

The Emergence of social complexity in the southern Chad Basin towards 500 BC: Archaeological and other evidence

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Even today the remarkable culture of the Kotoko city-states, located south of Lake Chad, impresses visitors. According to oral traditions collected by anthropologists, the founders of the city-states were the Sao from whom the Kotoko claim to descend.¹ Archaeologists discovered that the beginning of settlement in the southern Chad Basin was linked to Mega Chad's desiccation and dated this retreat to the early first millennium BC.² Yet, the question of the emergence of the Sao urban culture as such and hence of social complexity remained until recently largely unsolved.

Followers of the Culture History School interpreted the Sao urban culture on the basis of architectural features, furniture, and techniques as remnants of an old Mediterranean civilisation that was once wide-spread across the Central Sudan. It had been swept away "by the Islamic overflow and younger migrations but retained by splinter groups and pagans as sunken cultural remnants".³ On the basis of preliminary archaeological and oral data specialists of the Sao-Kotoko culture also first advanced the hypothesis of a Middle Eastern origin of the town builders south of Lake Chad.⁴

Nowadays, archaeologists agree on a purely local process leading gradually to social complexity. They suggest that the Sao-Kotoko towns were protected by town walls in a middle phase only.⁵ According to most recent archaeological studies, the first proto-urban settlements emerged at the western and southern fringes of the *firgi* flood plains around 500 BC. Initially, archaeologists explained this development with a climate model according to which increasing desiccation led to urbanisation.⁶ Yet, further results showed that the aquatic environment had not substantially changed by the middle of the first millennium.⁷ Therefore it seems necessary to search for alternative explanations for the emergence of social complexity in the Lake Chad area.

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¹ Lebeuf/Masson Detourbet, *Civilisation*, 26-37; Lebeuf, *Principautés*, 36-77.

² Connah, *Years*, 81, 91; Breunig, "Instability", 58-61. According to Holl desiccation began at the early second millennium BC (*Land*, 203).

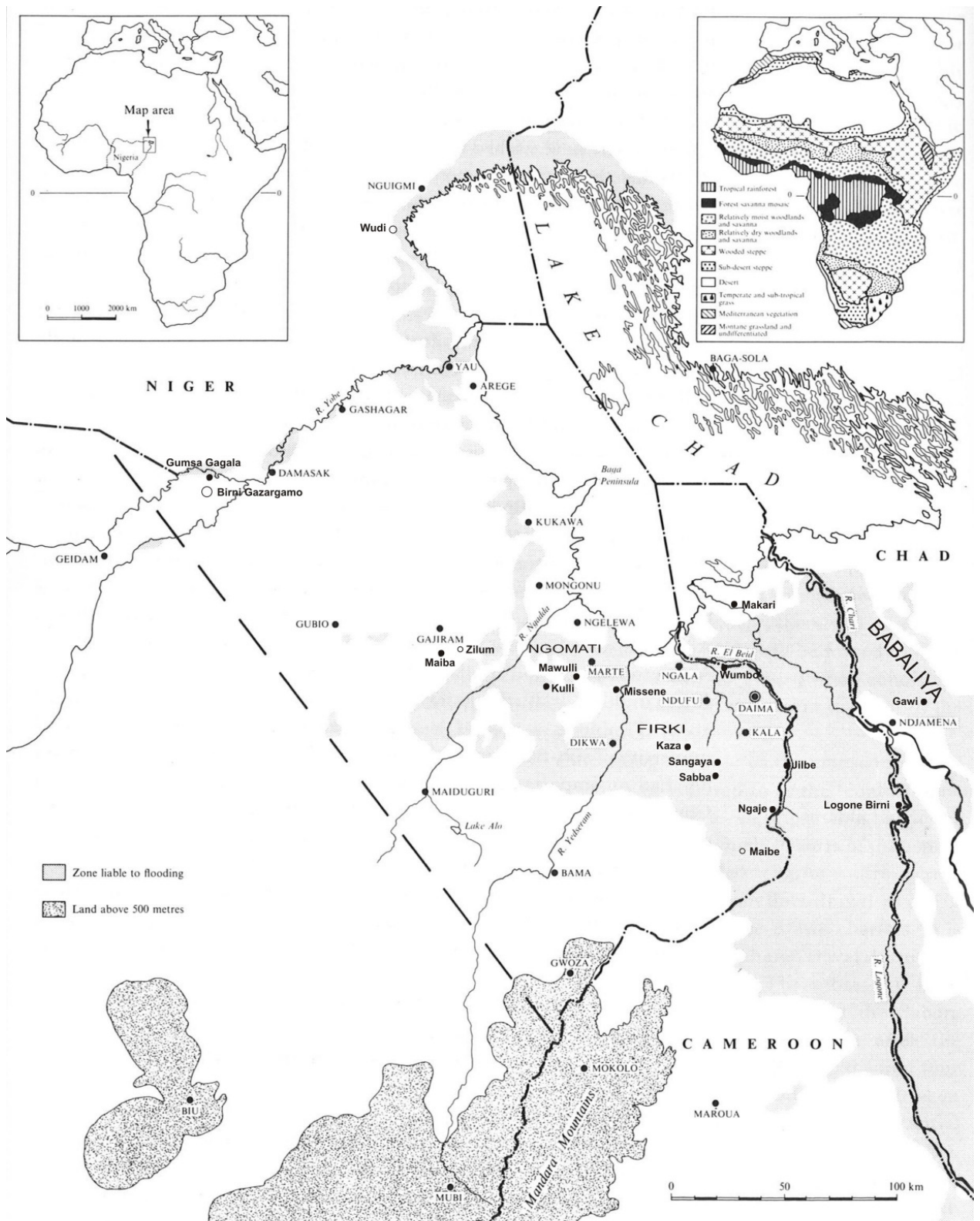
³ Baumann, *Völkerkunde*, 262-263.

⁴ Lebeuf/Masson Detourbet, *Civilisation*, 174.

⁵ Lebeuf, *Archéologie*, 118-128; Connah, *Years*, 220-5; Holl, *Land*, 252-5.

⁶ Breunig, "Instability", 59-64; Magnavita, "Zilum", 83-94.

⁷ Breunig, "Glanz", 259-261.



