyan period, with a formation into chronological periods of the geographical plane. Ibn Butdba, a century, puts the Zaghāwa to the era in which they still live today - and states that under the rule of the king of Kānem, as we can find, the end, that it is more likely that the Zaghāwa by the birth and growth that an earlier ethnic group that constituted the other groups in the region, and thereby brought into being between the Nile and the Niger.

We can go a step further. If some of the Zaghāwa form an inseparable body, we may deduce that the earliest Ibn Kutayba, reports that the Berbers, the text mentions the Nūba, the Nūba, and the Berbers. The main piece of evidence, the Zaghāwa, is that the Berbers, the followers of the Garamantes mentioned again at the time great geographer al-Khwārizmī, 1421, in the Feza, 'Alwā, 42. Half a century later, the Zaghāwa kingdom in Kānem described the Zaghāwa kingdom, we might have been tempted as meaning that the inhabitant stage in the general process of change, show that under the concept of reality, one and the same historical dating from the beginning of

38. The outfall of Lake Chad, not to be confused with the White Nile tributary of the same name.
42. Al-Khwārizmī, 1926, p. 6.
The Chad region as a crossroads

between the kingdom of the Zaghâwa and that of Kânem and his evidence has misled many historians about the role of the Zaghâwa in the Lake Chad region. In reality, if al-Idrîsî’s reports about the Central Sudan are taken together, it becomes clear that he juxtaposes items of information relating to two different periods in the history of Kânem: the period of Zaghâwa domination and the Sêfuwa period. Instead of putting these items of information into chronological perspective, the author projects them on to the geographical plane.39 Ibn Sa‘îd, writing in the seventh/thirteenth century, puts the Zaghâwa to the east of Kânem, near the Dâdo – where they still live today – and states that the majority of them were at that time under the rule of the king of Kânem.40 In the light of this body of evidence, we find, in the end, that it is more natural to explain the emergence of the Zaghâwa by the birth and growth of the state of Kânem than to postulate that an earlier ethnic group of Zaghâwa, homogeneous and distinct from the other groups in the region, conquered all the indigenous communities and thereby brought into being the first and largest state to be founded between the Nile and the Niger.

We can go a step further. If it is true that the history of Kânem and that of the Zaghâwa form an inseparable whole up to the fifth/eleventh century, we may deduce that the earliest mention of the Zaghâwa, which we owe to Wahb b. Munabbih, indicates that a state of Kânem was already in existence in his time. Wahb b. Munabbih (d. c. 112/730) was one of the famous traditionists of the Yemen in the Umayyad period. His evidence was reported by Ibn Kutayba (213/828–276/889). In addition to the Zaghâwa, the text mentions the Nûba, the Zandî, the Fazzân, the Ḥabasha, the Copts and the Berbers.41 The main point to note is that, according to this early piece of evidence, the Zaghâwa were differentiated both from the Fazzân (the successors of the Garamantes) and from the Berbers. The Zaghâwa were mentioned again at the beginning of the third/ninth century by the geographer al-Khuwârizmî (d. c. 231/845), who shows them on his map both south of the Fazzân and south of the Nubian kingdom of ‘Alwa.42 Half a century later, as we have seen, al-Ya‘kûbi places the Zaghâwa kingdom in Kânem. Had al-Muhallabî not subsequently described the Zaghâwa kingdom in great detail without mentioning Kânem, we might have been tempted to interpret al-Ya‘kûbi’s reference to Kânem as meaning that the inhabitants of that region had completed an important stage in the general process of becoming settled. All the evidence goes to show that under the concept of Zaghâwa and that of Kânem there lies, in reality, one and the same historical fact: the first mention of the Zaghâwa, dating from the beginning of the second/eighth century, certainly seems to

42. Al-Khuwârizmî, 1926, p. 6; J. M. Cuq, 1975, p. 44.
indicate that the large state at the southern end of the central Saharan route was already in existence then. Moreover, if it is true that in the seventh/thirteenth century the indigenous Kānem traditionists had extensive knowledge of the royal genealogies and that traces of their knowledge are to be found in the Diwan and in information transmitted by al-Makrizi at the beginning of the ninth/fifteenth century, we can even date the beginning of the state of Kānem to slightly before the hidjra.\textsuperscript{43} The expedition to Kawar undertaken by "Ulūb b. Nāfi" in the early days of the Arab conquest shows the importance of north–south exchanges in this region. The control of these exchanges was no doubt in the hands of a Sudanic state beyond the Arabs' range.

Largely on the strength of oral tradition, some authors have taken the view that the Sāo were the indigenous inhabitants of Kānem, and that from an early date they were under pressure from the nomad peoples further to the north.\textsuperscript{44} According to this theory, the Sāo, being a sedentary people, lived in village communities — or even small fortified towns — and had been organized into chieftaincies since time immemorial. After their subjugation by the Zaghawa nomads, the latter were believed to have learned from them the forms of political organization which made it possible to establish a large-scale state.

