

To Article IV (1978a : “Progrès de l’Islam”)

The historiography of the Chadic state was for a long time overshadowed by the question of the origin of the Kanem-Bornu kings. According to the traditional view, the Sefuwa ruled over Kanem-Bornu from the beginning to 1846. In line with this opinion, Ḥumē, the first Muslim king, was thought to have been a convert. On the basis of earlier critical studies of texts, I tried to show that the rulers of Kanem belonged to a ruling group called Zaghāwa by the external, and Duguwa by the internal sources. Although this group was strongly attached to divine kingship, its last two rulers were Muslims. Duguwa rule was brought to an end by Ḥumē, a Muslim by birth, who founded the Sefuwa dynasty. What was the ethnic identity of Ḥumē? Since the Sefuwa story of origin, referring to the Yemenite hero Sayf b. Dhī Yazan as an eponymic ancestor, seemed to build on a racist Arabic oral narrative, I suggested that he belonged to the Berber milieu of slave traders. Reluctant to promote the rapid spread of Islam, the new rulers were supposed to have continued to thrive on an internal recruitment of slaves (1978a: 506-511).¹²

This reconstruction remains valid insofar as it distinguishes between two ruling groups, the Duguwa and the Sefuwa, it associates the Duguwa with the Zaghāwa, and it postulates that the Duguwa were no heathens *per se*. It is faulty with respect to the Berber and foreign origin of Ḥumē. In fact, the determination of Ḥumē’s origin on the basis of the supposed spread of an Arab oral account is highly speculative. It neglects the inclination of Sudanic legends towards Yemenite origins and it ignores the difficult transformation of divine kingships into Islamic states. From a number of other considerations it now appears that Sayf b. Dhī Yazan was chosen as an eponymic ancestor on the basis of homonymous names and not because of the adoption of an alien oral narrative. The existence of the royal

Magumi clan composed of Duguwa and Sefuwa lineages, and the present-day distinction between the Magumi Duguwa and the Magumi Sefuwa, bear witness to a certain degree of governmental continuity beyond the Duguwa-Sefuwa cleavage.¹³ Furthermore, the comeback of the *Zaghāwa/Zaghāy* to power in the fourteenth century shows that the two ruling groups can neither be conceived as dynasties nor as ethnic groups (1993a: 271; 1993b: 52). In all likelihood, they were clan-families assuming specific functions within the cultic, the ceremonial, and the administrative sphere of the state. Humē was probably a member of an oppositional local clan associated with power who was more open towards Islam than the Duguwa. The main objective of the identification of the supposed clan ancestor Sef with the Yemenite hero Sayf b. Dhī Yazan, might have been the deliberately-attempted transposition of a divine into a legendary figure (see above p. 243). Altogether it would seem that the overthrow of the Duguwa was the consequence of religious incompatibilities between Islam and the cults of the Duguwa, rather than the result of economic changes such as a decreasing demand for slaves. Also, enslavement practices in an ancient and well-organized state should be seen more in terms of military activities against aliens and tributary levies, than in terms of internal recruitment (Meillassoux 1991: 51-52). Therefore it seems more appropriate to consider the process of Islamization in connection with the cult-mythological as opposed to an economic context.