Lake Chad and its southwestern surroundings
(G. Connah, *Years*, 20, with additions)

Linguistic research likewise provides indications of links with the north. Kotoko, Hausa, and a number of smaller languages south and east of Lake Chad belong to the Chadic language group, which is considered part of the Hamito-Semitic or Afro-asiatic language family. In view of the genetic relationship of Chadic with Berber and Semitic, its speakers were supposed to have immigrated from the north.⁸ The migration of Chadic-speaking peoples to sub-Saharan Africa is supposed to have taken place towards the sixth millennium BC during the period of the Mid-Holocene dry phase of the Sahara.⁹ It may be excluded that elements of urban culture reached the region of Lake Chad at such an early period.

According to Kotoko legends, the Sao City founders were characterised by their huge size. Similar legends are perpetuated by the Kanuri of the Komadugu Yobe region and the Buduma (Yedina), inhabitants of the Lake Chad islands. Assuming that the central Kanuri of the Komadugu Yobe once spoke a language akin to Buduma and Kotoko, it is tempting to consider the Sao as ancestors of modern Chadic speakers. In the course of Islamisation and the parallel process of Kanurisation, the Sao were thought to have been gradually absorbed or eliminated by human beings of a normal size.¹⁰

However, the attribution of the Sao legends solely to Chadic speakers is justified neither in historical nor in geographical terms.¹¹ Chadic speakers were, as migrants of the Mid-Holocene, certainly not carriers of an urban culture. On the other hand, Sao traditions of origin are also found among the Kanuri of the Sahara for whom a Chadic substratum must be excluded.¹² These references to northern Sao fit neither into the concept of a Chadic-speaking Sao population nor into the idea of the subjugation of black African Sao by state-organised conquerors. In view of it being impossible to ascribe to the Sao a distinct linguistic identity, it should be considered whether the ethnonym did not originally refer precisely to those people who introduced city-building and social complexity into the region of Lake Chad.

1. Archaeological research into the Gajigana culture and the emergence of proto-urban settlements

Over the last couple of years, intensive archaeological research has shed new light on the origins of social complexity in the Lake Chad region. Results of recent excavations southwest of Lake Chad show that the Gajigana culture

⁸ Greenberg, *Languages*, 42-51; Ehret, *Civilization*, 78-80.

⁹ Ehret, *Civilization*, 79.

¹⁰ Baumann, *Völkerkunde*, 262; Trimmingham, *History*, 104-6.

¹¹ Forkl, *Beziehungen*, 179-241; Lange, *Kingdoms*, ("Préliminaires", 189-210), 115-135.

¹² A. Buchanan, *Sahara*, 1926, *apud* Palmer, *Memoirs*, I, 2-3; Le Sourd, „Tarikh“, 2-5; Vikør, *Oasis*, 38-42,

emerged in the western retreat area of Mega Chad at the beginning of the second millennium BC. Forerunners of this culture are presumed to have lived in the southern Sahara between Air and Ennedi.¹³ The purely archaeological evidence for this hypothesis is very tenuous and alternative solutions should therefore be looked for. Before doing so we shall have a closer look at the historical reconstructions hitherto proposed by archaeologists.

In the first phase of the archaeologically traceable development, extending to the middle of the second millennium BC, the carriers of the Gajigana culture had been cattle herders. Increasing aridity of the desert had forced them to search for pastures further south. Their small, temporary settlements west of the clay soil or *firgi* plains indicate continuation of their nomadic lifestyle. From the middle of the second millennium BC on, small permanent settlement mounds with clay deposits up to 4 m are found in the same area and a little later also first indications of millet cultivation. Thus, the process of sedentarisation was set in motion by semi-nomads having adopted a mixed economy lifestyle where agriculture already played an important role.¹⁴

At the beginning of the first millennium BC, another cultural change took place as a consequence of which the people of the Gajigana culture returned to the nomadic lifestyle of their forefathers. The major reason for this return to nomadism is believed to having been a decline in climatic conditions.¹⁵ Indeed, at the same time settlement of the formerly flooded clay plains (*firgi*) south of Lake Chad commenced.¹⁶

Towards the middle of the first half of the first millennium, the archaeological record shows indications of a dramatic change with considerable increase in social complexity. Based on the Gajigana culture of the *firgi* plains, also a sudden town-like settlement structure, later called *birni*, emerged at several sites. In Zilum, remains of a settlement surrounded by a protective wall were found that extended over an area of 12 ha. An estimated number of 3,500 inhabitants practicing craft specialisations lived in the area surrounded by the wall.¹⁷ Particularly noteworthy are the large thick-walled storage pots that obviously served to keep cultivated grains. These containers can be compared with similar objects found in more recent layers of towns in the central *firgi* lands.¹⁸ Existence of a protective wall indicates the beginning of political centralisation and it suggests the necessity of collective protective measures.

¹³ Breunig, "Instability", 57-58; *id.*, "Groundwork", 111-4; Magnavita, "Zilum" 83.

¹⁴ Breunig, "Instability", 59; *id.*, "Groundwork", 117-8.

¹⁵ Breunig, "Instability", 58-59; Magnavita, "Zilum", 83-84.

¹⁶ Breunig/Neumann, "Continuity", 495-9; Breunig, "Instability", 57-59; *id.*, "Groundwork", 122.

¹⁷ Initially archaeologists expected the existence of iron tools but later not any more (Magnavita, "Zilum", 90-91; Breunig, "Glanz", 268).

¹⁸ Magnavita/Schleifer, "Look", 54-60; Magnavita *et al.*, "Zilum", 166-7.

The surrounding, smaller contemporary settlements, too, hint at formation of a local chiefdom.¹⁹

It has been pointed out that the town-like settlements of mid-first millennium BC fell apart soon after they had emerged.²⁰ As a consequence the population changed back to the nomadic lifestyle of their forefathers. Only towards the beginning of the Christian era are fortified settlements of the *birni* type – but this time associated with iron working – found again. From then on they were inhabited more or less continuously.²¹

An urban settlement with an estimated population of 6,500 inhabitants dated from the same period was found in Maibe, in the Gulumba region east of Bama at the southern fringes of the *firgi* area. Despite the considerable number of inhabitants, indications of social complexity are here less obvious than in Zilum. Noteworthy in this case is also the absence of iron objects.²²

What were the factors setting this development in motion? According to archaeologists, climatic changes contributed significantly to the rise of the proto-urban centres in the region of Zilum and at Maibe. Latest research data, however, hint at the continuity of the aquatic environment at Zilum.²³ Hence, the question arises whether political factors should be included in the attempts to explain the sudden and remarkable increase of social complexity. Two considerations should in this respect be taken into account: firstly, the Canaanite pattern of sacred kingship widespread in sub-Saharan Africa and secondly the numerous iconographic attestations for the presence of black African slaves in the Classical World.²⁴ Both indications presuppose trans-Saharan contacts by the Garamantian road which was the most direct line of communications between sub-Saharan and North Africa. The transfer of numerous slaves from south to north presupposes the existence of highly organised communities south of the Sahara. To initiate the sinister human deportations across the Sahara, well equipped garrisons were indispensable. Only on the basis of such an infrastructure was it possible to launch slave raids against the people in the south, to capture them, and to force them to embark on the painful march on foot through the Sahara to the north, involving heavy casualties.²⁵ In fact, the violent “acquisition of commodities” practiced by slave raiders did not need barter goods for exchange and it largely inhibited peaceful trade.²⁶ Later secondary states might have emerged, having

¹⁹ Magnavita, “Zilum”, 84-90; Magnavita *et al.*, “Zilum”, 159-168.