In point of fact, however, none of the assumptions underlying this theory of the foundation of Kānem rest on solid ground. Neither the sharp division between nomads and sedentary peoples, nor the distinction between indigenous and alien peoples, and least of all the postulated existence from an early date of a Sāo people (or culture) is a tenable proposition. The Sāo appear in written sources for the first time in the middle of the eighth/nineteenth century (Diwan)\textsuperscript{45} and they are mentioned by various tenth/sixteenth-century authors: at that time the term 'Sāo' was used for a group of peoples established to the east and south-east of Lake Chad and probably speaking Chadic languages. It was only during their long resistance to the expansion of Kānem-Bornu that these peoples developed the forms of political and social organization that gave them their distinctive character. To attribute to the indigenous inhabitants of ancient Kānem the characteristics that were developed in relatively recent times by the indigenous inhabitants of Bornu (situated to the west of Lake Chad) is therefore a gross anachronism.

Moreover, there is no reason to assume that a sharp division existed,

\textsuperscript{43} D. Lange, 1977, pp. 141–3.
\textsuperscript{45} In connection with the matrimonial alliances of the kings of Kānem, the Diwan records for the sixteenth/nineteenth century the names of some sedentary Kānem clans, but they seem to reappear among the population of present-day Kānem (cf. Unesco, \textit{General History of Africa}, Vol. IV, ch. 10).

particularly as regards ethnic characteristics, between sedentary peoples, or between indigenous Kānem. It would, for instance, be difficult to believe that the indigenous inhabitants spoke Chadic. On the contrary, there is evidence both in the written record and in the nomadic tribes that the population of the area was closely related to Saharan languages. It is easier to understand how an area which today also has a mixed language the only one to include the population without the people power to take coercive action between the sedentary and nomadic peoples.

[The kingdom of the Zaghawa comprises 'many nations (\textit{ummar}) of different ethnic groups within the fourth/nineteenth century, the king was a hereditary ruler, and was no longer connected with the peoples speaking Saharan language. The Zaghawa on the other hand was larger but the donkey is the most important animal in the Hausa caravans, and it was the king of the Zaghawa who was known as the donkey king.]

The kingdom of the Zaghawa comprises 'many nations (\textit{ummar}) of different ethnic groups within the fourth/nineteenth century, the king was a hereditary ruler, and was no longer connected with the peoples speaking Saharan language. The Zaghawa on the other hand was larger but the donkey is the most important animal in the Hausa caravans, and it was the king of the Zaghawa who was known as the donkey king. It is undeniable that the Sudan contributed greatly to the cultural assimilation of the city-states of the Hausa empire, and the kingdom of Bagirmi was formed by the union of the Zaghawa, the Sāo, and other peoples.

\textsuperscript{46} Al-Muhallabī, \textit{apud} Yākūt, 1849, p. 587.

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particularity as regards ethnic characteristics, between nomads and sedentary peoples, or between indigenous and alien peoples, at the time of ancient Kānem. It would, for instance, be an entirely arbitrary statement to say that the indigenous inhabitants of Kānem, like the Sao, spoke a Chadic language. On the contrary, there may be a certain degree of cultural affinity between the sedentary and nomad groups – such as still exists to this day between the sedentary Kānembu and the nomadic Tubu and Daza (speaking closely related Saharan languages) – and if we accept this, it will be easier to understand how an aristocracy like that of the Zaghāwā (who today also speak a Saharan language) could have come to dominate the rest of the population without the division between two groups of peoples becoming particularly apparent to later foreign observers. Al-Muhallabī’s account – the only one to include information about the way of life – suggests peaceful coexistence between cultivators and herdsmen, the power to take coercive action being apparently confined to the king:

[The kingdom of the Zaghāwā] is under cultivation from one end to the other. Their houses are all reed huts, and likewise the palace of their king ... As he has absolute power over his subjects, he reduces to slavery whom he wishes. His wealth consists of livestock: sheep, cattle, camels and horses. The principal crops of their country are millet, beans and also wheat. The majority of the King’s subjects go naked, wearing nothing but leather loin-cloths. They live by tillage and herding livestock.46

The kingdom of the Zaghāwā is not portrayed in this text as an entirely homogeneous whole. On the contrary, the author states at the outset that it comprises ‘many nations (umam)’, which clearly suggests the coexistence of different ethnic groups within a single state structure. At the end of the fourth/tenth century, the kingdom of Zaghāwā evidently expanded considerably, and was no longer confined to the region inhabited by kindred peoples speaking Saharan languages. Kānem proper, lying between Lake Chad and the Bahr al-Ghazāl, was still the centre of the kingdom, but other peoples on the periphery had been brought under its sway. According to al-Muhallabī, its length was fifteen days’ journey and its width the same. In connection with Kaw-Kaw the same author states that the kingdom of the Zaghāwā was larger but the kingdom of Kaw-Kaw more prosperous.47 It is undeniable that from that time on the largest state in the Central Sudan contributed greatly to the expansion of the Saharan languages and the cultural assimilation of neighbouring peoples. It was only later that the city-states of the Hausa came into being on its western border and the kingdom of Bagirmi was formed to the south-east of Lake Chad, in the

land inhabited by Sara-Bongo-Bagirmian-speaking peoples, contributing in their turn to the expansion of other Sudanic cultures. 48

In Kānem, another important development that took place at this time was an increase in the number of sedentary communities, together with the founding of small towns. Al-Ya'qūbī, at the end of the third/nineteenth century, wrote in so many words that the Ḥadhāwa had no towns. 49 But al-Muḥallabi, writing more than a century later, gives the names of two towns, Mānān and Tarāẓākī. 50 The town of Mānān is also known to us from the Diwan, and Ibn Sā'īd, in the seventh/eleventh century, stated that it was the capital of the ‘pagan ancestors’ of the Sefawa. 51 There is evidence to show, however, that in the fifth/eleventh century and the first half of the sixth/twelfth century the kings of Kānem still took their principal wives from two nomad groups, the Tomaghra and the Tuba. It was not until the first half of the thirteenth century, in the reign of Dūnāma Dībalāmi (c. 607/1210–646/1248), that sedentary elements finally gained the upper hand. This development went hand in hand with the progress of Islamization.