²⁰ Magnavita, “Zilum”, 93-94; Breunig, “Groundwork”, 122-3.

²¹ Breunig, “Groundwork”, 123-4.

²² Breunig, “Glanz”, 265-8.

²³ Breunig, “Glanz”, 159-260.

²⁴ Snowdon, *Color*, 19-107; Lange, *Kingdoms*, 277-287; Kühme, *Königtum*, 215-6.

²⁵ Meillassoux, *Anthropologie*, 43-78; Lange, *Kingdoms*, 277-287, 370-1.

²⁶ See for later times Meillassoux, *Anthropologie*, 75-6 and Fisher, *Slavery*, 295-307.

the economic function of providing the main Chadic state with slaves for trans-Saharan trade in terms of tributary arrangements.²⁷

Archaeologically, such external connections are difficult to trace, as North African importation goods can hardly be expected to be found in the southern sites. Slave-raiding would appear to have prohibited regular trade with southern communities from an early period onwards. Nevertheless, further to the north, various indications suggest early trans-Saharan contacts. Herodotus mentions slave raiding activities of the Garamantes of Fezzan on Black African troglodytes which in fact may have taken place on a larger scale further south in the region of Lake Chad (IV, 183). Greek pottery found in the lowest level of the capital Germa and dated to the fifth century BC provides indirect evidence for the importance of trans-Saharan trade in the mid-first millennium BC.²⁸ Ptolemy provides clear evidence for trans-Saharan contacts in the Roman period. With respect to the end of the first century AD he refers to a Roman trader who had joined an expedition of the king of the Garamantes to Agisymba – probably another name for Kanem – located in the land of the Blacks directly south of Fezzan.²⁹ Archaeological findings on the Garamantian route between Fezzan and Kawar from roughly this period consist of a broken marble column, a sword, and remains of a square stone building.³⁰ The more favourable climatic conditions of the Sahara in ancient times made it easier to cross the Sahara by the Garamantian road than in later periods. These different indications show that the Central Sudan was in Phoenician and Roman times in no way isolated from North Africa.

Further evidence for ancient trans-Saharan contacts is provided by the spread of various innovations. Most researches would nowadays agree that iron technology, dated south of Lake Chad to the seventh century BC, was introduced from Phoenician North Africa to sub-Saharan Africa.³¹ At a later stage the lost wax technology for the production of bronze objects was probably transmitted by craftsmen with a similar cultural background. These innovations can now be supposed to have contributed among the Sahelian societies to the precipitation of the first millennium BC crisis which finally led to the emergence of social complexity.³²

In this context the potsherd pavements, which archaeological research has unearthed among the Sao-Kotoko and other peoples of present day Nigeria,

²⁷ MacEachern, "State", 141-143; Fisher, *Slavery*, 295-307.

²⁸ Daniels, "Garamants", 37; Liverani, "Road", 511.

²⁹ Ptolemy VIII, 5-6; Stevenson, *Ptolemy*, 31; Lange, *Kingdoms*, 280-1; *id.* "Mune-Symbol", 19.

³⁰ Rohlfs, *Quer*, 1984, 144; Lange, *Kingdoms*, 282.

³¹ Connah, *Years*, 163; MacEachern, "Iron", 425-9.

³² Cf. Breunig/Neumann, "Continuity", 495-501.

deserve special attention.³³ In the last resort, they seem to go back to the model of North African mosaic floors and more precisely to the *pavimenta punica* highly valued by the Romans.³⁴ Other archaeological findings often thought to be of North African origin concern the glass bead production, the rosette-guilloche-pattern, traditional *impluvium* houses of the Yoruba, and the *templum* idea.³⁵ Because of the wide distribution of these elements and the diverse time horizons of their occurrence, archaeologists often assume independent local invention. However, since cultural phenomena belonging to the same context can be shown to be connected to ancient Near Eastern antecedents it would appear to be safer not to exclude the possibility of early borrowings.³⁶

In view of the geographical proximity of Zilum to the territory of later Kanem-Borno, the question arises of a possible relationship with the gradually emerging ancient Chadic state. In this respect, a much stronger western orientation of the Chadic state has to be taken into account than would appear from the present location of Kanem east of Lake Chad and Borno west of the Lake.³⁷ Zilum being located hardly more than one hundred km south of the Komadugu Yobe, the life stream of pre-colonial Borno, it is tempting to suppose some kind of early relationship. In fact, the protective wall and the associated political centralisation appear to be best explained as defensive measures taken against slave raiders whose centre of power was located in the northern part of the Chad Basin. The short lifespan of the settlement, which the archaeologists noted with surprise, might in turn have been the consequence of a short but finally unsuccessful resistance against aggressors having in view to take human booty. Thus, the early settlement of the *firgi* region should not only be envisaged as a consequence of the retreating waters of Lake Chad or other climatic changes but also as a zone of retreat for people being exposed to the aggressiveness of northern intruders. In fact, it very much looks as if, pressurized by the slave raiders of nascent Kanem, the inhabitants of the Zilum region first tried to make a stand against their enemies in large fortified settlements and later decided to join their brethren in the more central *firgi* region where the devices of the *birmi* could be more favourably complemented by the natural protection offered by the annual flooding by the River Shari and the remaining swampy areas.

³³ Connah, *Years*, 148, 187; Shaw, *Years*, 160.

³⁴ Cf. Niemeyer, "Pavimentum", NP, IX, 451-2.

³⁵ Frobenius, *Afrika*, 264-7, 323-351; Shaw, *Nigeria*, 1960-2.

³⁶ Lange, *Kingdoms*, 215-306, 343-376; *id.*, "Überleben". 303-345.

³⁷ Lange, *Kingdoms* ("Éviction", 317-326; "Ethnogenesis", 270-2), 85-94, 146-8.

2. Former Kotoko identity of the inhabitants of the eastern *firgi* region

Today the inhabitants of the Nigerian clay soil or *firgi* region consider themselves to be Kanuri. Most of the European travellers of the nineteenth century, who crossed this area on their way to Logone Birni, Mandara, or Bagirmi, also took the Kanuri identity of the inhabitants of this region for granted.³⁸ Only Nachtigal discusses the peopling of south-eastern Borno in more detail. He considers the area between Monguno and Marte, inhabited by Ngwma or Ngomatibu, as the Ngomati province. The region bordering in the southeast between the town of Missene and the River Shari, he calls the Kotoko province and its inhabitants Makari according to their major town in present-day Cameroon. In contrast to the Ngwma or Ngomatibu, who were already considered Kanuri in the nineteenth century, he realized that the Makari spoke a foreign language called Kotoko. However, he does not provide any details about the actual language spoken by the inhabitants of the various towns of the area. Instead, he singles out two different types of habitation used by the two major peoples of the *firgi* plains: While the Kanuri lived in light straw huts, the Makari or Kotoko preferred to stay in massive houses with thick walls, their reception rooms having a wide earthen elevation where more important people were seated.³⁹

In addition, Nachtigal goes into some details with respect to the change of ethnic identity undergone by the inhabitants of the Ngomati province. He considered the Ngwma to have originally been Tubu who were exposed to the influence of the Kotoko. As inhabitants of Ngomati he believed them to be identical to the Ngomatibu ("inhabitants of Ngomati"). The people migrating from here into other provinces of Borno would call themselves Ngwma.⁴⁰ Nachtigal is certainly right to stress the original Kotoko identity of the inhabitants of the *firgi* land and the subsequent spread of the Ngwma identity to other regions of Borno but he is wrong in considering the Tubu to have contributed largely to the Kanurisation of the Kotoko. This opinion is based on his erroneous view that the early history of Kanem-Borno was shaped to a large extent by Tubu nomads.⁴¹

Field research in the 1970s led to the theory that the Ngwma must be seen as Kanurised Kotoko and that the entire *firgi* region of south-eastern Borno had formerly been inhabited by Kotoko or a group closely related to them. Traces of Kotoko identity only survive in the extreme east, directly at the Nigerian border

³⁸ Denham *et al.*, *Narrative*, I, 140-4; Barth, *Reisen*, III, 118-138; Rohlf's, *Reise*, II, 4-6, 23-25.

³⁹ Nachtigal, *Sahara*, II, 422, 428, 498.

⁴⁰ Nachtigal, *Sahara*, II, 422-3 and population map, *Sahara*, II, Appendix.

⁴¹ Nachtigal, *Sahara*, II, 338-9, 400.

with Cameroon. Old people in three villages at the border even spoke Kotoko at the time of research.⁴² The progress of Kanurisation contributed on the one hand to detach Ngwma identity from the Ngomati district and on the other hand it led to the spread of this label all over the Nigerian part of the *firgi* region. Consequently most informants nowadays refuse to relate the Ngwma to Ngomati.⁴³ Historically the sharp difference between Ngomatibu and Ngwma could refer to two distinct phases of Kanurisation, the first belonging to the Kanem and the second to the Borno period.

By contrast, a rapprochement between Ngwma and Karde is noticeable. Various informants consider the two groups identical although in fact the Ngwma are of Kotoko origin while the Karde were royal slaves.⁴⁴ With respect to our region, it may be noted that in the Sefuwa period the Karde were posted from Birni Gazargamo as provincial governors to two Ngomatibu towns, Kulli and Mawulli.⁴⁵ Perhaps the original Karde home in the east of Borno, mostly given as Bagirmi,⁴⁶ has been decisive for the rapprochement between these two Kanuri sub-groups. In reality, however, the two groups have contributed in different ways to the process of Kanurisation in south-eastern Borno: While the Karde supervised as provincial governors the implementation of Sefuwa power, the Ngwma formed the local element of ethnic incorporation further to the east. With the increasing power brought to bear by the centre on the periphery and with the intensification of the process of Islamisation, many descendants of the Kotoko found it apparently more opportune to claim being members of the Ngwma group that had been totally Kanurised since long instead of persisting in calling themselves Makari. In certain cases of recent adoption of the Kanuri identity people qualify themselves by using both terms Ngwma-Magari (for Ngwma-Makari).⁴⁷ It probably will not last long before this direct hint to their former ethnic identity will be abandoned.

Other names connected with the Sao tradition look suspiciously like Ngwma. According to local legends, Birni Gazargamo, the capital of Borno from c. 1460 to 1809, was built by the king of the Sao Dala Gumami or Guma Kandira

⁴² In Wumbo, between Ngala and Rann, in Jilbe, south-eastern of Kala, and in Ngaje, south of Jilbe (FN 77, 85b, 88b).

⁴³ In Monguno the Ngwma are placed outside of Ngomati, in Ngala it is believed that Ngwma live south and east of Ngomati (FN 77, 83a) and in Maza/Dikwa Ngomati is called the land of the Ngwma (FN 77, 89b).

⁴⁴ Identity between them is supposed in Ngwlaru/B. Gazargamo, Sabba/Sangaya, Maza/Dikwa and Mafa/Dikwa (FN 77, 26b, 84b, 89b, 90a); close similarity in Ndufu, Kaza/Sangaya, Maiba/Gajiram (FN 77, 84a, 84b, 91a).

⁴⁵ In Ngwlaru/B. Gazargamo, in Sabba, and in Mafa/Dikwa (FN 77, 26b, 84b, 89a).

⁴⁶ In Damasak, in Kulli, and in Maiba/Gajiram the Karde are said to have come from Bagirmi (FN 77, 11b-12a, 90a, 91b).

⁴⁷ In Wumbo, east of Ngala, and in Kaza, south of Ngala (FN 77, 84b, 88b).