The progress of Islamization

Written sources yield very little material bearing directly on the growth of Islam in Kānem or in the neighbouring regions, and we are reduced to making use of odd scraps of information to build up a very imperfect picture of the process which led first to the conversion of the kings of the old dynasty, and then to the decline of the Ḥadhāwa and the advent of the Sefawa. As regards the beginning of Kānem, it is well established that Islam played no part in the founding of this Sudanic state, nor in the early stages of its development. In Kāwār, at the northern extremity of the central Sudan, Islam made a fleeting appearance with the expedition led by ‘Ukbā b. Nafl shortly after the middle of the first/seventh century, but it probably did not leave a deep impression. It was only in the second/eighth century when the Berbers of the Fezzān and Kawār were converted in large numbers, that Islam began to reach more southerly regions.

48. On the formation of the Hausa city-states, cf. A. Smith, 1970, and Unesco, General History of Africa, Vol IV, ch. 11. As regards the origins of Bagirmi, we must probably accept a much earlier date than that suggested by oral tradition. Indeed, the Diwan states that ‘Abd Allāh b. Kādāy (c. 1315–35) waged war against the Lord of Bagirmi (§ 21). Moreover, it would certainly seem that the name Bakarmi given by Ibn Sā’īd (mid-seventh/thirteenth century) also refers to Bagirmi (Ibn Sā’īd, 1958, p. 49). J. M. Cuquet, 1975, p. 217.


50. Al-Muhalabi, apud Yākū, 1866–73, Vol. 2, p. 932. In Kāwār, al-Muhalabi mentions the towns of Bimla and al-Kasaba (ibid.). Djado, situated further to the north and at some distance from the great trans-Saharan route, may already have been a staging-post on the Wargla route.


Like many Berber peoples, some adopted a heterodox form of Islam with the Khāridjite faction. The central Saharan caravan route, crossing the Lake Chad area — and a fortiori the Mediterranean. Hence it is clear that even if this did not propagate south of the Saharan but Indirect evidence of Ibadite influence and bibliographical information concerning Dīnawunī, a governor of the Djawah, well survives to our day. It is to be noted that the first half of the third/ninth century, in addition to Berber and Arabic, saw the introduction of the Latin to the Central Sudan.

In the Fezzān, the situation in the tenth century is complex, as the Berbers of the Fezzān, and it is possible that event Arab geographers such as Ibn Dīnawunī, a governor of the Djawah, to state that it was called Kuwār (the capital of the Fezzān) to mean that the transition from Islam proceeded more rapidly southwards, though Kānem was also well off to the south.

In fact, nothing very definite is known about the earliest times of the Berber occupation of Kāwār, or even at Zawīa (the capital of the Fezzān around 932) the inhabitants of Kāwār, to state that it was called Kuwār in the tenth century. It is clear that the Berbers of the Fezzān was inhabited by Berbers, and that even at that early date they may have been slave-trading. The other possibility is that the Berbers of the Fezzān may have been slave-trading. The other possibility is that the Berbers of the Fezzān may have been slave-trading. The other possibility is that the Berbers of the Fezzān may have been slave-trading. The other possibility is that the Berbers of the Fezzān may have been slave-trading. The other possibility is that the Berbers of the Fezzān may have been slave-trading.

52. Al-Shammākhī, Kitāb al-turāj, 1892, p. 345; J. M. Cuquet, 1975, p. 54.


54. Al-Muhalabi, apud Yākū, 1866–73, Vol. 2, p. 932. In Kāwār, al-Muhalabi mentions the towns of Bimla and al-Kasaba (ibid.). Djado, situated further to the north and at some distance from the great trans-Saharan route, may already have been a staging-post on the Wargla route.

Like many Berber peoples, the inhabitants of the Fezzan initially adopted a heterodox form of Islam, the Ibāḍīyya, thus aligning themselves with the Khāridjīte faction. The Fezzan, situated at the northern end of the central Saharan caravan route, controlled the bulk of the trade between the Lake Chad area and a fortiori the Kawar oasis and the Muslim world of the Mediterranean. Hence it is quite likely that the earliest form of Islam propagated south of the Sahara by Berber traders was in fact the Ibāḍīyya. Indirect evidence of Ibāḍīte influence in Kānem is afforded by an item of bibliographical information concerning Abū ‘Ubayda Abī al-‘Hamīd al-Djamāwuni, a governor of Djabal Nafusa, a region where the Ibāḍīte sect well survives to this day. It is to the effect that this governor, who lived in the first half of the third/ninth century, knew the language of Kānem in addition to Berber and Arabic. He doubt learnt the language during a visit to the Central Sudan.

In the Fezzan the situation changed at the beginning of the fourth/tenth century when the new dynasty of the Banū Khatṭāb came to power. After that event Arab geographers ceased to mention the heterodox beliefs of the Berbers of the Fezzan, and it is very probable that the political connection made with it a change in the religious trend. This does not necessarily mean that the transition from Ibāḍīyya to Sunnah took place with the same speed further south, though Khāridjīte resistance eventually petered out there as well.

In fact, nothing very definite can be said on this point, and it is noticeable that al-Ya‘kūbī — though attesting to the existence of the Ibāḍīte sect at Zawila (the capital of the Fezzan)53 — is content, in his remarks about the inhabitants of Kawar, to state that they were Muslims:

Fifteen days journey beyond Zawila, you come to the town [madīna] called Kuwār inhabited by a Muslim community composed of various peoples. The majority are Berbers. They bring Sudān [slaves].

It is clear from this text that in the second half of the third/ninth century Kawar was inhabited by Berbers; their main occupation seems to have been slave-trading. The other peoples mentioned were probably Sudanic; even at that early date they may have been the Tubu who nowadays live there alongside the Kanuri. Most of the slaves whom the Berber traders of Kawar brought to the Fezzan no doubt came from Kānem, where the king of the Zaghawa ‘reduced to slavery those among his subjects whom he wished’.54 Al-Ya‘kūbī himself says that ‘the kings of the Sudān sell the Sudān [their subjects?] for no reason, and quite apart from any war’.55

54. Ibid.
56. Al-Ya‘kūbī, 1892, p. 345.
Islamization of Kānem as an unusual event is not strange if the king and the Zaghåw movement that threatened to undermine them and their power was at least partially dependent on the support of the Berber communities. It is clear that the rulers of the Kawar oases and their region, which today forms part of Libya, did not have much to lose by participating in the conflict to check it. It is also clear that they have felt impelled by an instinctive desire to maintain their trading activities and their relations with the Diwān, which, at the time, was the center of the Berber communities. 

We cannot be certain that it really was the king of Kānem who introduced these diplomatic missions, but we know that he was at least indirectly in contact with Ifriqiya (Tunisia) and therefore indirectly in contact with the Maghribi emirates. In this context, Ibn Khaledūn tells us that the kings of Kānem were in touch with the Hafsid dynasty (625/1228-748/1347) from the time of its founding, and he reports in particular that in 1257 the king of Kānem and the Lord of Bornu sent a Hafsid envoy to the Hafsid Sultan al-Mustansir (647/1249-657/1277) to establish a permanent office of the Hafsid dynasty in Kānem. There is nothing surprising about the fact that the king, who was one of the major suppliers of slaves and had some sort of monopoly over their acquisition in his own country, should have courted the goodwill of his principal customers. In the eyes of the Muslim rulers, his economic importance no doubt outweighed any objections to his religious position.

Trade relations with the countries of North Africa and frequent contacts with Muslim merchants could not have gone on for long without enabling Islam to make considerable progress in court circles and certain sections of the population. It would probably be a mistake to visualize the progressive

57. The number of slaves exported northward by Kānem must have been substantial. Zawila, on the route between Kānem and Tripoli, was also a slave centre in the Saharan (al-Ya‘kūbi, 1832, p. 345, al-Iṣṭakhrī, 1870, p. 40; al-Bakrī, 1911, p. 11; J. M. Cuqo, 1975, pp. 49, 65, 81).


60. Ibid.

61. We have very detailed information about diplomatic relations between Bornu and Tripoli in the seventeenth century: the King of Bornu’s envoys brought written messages and presents to the Governors of Tripoli (cf. D. Girard, 1680).


64. It has been established that the B and the material from external sources. See D. L. 1977.


66. Al-Bakrī, 1911, p. 180; but see J. 1977. If the first Muslim ruler of Kānem to conceal her real name becomes quite
Islamization of Kānem as an uninterrupted growth process: it would be strange if the king and the Zaghawa aristocracy had not tried to curb a movement that threatened to undermine the economic order on which their power was at least partially founded. It is interesting to note in this connection that, according to the Dīwān, Arkū b. Būlū (c. 414/1023-459/1067), one of the last Zaghawa kings, established colonies of slaves in several of the Kawar oases and even at Zaylā in the southern Fezzan, a region which today forms part of Libya. This information is of course difficult to check but it is quite understandable that Arkū b. Būlū should have felt compelled by an instinct of self-preservation to extend his sway over the Berber communities of Kawar in order to better control both their trading activities and their religious proselytizing. The authors of the Dīwān do not, of course, state the motives that led to the occupation of Kawar by Kānem, but they abruptly mention the ‘mosque’ at Sakādam (Seggedine), which may at least be taken as a sign of the importance of the ‘religious question’. Moreover, we know that at the same period the king of Ghana was extending his authority over the important trading centre of Awdaghust, and the conjunction of these developments may not be fortuitous.

Arkū’s successor was the first Muslim king of Kānem. His name is given in the Dīwān in three different forms: Lādūsū, Sū (or Sawā) and Ḥū (or Ḥawwā’). The correct form, overlaid by a recent interpolation, being Ḥū (or Ḥawwā’). The authors of the Dīwān, reporting the crucial event in the history of the Chad region, which was the accession to power of a Muslim sovereign in the kingdom of Kānem, were content with an extremely brief note: ‘he was invested by the Caliph’ (Dīwān, §10). Neither this manner of investiture nor the unorthodox form of the first Muslim king’s name admit of the hypothesis of a conversion. On the contrary, it is very likely that after Arkū’s death (at Zaylā) the pro-Muslim faction within the old dynasty put forward the strongest candidate it could find having regard to the rules of succession then in force. In the absence of other evidence, we cannot dismiss the possibility that Ḥū (or Ḥawwā’) was in reality – as certain pointers suggest – a woman bearing the very Muslim name of Ḥawwā’. He (or she) reigned for only four years, and was succeeded by ‘Abd al-Djalīl, whose reign likewise lasted four years. The next

66. It has been established that the Banū Dūkū of the Dīwān correspond to the Zaghawa mentioned in external sources. See D. Lange, 1973, pp. 113-29.