“Guma, the hunter”.⁴⁸ In Kanuri *Guma-mi* means “the son of Guma”. Who was Guma, whose name designates in all likelihood such different items as the Sao leader of the region of Birni Gazargamo on the Komadugu Yobe, the capital of Borno (*gayr gamo* “strength of Gamo”)⁴⁹ and the Ngwma of the *firgi* land? Earlier attempts to explain this relationship by late medieval influences brought to bear by the inhabitants of the *firgi* lands on the region of the Komadugu Yobe are not convincing since the descriptive designation Sao itself – as will be seen below – is much older.⁵⁰ Therefore it must be supposed that the term Guma belongs likewise to the oldest stratum of social complexity in the Lake Chad area. Anticipating somewhat further developments in this respect, it may be suggested that the term is derived from the name of a forebear of ancient Near Eastern immigrants of the pre-Roman period such as the Kassite ancestral figure Agum.⁵¹ In the wider context of the history of the Central Sudan such considerations with respect to the oldest history of the town and state builders of the Lake Chad Basin will appear to be more plausible.⁵²

3. Foreign origin of the Sao according to Kanuri and Kotoko traditions

Everywhere in the former Borno Empire, the most prominent pre-Islamic inhabitants are called São, Sâu, Sô or Sôo. They are said to having been giants who built large buildings and produced high, thick-walled clay pots. Hence Kanuri consider them town builders and producers of much larger containers than in use nowadays. In Kavar and southern Fezzan they are thought to have been the builders of mighty castles.⁵³ The Kotoko likewise ascribe to them the imposing clay architecture, the former town walls, and the large clay pots that served as storage and burial containers.⁵⁴ We are apparently faced here with old and relatively precise traditions common to Kanuri and Kotoko, which refer to craftsmen no longer in existence.

⁴⁸ Palmer, *Memoirs*, II, 66-68; Migeod, “People”, 26 (Yau), 28 (Gumsai Gagala); FN 77, 22b (Dekwa); 32a (Dagambi).

⁴⁹ From Akk. *gayru* “strong” or *gayr5tu* “strength” (CAD, V, 56-58) according to a presumably older traditional name. The earlier suggested etymology *qasr Gamo* “the castle of Gamo” is open to criticism (Lange, *Kingdoms*, 149) and would imply the duplication of Akk. *birmi/birtu* “citadel” (CAD, II, 261-3) and Ar. *qasr* “castle”, 82.

⁵⁰ Lange, *Kingdoms* (“Préliminaires”, 205; “Ethnogenesis”, 277), 131, 149; Platte, *Frauen*, 55.

⁵¹ The second, the ninth and the twelfth Kassite kings were called Agum (Grayson, “Königslisten”, RLA, VI, 126. For the importance of Agum as an eponymous ancestor of the Kassites, see Brinkman, “Kassiten”, RLA, V, 465-6). Similarly the second founder of Makari is called Dala Kasé “the praised Kasse/(Kassite)” (cf. Lebeuf, *Principautés*, 77).

⁵² Lange, *Kingdoms*, 253; *id.*, “Für” (in preparation).

⁵³ Migeod, “People”, 19-29; Le Sourd, “Tarikh”, 2-3; FN 76, 25a (Tedjerhe: Sao was a giant); FN 76, 26b (Djado: castle of Meshru, 80 km south of Tedjerhe, was built by the Sao).

⁵⁴ Lebeuf/Masson Detourbet, *Civilisation*, 44-56; Trimmingham, *History*, 105-6; Connah, *Years*, 179, 191.

The Sao were not at all the autochthonous inhabitants of the Borno Empire as is often assumed.⁵⁵ Various traditions confer to them a far-away place of origin comparable to the Yemenite provenance of the Sefuwa. Among the Kanuri of Kawar (Bilma) it is said that they were descendants of Noumouroudou Kinana (Nimrod Canaan), a Biblical figure also known elsewhere in the Central Sudan.⁵⁶ During their immigration from their home region – probably Canaan – they are said to have followed a route via the Nile Valley in the east or a route passing through North Africa.⁵⁷ Only among the Kanuri of the Komadugu Yobe region might a local origin of the Sao initially be considered to be correct. This opinion, however, results from the contrast between the Sefuwa immigrants from Kanem and the local people. It only corresponds to the traditions of the ruling dynasty and not to – so far unknown – traditions of the local population.⁵⁸ Further to the north the legends of the Saharan Kanuri clearly indicate an early connection with Canaan.

According to older Kotoko traditions, the Sao originated from Syria or Palestine in the Near East.⁵⁹ Informants of the colonial period trace the origin of the Sao to northern towns with stone walls and mention the crossing of a desert. They furthermore explain certain customs by reference to the behaviour of their ancestors who lived in far-away towns abandoned by them at the edge of the sea. In particular they refer to ancestral Sao who inhabited a coastal town of the *bahr N'Gouloufoun* (*bahr*, Arab. 'sea') on the other side of the desert.⁶⁰ Other traditions connect the Near Eastern origin of the Sao with a pair of twins of a woman from Jerusalem. Her descendants, the Sao, are said to have inhabited the dark island of *Goulefou* which was located in a black sea without sunlight, illuminated only by shining metal, the "living gold".⁶¹ Traditions published by anthropologists in post-colonial times distinguish between hunters with spears, hunters with bow and arrows, and fishermen. The hunters are believed to have originally lived in Kanem or further north or northeast. The fishermen are said to have come from the north, from Lake Fitri, and from the region of River Benue.⁶² Neither general Kotoko traditions nor those of the individual city-states support the idea of a purely local origin. Even behind the place names Kanem and Fitri, which prevail in the more recent accounts, one may suspect the previously mentioned relations with

⁵⁵ Urvoy, *Histoire*, 17-20; Trimingham, *History*, 104-5; Oliver, *Experience*, 92-3.

⁵⁶ The Yoruba are said to descend from Canaan and Nimrod (Bello, *Inf1q*, 21; transl. Arnett, *Rise*, 16); Hogben and Kirk-Greene mention the drumbeat *Namaruzu fan Kana'an* practiced in Daura (*Emirates*, 148); FN 96, 7-8 (right and left drum on the camel); 17-18 (at turbanning ceremony of the king).

⁵⁷ Le Sourd, "Tarikh", 3; Vikør, *Oasis*, 41-42.

⁵⁸ Palmer recorded two texts about the conflicts between the Sefuwa and the São (*Memoirs*, II, 64-68).

⁵⁹ Nachtigal, *Sahara*, II, 534-5; Lebeuf/Masson Detourbet, *Civilisation*, 28, 33.

⁶⁰ Boulnois, "Migration", 85 (salt sea), 101 (stone walls, human sacrifice).

⁶¹ Lebeuf/Masson Detourbet, *Civilisation*, 28-29; Lebeuf, *Archéologie*, 109.

⁶² Lebeuf, *Principautés*, 37-38, 75; Lebeuf/Masson Detourbet, *Civilisation*, 28-29.

North Africa and beyond. The legendary locality *N’Gouloufoun* or *Goulefou*, at the sea shore or on a small island, might have been a coastal town at the edge of the eastern Mediterranean Sea. It may hypothetically be identified with either the harbour town Byblos, called Gubla in Phoenician and Jubayl/Gubayl in Arabic, or Tyros situated on a small island in the sea.⁶³ Both towns were located amidst a region which during the neo-Assyrian period received large numbers of deportees from Mesopotamia.⁶⁴

In addition, among the Kotoko circulate stories with strange biblical connotations. According to one narrative, the Sao had left their home at a “black river” close to the Red Sea after the destruction of their harvest by the Deluge.⁶⁵ Following another story, the Sao boarded Noah’s Arc and left it at Moussoro, east of Lake Chad. It is also said that Noah saw, from the mountain Hadjer al-Khamis, his people in a pirogue on Lake Chad. On attempting to reach them, he fell into the water and the pirogue capsized. After this the Sao emerged from the fertile mud of Lake Chad – out of Noah’s body?⁶⁶ The ancestry of the Sao is sometimes traced back to Iwètche, son of Anak (Henoch), son of Sita (Set), son of Adam and Eve.⁶⁷ This tradition may be compared with the genealogy of the Sefuwa kings of Kanem-Borno transmitted by the *D3w1n*, which has with one exception all the names of the Biblical patriarchs from Abraham to Adam.⁶⁸ The suspicion of a loan from Islamic written material can be shown to be unfounded in the case of the *D3w1n* since some of its biblical names have more authentic forms than those transmitted by Arab authors.⁶⁹ Although the biblical stories of Kotoko oral traditions likewise have an authentic flavour because of their closeness to oriental mythology, Islamic *feedback* can in this case not be formally excluded. With respect to these biblical elements, note should also be taken of the Israelite impact on the early culture of Kanem-Borno as witnessed by the *Mune-Symbol*, which Ibn Furtū5 in the sixteenth century considered to be identical with the Arc of the Covenant of King Saul.⁷⁰

So far, it is unclear whether the Sao were strangers or simply ancestors of the

⁶³ Jidijian/Lipinski, “Byblos”, “Tyr”, DCP, 82-83, 478-9; Lipinski, *Itineraria*, 189-223 (Ophir).

⁶⁴ Oded, *Deportations*, 116-135.

⁶⁵ Lebeuf/Masson Detourbet, *Civilisation*, 29.

⁶⁶ Lebeuf/Masson Detourbet, *Civilisation*, 29-30; Lebeuf, *Principautés*, 98.

⁶⁷ Lebeuf/Masson Detourbet, *Civilisation*, 30; Lebeuf, *Principautés*, 43.

⁶⁸ Lange, *D3w1n*, 22-23, 65; *id.* *Kingdoms*, 243-5. The only missing name is Peleg, son of Eber (Gen. 5; Gen. 11, 10-27; L 3, 34-38).

⁶⁹ Lebeuf believes in a loan from Islam (*Études*, 98). Regarding independence of the biblical information of the *D3w1n* see Lange, *Kingdoms*, 243-5.

⁷⁰ Palmer, *Memoirs*, I, 70; Lange, “*Mune-Symbol*”, 15-25. In a paper of 1977, published by K. Tijani, which lapsed my attention Abdullahi Smith already suggested that the *Mune* should be considered as an element of Judaic influence in the Central Sudan (“*Mune*”, 244-5).

present carriers of these traditions. They are mostly regarded as giants, able to erect large buildings and to produce huge pots, but who rejected Islam. As pagans, they stood in opposition to the Muslim people of Borno. Sometimes it is purported that they had tried to trick the Yemenites (Kanuri) into death. However, more frequent are traditions according to which the Kanuri tricked the Sao without any previous enmity. In the region of the Komadugu Yobe and in Kawar the story is told that the Kanuri overwhelmed the Sao in a defenceless condition after they had beguiled them into letting their hands be tied together in order to have them henna-dyed.⁷¹ According to these legends, the Sao must have lived for some time side-by-side with the Kanuri before they died out or were forcefully eliminated.⁷² Other narratives claim that the Sao had disappeared already or moved to other places when the Kanuri arrived.⁷³ It would appear that these stories are told by present-day people who prefer to dissociate themselves from any Sao ancestry. This is the prevalent tendency among all the Kanuri speakers. Only with respect to the Ngwma of south-eastern Borno do some informants suggest an earlier Sao identity.⁷⁴ Also it should be noted that modern researchers tend to press local traditions into the mould of ethnical constructs. This is most apparent in the usage of the ethnonyms Kanuri and Kotoko as opposed to the term Sao, a contrast which local informants even today do not perceive in the same way.⁷⁵

In the first quarter of the twentieth century people in various places insisted on ethnic continuity between the Sao and themselves. It was then possible to meet individuals who used the term with positive connotations. That was the case with the majority of the inhabitants of Yau on the *Komadugu Yobe* who called themselves specifically Sao-Ngissim (not Ngizim). The village head of Yau considered his own father to be Sao and his mother Kangu. In Gumsai Gagala close to Birni Gazargamo, the village head (*lawar*) and his representative (*bwlama*) likewise claimed for themselves and fifty other persons in the village Sao ancestry. In Monguno further south 150 Sao families were recorded and the office *bwlama* was said to be reserved to the Sao.⁷⁶ Here it was even believed that the newcomers from Kanem in the area of Birni Gazargamo speaking Arabic learnt the Kanuri language from local Sao.⁷⁷ These statements would seem to refer to a section or a clan of the Bornoan

⁷¹ Palmer, *Memoirs*, II, 67; Le Sourd, "Tarikh", 5; tradition from Guba between Gashua and Geidam (FN 77, 39a-3b).

⁷² In Fachi (Le Sourd, "Tarikh", 4). In Minter mention is made of co-habitation without intermarriage (FN 77, 3a-3b).

⁷³ It is said in Kawar that they had moved to Fezzan (Le Sourd, "Tarikh", 3). In Banna, near Damasak, they are reported to have disappeared before the arrival of the Kanuri (FN 77, 13b).

⁷⁴ In Kaza, Sangaya and Monguno (FN 77, 84b, 85a-b, 91a).