67. Traces of an early Sudanic presence can easily be recognized in certain archaeological vestiges in the Fezzan: Ganderma, in the vicinity of Trāgen, and Mōbe, to the north of Gatrūn, are fortifications which were undoubtedly erected on the orders of the kings of Kānem (D. Lange and S. Berthoud, 1977, pp. 32-3, 37-8); however, the dates remain uncertain.


69. If the first Muslim ruler of Kānem was in fact a woman, then the chroniclers’ efforts to conceal her real name becomes quite understandable (D. Lange, 1977, pp. 23-25, 63-8).
king, Hummay, was the first of a new dynasty, the Sefuwa. The very short reigns of Hū or Hawwā', (c. 459/1067-478/1071) and 'Abd al-Djālīl (c. 478/1071-483/1075) stand in contrast with the long reigns of their predecessors: Ayūma, according to the Diwan, reigned for twenty years (c. 376/987-397/1007) Būlu for sixteen years (c. 397/1007-414/1023) and Arkū for forty-four years (c. 414/1023-459/1067). The shortness of the reigns of the last Zaghawā rulers may be interpreted as a sign of a serious crisis: after a long period of incubation, when the crucial stage was reached in the growing power of Islam, the Muslims first undermined the stability of the old regime and then brought about a drastic political change.

The advent of the Sefuwa

By an extraordinary coincidence, the dynastic change that occurred in Kānem around the year 467/1075 is not reported clearly in any of the available sources. Consequently there is absolutely no way of establishing for certain the sequence of events that led up to the dynastic change, nor its precise economic and social effects. Since there is a dearth of information about this period despite its great importance, we must do with what little evidence there is. The first step will be to establish that there really was a change of dynasty at that time, we shall then have to answer the question: Who were the Sefuwa? We may then be in a position to shed some light on the overall significance of the events that took place.

At the end of the paragraph which the Diwan devotes to 'Abd al-Djālīl, there is a curious passage whose real meaning has escaped most historians:

That is what we have written about the history of the Banū Dūkū; we shall now proceed to set down the history of the Banū Hummay, who professed Islam.

Even since the days of Heinrich Barth this remark has been taken to refer solely to the adoption of Islam - and not to a dynastic change - since the authors of the Diwan indicate in a later passage that the next king,

68. All previous writers, misled by an ambiguous passage in Diwan (§11), have confused the introduction of Islam with the change of dynasty.

69. It seems that more weight should be given to the chronological data supplied by the Diwan than to the report concerning the occupation of Kāwār.

70. We cannot completely rule out the possibility that the first two Muslim rulers of Kānem were Ibadites.

71. This date is arrived at by adding up the lengths of the reigns given in the Diwan (D. Lange, 1977, pp. 83-94).

72. Diwan, §11.

73. The German traveller Heinrich Barth visited Bornu - and part of Kānem - in the middle of the thirteenth/nineteenth century, and brought back with him the only two extant copies of the Diwan. We also owe to Barth the first critical history of Kānem-Bornu, which is based on a knowledge both of the country and of the original texts.

Hummay, was the son of 'Abd al-Djālīl that Hū (or Hawwā') was already in the time of 'Abd al-Djālīl and this could not be. Hence the passage just quoted must be a commentator's insertion.

It is an eighteenth/eleventh century chronicler who establishes the succession of the three reigns, and the evidence of Shaykh Uthman Bello (Borno"
atives"), he writes:

The first to establish Islam in the country claimed to be one of the descendants of the Kānem that fell to the Yazaniyūn to whom al-Umrānī assigned the Sefuwa, whose name is derived from the Arabic noun Sefūwā, claims in so many words that the emergence of Islam is due to the introduction of Islam by the introduction of Islam by Shaykh 'Abd al-Djālīl himself.

Much later, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, Muhammad Bello offers more information of the dynasty at a certain stage in the history of the Berbers who, having left the Yεt.

The Berbers found in this case a brother in their domination of their country, their state prosperous remote countries of this region.

The first point to note is that the two groups of foreign origin which are present in this region. This remark itself leads us to the conclusion that the Berbers who had founded the state of Kānem claimed to have conquered at this time a country, their state prosperous remote countries of this region.

As to the alleged Berber origin of the

75. In Muhammad Bello's time there was a Caliphate of Sokoto, west of Bornu, and the Yemen (the Sefuwa) reached Kānem.
The Chad region as a crossroads

Dynasty, the Sefuwa. The very important Sefuwa dynasty, which reigned from 1774 to 1871, and 'Abd al-Djalil with the long reigns of their predecessors, reigned for twenty years (c. 397/1007-414/1023) and 399/1007. The shortness of the reigns, interpreted as a sign of a serious dynastic crisis, was first undermined by the introduction of Islam.