⁷⁵ With respect to the ethnonym Kanuri see the valuable comments by Platte, *Frauen*, 55.

⁷⁶ Migeod, "So people", 24-27. In Sabba, south of Ndufu and Sangaya, it is still maintained today that the village head descends from the Sao (FN 77, 84b).

⁷⁷ Migeod, "People", 24, 29 (information of Mongonu).

society with handicraft specialisation akin to the Magumi Duguwa or the Ngalaga likewise marginalised by the Sefuwa.⁷⁸

Among the Kotoko the opinion of an original Sao identity was even more prevalent. In particular, it was generally believed that all the pre-Islamic kings of Kotoko towns were Sao while the people themselves had Sao ancestors.⁷⁹ The common designation of formerly prestigious predecessors associated with the *birni* complex can be taken in itself as important evidence of an ancient cultural hegemony exercised by the Magumi – first the Duguwa, then the Sefuwa – on the city-state societies of the *firgi* land. Among the Kanuri and the Kotoko four factors led to a growing dissociation from the Sao: increasing identification of the Sao with paganism, loss of craft skills connected with pre-Islamic practices and rituals,⁸⁰ association of the Sao with people of unusual gigantic size, and preference for clan names not bearing negative connotations.

Attention should further be drawn to the prominence of an individual Sao in the traditions of central Borno. Arriving in the region of their future Bornoan capital, the Sefuwa are said to have first met So Dala Gumami, an individual who was the *mai*, “king”, of the Sao or just their leader. He is the one who interacted with the newcomers and built Birni Gazargamo for them, not the Sao people in general. When after some time of cohabitation, war broke out two different sets of traditions refer to the consequences. In the area of Birni Gazargamo it is believed that the Sefuwa exterminated the Sao only sparing their friend So Dala Gumami who left for Kano.⁸¹ In Yau, 120 km to the east, people have a different opinion on the outcome of the war. Dala Gumami having already died, his son Duna is supposed to have been slain by the Sefuwa. But subsequently the women united and killed the Sefuwa king in turn.⁸² This victory and the subsequent survival of the Sao explain why the inhabitants of Yau could still recently claim to be of Sao origin.⁸³

Sao traditions of Tedjerhe, the most northern Kanuri locality situated in

⁷⁸ In 1977, the Sao were said to have disappeared from the area of Birni Gazargamo (Boari, Gambaru, Dekwa, Krikao, FN 77, 18b, 20b, 22a, 23a) and of Monguno (FN 77, 1b, 90b, 91a). On the sub-groups of the Kanuri see Nachtigal, *Sahara*, II, 415-447.

⁷⁹ Boulnois, “Migration”, 87-89; Lebeuf/Masson Detourbet, *Civilisation*, 38; Lebeuf, *Principautés*, 36, 77-79; Platte, *Frauen*, 49.

⁸⁰ At present all blacksmiths and goldsmiths among the Kotoko are foreigners since the exercise of their professions is considered to be contrary to Islamic prescriptions (Lebeuf, *Principautés*, 119).

⁸¹ According to the tradition collected by Palmer, the leader of the Sao was called So Dala N’gumami (*Memoirs*, II, 66-68). The *lawan* of Dekwa, west of Birni Gazargamo, called him *Mai* Dala Gumami and made him finally depart to Kano (FN 77, 22b).

⁸² Migeod, “People”, 26. It should be noted that Duna is an abbreviation of Dunama and as such a royal name (*D3w1n*, n° 13, 17, 36, 40, 52, 60, 66).

⁸³ The expeditions of Idr3s Alauma in the sixteenth century against the Sao-Gafata reached only up to Diffa, 50 km northeast of Birni Gazargamo. No mention is made of attacks against Sao living north of the capital (Lange, *Kingdoms* (“Préliminaires”, 196), 122.

southern Libya, ignore a people of that name and only deal with an individual called Sôo. He is said to have been a giant who built not only the castle of Tedjerhe but also those of Agram/Fachi und Brao/Djado in Niger and Traghen in Libya.⁸⁴ In Kawar people tell the story of an individual Sao who usually travelled in half a day from Tedjerhé to Fachi but died in a well in southern Libya.⁸⁵ Going one step further, we note that according to the tradition of Makari, the most important Kotoko town, the city was founded by a hero called *Ma Sougou*, “king” Sougou, whose people were called Sougou or Sao.⁸⁶ It would therefore appear that certain traditions preserve the memory of a “king” of the Sao, others of an individual Sao and still others of a fuller name Sougou/S5g5.

In connection with an overall history of the Central Sudan it may be worthwhile considering the possibility that the quasi ethnic label Sao is itself an abbreviation of an originally more complete name such as Shango. Like in Magumi > Maami elision may have reduced the name Shango/Sango to Sao: Sango > Sago/Sugu > Sao. It should be noted that *yangû* itself was the priestly name of Assyrian kings which is widespread in West Africa.⁸⁷ In the light of this etymology the previously noted marginal Sao traditions insisting on royalty, individuality and the full name S5g5 may in fact reflect traces of an older form of the Sao tradition focussed on an ancestral individual king called Shango/ *yangû*.

Evidence for a survival of the Shango title among the Kotoko is provided by the kinglist of Makari, the traditional centre of the Kotoko: In the seventh, eighth and fifteenth position of the list it has the names Sungu *dumu* (Kot.: “Sungu the strong”), Sungu *yim2* (Akk.: *yangû yanû* “Shango, the second”) and Sungu *dal*.⁸⁸ These names were formerly wrongly written as *Sug Dumuh*, *Sug Smé* and *Sug Dalé* because they were solely rendered on the basis of a transcription of their written Arabic form and not on account of their local pronunciation.⁸⁹ In the list, they follow names of apparently Kassite and Assyrian origin which are similar to those of other Central Sudanic kinglists.⁹⁰ Furthermore, with

⁸⁴ Information provided by a group of old Tubu – on the basis of stories heard from elderly Kanuri – and independently by a young Kanuri (FN 76, 25 a).

⁸⁵ The story seems to reflect knowledge of the individual Sao tradition of Tedjerhe (Le Sourd, “Tarikh”, 4-5).

⁸⁶ Lebeuf, *Archéologie*, 75; Lebeuf, *Principautés*, 61.

⁸⁷ Lange, “Ursprung”, 213-238; id., *Kingdoms*, 239, 254 (“Links”, 358-360; “Dimension”, 196-8), 330-2, 206-8; CAD, XVII, 1, 377-382.