It is an eighth/fourteenth century author, Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-'Umarī, who establishes the succession of events. Basing his account indirectly on the evidence of Shaykh 'Uthmān al-Kānemī, 'one of their king's close relatives', he writes:

The first to establish Islam [in Kānem] was al-Hādī al-'Uthmānī who claimed to be one of the descendants of 'Uthmān b. 'Affān. After him [Kānem] fell to the Yazaniyyūn of the Banū Dhi Yazan. The Yazaniyyūn to whom al-'Umarī refers are in fact none other than the Sefuwa, whose name is derived from that of Sayf b. Dhi Yazan. The author says in so many words that the accession to power of the Sefuwa was preceded by the introduction of Islam.

Much later, at the beginning of the thirteenth/nineteenth century, Muhammad Bello offers more information about the advent of the Sefuwa dynasty at a certain stage in the history of Kānem. He refers to a group of Berbers who, having left the Yemen, travelled all the way to Kānem:

The Berbers found in this country different [adjam] people under the domination of their Tawārīkh brothers [called] Amākīta. They took their country away from them. During their occupation of the country, their state prospered so much that they dominated the most remote countries of this region.

The first point to note is that the author distinguishes between two ethnic groups of foreign origin which reigned over Kānem one after the other. This remark in itself leads us to think that the author is referring to the change of dynasty in the fifth/eleventh century. The decisive point is that he makes the second group— and not the first one— come from the Yemen, the homeland of Sayf b. Dhi Yazan, the eponymous ancestor of the Sefuwa. He must have known that the dynasty that still reigned over Bornu in his days claimed to have come from the Yemen and that it was not they who had founded the state of Kānem, as the Diwān and popular tradition implied, but an earlier group that, according to him, was also of foreign origin.

As to the alleged Berber origins of the successive rulers of Kānem, it

75. M. Bello, 1911, p. 8.
76. In Muhammad Bello's time the Sefuwa had left Kānem three and a half centuries earlier to settle in Bornu, west of Lake Chad. Bello, who himself reigned over the 'Caliphate' of Sokoto, west of Bornu, knows this, for he says that the group of Berbers from the Yemen (the Sefuwa) reached Kānem and not Bornu.
must be borne in mind that Bello’s work was written some 800 years after the events under discussion and that in the meantime the role of the Berbers in the Central Sudan had increased enormously, both politically and religiously. The Sefuwa legend of origin appears to have been primarily the work of Muslim scholars many of whom came to early Kanem from the areas where the Himyarite traditions were still alive. In working out the legend, the clerics were no doubt influenced by the local folk tales and traditions, especially those referring to north-south migrations.

The antiquity of the tradition that tends to conceal the dynastic change by putting the emphasis on the adoption of Islam is attested by Ibn Sa’d in the thirteenth century. Drawing on sources going back to the reign of Dunama Dibalami (c. 607/1210–640/1248) he provides the earliest evidence of the existence in Kanem of a dynasty claiming descent from Sayf b. Dhi Yazan:

The Sultan of Kanem... is Muṣammad b. Ḍījil of the line of Sayf b. Dhi Yazan. The capital of his infidel ancestors, before they were converted to Islam, was Mānak; then one of them, his great-great-great-great-grandfather, became a Muslim under the influence of a jurist, after which Islam spread throughout the land of Kanem.

The great-great-great-great-grandfather of Muṣammad b. Ḍījil (= Dunama/Aḥmad b. Salmama/’Abd al-Ḍījil = Dunama Dibalami) was in fact Hummay (c. 467/1075–478/1086) and he, as we have seen, was by no means the first Muslim king of Kanem, still less a new convert. The only point in this passage that directly relates to the dynastic change is the change of capital: first Mānak, then Ndjimi.

Another Arab geographer, al-Bakri, writing in 460/1067–8 gives us a termnus a quo both for the introduction of Islam into Kanem and for the change of dynasty:

Beyond the Zawila desert and forty days’ journey from that town there lies the land of Kanem, which is very difficult to get to. The inhabitants of Kanem are idolatrous Sudān. It is said that there exists in those parts a clan descended from the Umayyads, who took refuge there when they were persecuted by the Abbāsid. They dress in the fashion of the Arabs and follow their customs.

We do not know for certain to what period this information relates, but it cannot be later than 460/1067–8. It emerges from the Dīnān, that was a protector of the king, who in the time of Ibn Sa’d, was still a Muslim. Power in the kingdom of Kanem could not yet have known of the events of 650–700. The succession of the ‘idolatrous’ inhabitants of Kanem continued to the Dīnān. As for the ‘descendants of the fashion of the Arabs’—and who the Bakrī family had been a group of Berbers (at all events, they were not drawn attention to itself by itself if the possibility has been one of the success of the pre-Islamic period brought about the downfall of the dynasty—which was the case of an Arab— and the surrounding area, writing only three-quarters of the text is muddled all his material together. Hence his description used with the greatest caution. Nevertheless, it emerges from the Dīnān that in his day ‘Kanem’ and the evidence goes to show that the prince and the qal’a of the Islamic period is lost its ancient privilege.

Most of the evidence is lost, but the remarks suggest that the Zaghawa are more vague, while the Mānak seems to have been the same as the text whether it was based on the religious situation.

It will be deduced from what

80. Al-Bakri bases his account on events just preceding the time when he was writing. He regards the Bilād al-Sūdān being a work of 81. Al-Bakri wrote in 460/1067–8. Dīnān, we find that Hu (or Jawwā) is 82. Al-Idrisi, 1866, pp. 12–15, 33. founded in D. Lange, 1977, pp. 124–9.
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It cannot be later than 460/1067–8. According to the chronology which emerges from the Diwan, that was in fact the very year in which the first Muslim king, who was still a member of the old Zaghawa dynasty, came to power in the kingdom of Kanem. Al-Bakri, living far-off Andalusia, could not yet have known of the event even under the most favourable circumstances; and still less could he have known about the change of dynasty, which only happened around 468/1075. So his reference to the ‘pious Arab’ inhabitants of Kanem squares very well with the information in the Diwan. As for the ‘descendents of the Usayyads’ who ‘dressed in the fashion of the Arabs’ – and who therefore were not Arabs – they must presumably have been a group of Berbers who had adopted certain Arab customs (at all events, they were not black Africans). This group had perhaps drawn attention to itself by its insubordination to authority and it may quite possibly have been one of the forces that were later to contribute to the success of the pro-Muslim faction within the old dynasty before they brought about the downfall of that dynasty.

Of all the Arab authors, al-Idrisi (who wrote in 549/1154) should have given us the most accurate account of the changes that took place in Kanem – and the surrounding area – in the second half of the tenth-twelfth century. Writing only three-quarters of a century after the fall of the Zagawa, he had access to a wealth of information, most of it transmitted to him orally but also some derived from written sources. But in fact al-Idrisi muddles all his material together, and also threw in some details that were pure inventions. Hence his description of the Bilad al-Sudan must only be used with the greatest caution.

Nevertheless, it emerges from the mass of information provided by al-Idrisi that in his day ‘Kanem’ and ‘Zagawa’ were two separate entities. All the evidence goes to show that the Zagawa no longer ruled over Kanem: having lost their ancient privileges, they were apparently living in quite wretched conditions. Most of them seem to have been nomads. Nothing specific is said about the new rulers of Kanem, but some of the author’s remarks suggest that the Zagawa were their subjects. There is the same vagueness about the capital: Makan and Ndjiimi are both mentioned, and Makan seems to have been the more important town, but it is not clear from the text whether it was the capital of Kanem. No information is given about the religious situation.

It will be deduced from what has gone before that the dynastic change

80. Al-Bakri bases his account on oral information – some of which dates from a period just preceding the time when he was writing – and also on written sources, the main one as regards the Bilad al-Sudan being a work by Yusef al-Warrak (292/904–5; 363/973–4).
81. Al-Bakri wrote in 460/1067–8. If we add up the lengths of the reigns given in the Diwan, we find that Hu (or Hawwa) must have come to power in the eighth month of the year 460 AH.

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referred to by Muhammad Bello and the coming to power of the Yazaniyin reported by al-'Umarī must have taken place between al-Bakri's time (460/1067-8) and al-Idrīsī's (549/1154). The dynastic change is then seen to coincide with the expulsion of the Zaghawa from Kanem. This is as far as we can go on the strength of outside sources, but from analysis of the Dima'a, the range of dates for this event which is of crucial importance for the history of the Central Sudan, can be narrowed down to the beginning of Humay's reign (c. 467/1075-478/1086) for his predecessor, 'Abd al-Djalil, was the last king of the Banu Daka line and Humay was to be the first of the Banu Humay line. The distinction drawn between these two royal houses thus signifies that there was a sharp break in dynastic continuity; it does not coincide with the introduction of Islam.

Who were the new rulers of Kanem? The Dima'a provides no answer to this question; while linking Humay genealogically with his predecessor, its authors are silent about his true paternal ancestry. However, the traditions of Kanem and Borno which have been committed to writing in recent times say generally that the new dynasty was descended from Sayf b. Dhi Yazan. 

Several authors have commented on the origin of this new dynasty. Abdullah Smith suggested that they were a product of the nomad/semi-nomad world, probably Tubu who allied with the other groups through marriage relations in order to come to power. This appears also to be the view of John Lavers. Nur Alkali as well as Bawuro Barkindo believe that they were of local origin but attempted to assume foreign origins in order to gain prestige.

We know that it was during the rule of Humay or his successors that the Sayfī nisba was introduced. Sayf Ibn Dhi Yazan was a Yemeni hero who, according to legend, helped drive the Ethiopians out of the Yemen in the second half of the sixth century of the Christian era. And it is known that the Berbers of North Africa liked to claim Yemenite descent in order to differentiate themselves from the Adnanite Arabs of the Nadjib and the Hijaz. This attitude was the equivalent in the genealogical field of the adoption of the Khaddjite heterodoxy in religious matters.

It should be noted, however, that Sayf b. Dhi Yazan distinguished himself in battle against an African people. The theme of war between white Muslim Arabs (at a time before the Prophet) and black Africans who practiced a traditional religion (though it came to appeal strongly to the inhabitants of Egypt this theme eventually took on religious overtones) remains uncertain. Though in North Africa the Himyarite legends found out that the Himyarite saga of the Berbers of North Africa and the name of Sayf b. Dhi Yazan could both of whom had highly respected the Berbers were proud of called Berger Muslim clergies who elaborated the relationship between them by the similarity of sound meaning South of Teda-Daza, South, mean south.

All that can be said here is that a different genealogy from their Zaghawis was not the first Muslim ruler of the region. It is clear that the political authorities were indifferent to this process of dominance; the absolute power over his subjects was vested in the ruler of the Zaghawa aristocracy. The political authorities enjoyed a monopoly of the acquisition of the power over the common people, and the power of the various peoples integrated through protection against the king's arbitrariness.