⁸⁸ *Dumu* may be interpreted as a loan from Kanuri *dunó* “strength”/ *duna* “strong” (Cyffer/Hutchison, *Dictionary*, 39) and similarly from Akkadian *dunnu* “strength”/ *dunnunu* “strong” (CAD, III, 184-6). *Dal*, may be related to the Akkadian *dal1lu* “glorify” sometimes used in royal epithets (CAD, III, 46-47).

⁸⁹ Lebeuf, *Principautés*, 77; FN 77, 80a, 80b.

⁹⁰ Lange, *Kingdoms*, 239-242 (Oyo-Yoruba), 252-254 (Kebbi and Zamfara).

respect to the importance of the Shango name for the Sao-Kotoko, it may be noted that the founder of Gawi, the most eastern Kotoko town, is said to have been Dongo, the slave of a Babaliya king.⁹¹ The slave status of a Shango city founder of the Kotoko matches well with the subservient position of the Sao *vis-à-vis* the Magumi – Duguwa and Sefuwa – ruling groups. It seems to reflect a reversal of destiny of the Assyrian ruling elite owing to their defeat by the Babylonian (Babaliya) army.⁹² Assyrian traditions are most strikingly preserved in the former Kotoko town of Sangaya, a name apparently derived from *yangû*, where the founding heroes are called Adimun and Adisun, two names which figure in the Assyrian kinglist as Adamu and Adasi in the 2nd and 47th position, the second being considered as a dynastic founder.⁹³ South of Lake Chad, certain political entities would appear to have perpetuated the names and traditions inherited from their ancient Near Eastern forebears. In Kanem-Borno as in other states of the Central Sudan, the name Shango – in this case apparently shortened to Sao – could thus originally have referred to the ancestral figure of an ancient Near Eastern group of refugees perpetuating the tradition of Assyrian rulership. The supposition of a specifically Mesopotamian connection of the Kotoko is further supported by the dragon killing myth of Makari and the associated triadic structure of the town and of the whole country.⁹⁴

Conclusion

Contrary to the theories of the colonial period claiming that the city culture of the Sao-Kotoko is of Mediterranean or ancient Near Eastern origin, the tendency prevails today to consider only local factors for the emergence of sub-Saharan cultures. This approach, rooted in the post-colonial paradigm, has undoubtedly contributed to the decolonisation of African history. Its continued pre-eminence in African historical research is likely to be an obstacle for further progress in the attempt to throw light on the period most relevant for the emergence of social complexity.

Admittedly, the absence of North African importation items in the older layers of settlement mounds south of Lake Chad has reinforced the impression of purely local developments leading to the rise of the *birni* complex and the state. However, non-archaeological evidence points to the likelihood that early slave raiding inhibited normal trade relations and thus distorted considerably the archaeological record. Therefore it would be one-sided and misleading to base consideration concerning the early history of the *firgi* people solely on

⁹¹ Lebeuf, *Principautés*, 71; Lange, "Ursprung", 218.

⁹² Weißbach, "Babylonien", RLA, I, 381-2; Lange, *Kingdoms* ("Dimension", 196-200), 206-210.

⁹³ FN 77, 85b; Grayson, "Königslisten", RLA, VI, 126; Weidner, "Adasi", RLA, I, 35.

⁹⁴ Cf. Lebeuf, *Archéologie*, 75-81. For further details see Lange, "Für" (in preparation).

archaeological findings.

In spite of the noted shortcomings of the proposed historical reconstructions, the results of archaeological research provide important evidence for the re-evaluation of the early history of the Central Sudan. By dating the first proto-urban settlements to the middle of the first millennium BC and by revealing manifold connections between urbanisation, agricultural and craft innovations, archaeologists have highlighted new aspects of the beginning of social complexity in West Africa. Nevertheless, climatic models should not be considered in isolation from a number of possible political factors contributing to the explanation of the sudden emergence of the *birni* complex south of Lake Chad. First, the likelihood of a slightly earlier rise of the nucleus of the Kanem Empire in the region north or northeast of Lake Chad. Second, the plausibility of an ethnic contrast between the state builders of the north and the inhabitants of the proto-urban settlements south of Lake Chad, as evidenced by the linguistic distinction between Nilo-Saharan Kanuri and Chadic Kotoko. Third, the probability that the Kotoko and *a fortiori* the Ngwma had adopted major characteristics of the Kanem-Borno state and town culture associated with the name Sao. Fourth, the possibility that the defeated inhabitants of the marginal *firgi* lands of the west used in the mid-first century BC the central *firgi* lands as a region of retreat, thus protecting themselves against further slave-raids. Fifth, the expectation that defectors and interlopers supported the process of cultural transfers including the transmission of the concept of the *birni*, but excluding at first the spread of the militarily important technology of iron production.

Apart from local aspects of history, any attempt at historical reconstruction should take into consideration the inter-continental context. None of the sub-Saharan societies of West Africa had the same favourable possibilities of contacts with North Africa as the societies of the Lake Chad region. Major innovations might thus have reached the Lake Chad region by groups of refugees from the Near East shipping through the Mediterranean Sea, passing by the coastal cities of Tripolitania and crossing the Sahara.⁹⁵ Such a process of direct cultural transfers would of course have more far-reaching effects than the normally considered indirect transmission of innovations by way of the Saharan Berbers.⁹⁶

Neglect of these possibilities leads to the overemphasis of the post-colonial paradigm and consequently increases the intellectual one-sidedness in spite of the tremendously greater research potential of our time as compared with the colonial period. In fact, cultural parallels between sub-Saharan Africa and ancient Near Eastern societies are myriad, they only have to be looked for

⁹⁵ Such a route is suggested by the Bayajidda legend for the founders of Daura (Palmer, *Memoirs*, III, 132).

⁹⁶ Law, "Garamantes", 196-8; Lange, *Kingdoms* ("Al-Qasaba", 32-39), 26-33.

properly.⁹⁷ In our time of globalisation it is of greater interest than ever before to examine the question of a possible participation of the great Sudanic empires, especially Kanem, in the history of the ancient world.

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- FN: field notes from D. Lange; FN 77 – field notes from 1977.
- NP: H. Cancik (ed.), *Der Neue Pauly: Encyklopädie der Antike*, 15 vols., Stuttgart 1996-1999.
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⁹⁷ Kühme, *Königtum*, 38-40, 208-216; Lange, *Kingdoms*, 215-306; 343-376; *id.*, „Überreste“, 303-345.

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