83. His mother was a Kay (Koyam) - a people of unknown origin - by the name of Takrama, the prefix ta- possibly indicating Berber influence. The analysis of the name Humayyin itself shows the possibility of being derived from the name Muhammad (loss of the prefix Ma- and the ending –a, acquisition of a new suffix) as a hypocoristic form, which is still common today among the Tawariq, and other people who were Islamized through Berber influence.

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tised a traditional religion (though the Ethiopians were in fact Christians!) came to appeal strongly to the imagination of certain classes of Arabs. In Egypt this theme eventually took the form of a true folk tale or novel which extols the powers of Sayf b. Dhi Yazan in his innumerable battles with the 'impious blacks'.

Whether those who introduced this strange genealogical concept into the black African environment of the Central Sudan were aware of its racialist overtones remains uncertain. That they were Berbers cannot be doubted; in North Africa the Himyarite legend was still current. H. T. Norris has found out that the Himyarite saga has been ancient and widespread among the Berbers of North Africa and the Sahara. Those who flaunted the name of Sayf b. Dhi Yazan could not have been either Sudanese or Arabs, both of whom had highly respectable genealogies, whereas on the other hand the Berbers were proud of their Himyarite Yemeni origin. The Berber Muslim clerics who elaborated the Sayfīd mishā were doubtless attracted also by the similarity in meaning or usage between 'Kānem' meaning South of Teda-Daza, and 'Yemen' often used colloquially to mean south.

All that can be said here is that the Sefuwa appear to have been of a different genealogy from their Zaghawa predecessors and that their coming to power was not connected with the introduction of Islam since Humayat was not the first Muslim ruler of Kānem. Although there is no concrete evidence to show that the Sefuwa were not of local origins, there is equally none to say convincingly that they were.

It has been shown that the Islamization of the Central Sudan started with the conversion of the inhabitants of Kāwār, who later became the main agents of the expansion of Islam into the kingdom of the Zaghawa. In Humayat’s time (467/1075–478/1086) the gradual infiltration of Islam into the various sections of the population had been going on for at least two centuries. The political authorities eventually found that they could not remain indifferent to this process for it was bound to undermine the king’s absolute power over his subjects and at the same time help to weaken the position of the Zaghawa aristocracy. We have seen that the king probably enjoyed a monopoly of the acquisition of slaves and it was clearly in the Berber traders’ interests to break the royal monopoly so as to have more direct access to the sources of supply. As for the Zaghawa aristocracy, it can probably be regarded as the means whereby the king exercised his power over the common people. On the other hand, it was in the interests of the various peoples integrated into the kingdom to embrace Islam as a protection against the king’s arbitrary power.

87. R. Paret, 1924, p. 88, has shown that the written form of this tale dates from the beginning of the ninth/fifteenth century. Oral versions certainly existed from a much earlier date.


Africa from the Seventh to the Eleventh Century

But at the end of the eleventh century, Islam was still restricted to the narrow circles of the royal court and the aristocracy, and it was only much later, at the time of Dünama Dibalami (c. 607/1210–646/1248) when it became the instrument of an expansionist policy, that it was able to bridge the gap separating the ruling aristocracy from the ruled peoples and thereby to become a truly popular religion. 90

Hummay came to power in Kānem around the year 468/1075. At the same period, the Berber movement of the Almoravids in the western Sahara was driving southwards to conquer the kingdom of Ghana, where it set up a Muslim dynasty. 91 Further to the east, the Almoravid movement resulted a little later in the establishment of a new Muslim dynasty in the kingdom of Kāw-Kāw (Gao) on the east bank of the Niger 92 It would not be unreasonable to suppose that the movement led by Hummay in the Central Sudan was one of the consequences of the religious ferment that had been stirred up, in a different economic context, among the western Berbers. But unlike the new dynasties of the Western Sudan, the Sefuwa of Kānem were integrated into an African context, thus ensuring the continuity of the state tradition they had inherited. A century and a half after their seizure of power, the Sefuwa kings were doing their utmost to eradicate the memory of their real origins and so they linked themselves directly with their Zaghawa predecessors. In the end, the state institutions had proved to be stronger than all particularist tendencies.

90. The theory of a decline of Islam at the beginning of the Sefuwa period is presented in greater detail in D. Lange, 1978.

Introduction

I once characterized the thousand-year period from the death of Mohammed until the death of the Fatimids as the 'silent millennium'. 1 I pointed out that historians have paid little attention to it, for two main reasons. The first is that the period is less significant than the centuries that immediately preceded and succeeded it. The second is that the sources are biased in that historians write about events that interest them, and that the events of the 'silent millennium' are not interesting. The silence is due equally to the sources and to the cross-cultural contacts of the period, which were far less frequent than those of the centuries that preceded and followed it. The silence was also due to the fact that the period was not a time of great political or social changes. The period was a time of stability, and it is therefore not surprising that historians have paid little attention to it.

The expansion of agriculture

Early developments

The change in the way of life of the people of the Mediterranean basin, which is marked by the development of agriculture, has been characterized by a number of factors. The most important of these factors are the development of irrigation systems, the use of water for the production of crops, and the establishment of trade networks. The development of agriculture has been closely linked to the development of trade, and the two have been closely interdependent. The development of agriculture has also been closely linked to the development of the economy, and the two have been closely interdependent.