

To Article VIII (1989: “Préliminaires – Sao”)

This study delimits the areas inhabited by different groups of Sao and suggests that the name was originally applied to the city dwellers of the plains south of Lake Chad. It postulates that the pastoral people hailing from Kanem adopted numerous culture traits from this urban society in the late medieval period. Most important for the process of culture exchange would have been the time between 1250 and 1470 when the Sefuwa ruled first over Kanem and Bornu and later over Bornu alone. During the period of closest contact extending from 1380 to 1470 the southern city dwellers are supposed to have been involved in various ways in the dynastic conflicts between the Dāwūdids and the Idrisids, so that in the end the newcomers from Kanem borrowed numerous culture traits from the autochtones of the plains. Founding their new capital Birni Gazargamo towards 1470, the Sefuwa would have transferred the urban culture adopted from the Sao further to the north (1989: 203-210).²⁴

In the light of later research the current paradigm involving a regional and period-specific approach to the late medieval history of Bornu and other West African kingdoms appears to be too restrictive. Instead of postulating – in this case – a process of intensive borrowing by the Nilo-Saharan Kanuri from the Chadic Sao during a limited and late period, it would be more appropriate to search for a common substratum of both cultures dating from the classical era. In fact, numerous parallels with the Canaanite culture of North Africa bear witness of an ancient process of exchange across the Sahara (see pp. 279-285). With respect of the trans-Saharan trade, the Nilo-Saharan people of Kanem-Bornu were in a better position than the Chadic speakers further south. Also, to refer to the immigrants from Kanem to Bornu as pastoralists, neglects the ancient process of state building involving mainly the peasant population east of Lake Chad. Moreover, the Kagha hypothesis is neither confirmed by the northern location of Jāja (1980: 174-75), nor by the ancient contact between Kanem and Mali, and also not by the long-lasting suzerainty of Kanem-Bornu over the Hausa states (1979b: 208 § 35; 1993b: 56-60).²⁵ Therefore it would be more appropriate to

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consider the ancient Kanuri population living west of Lake Chad in the present Niger Republic to have been the core group of the Bornu state. By disentangling the medieval history of Kanem-Bornu from that of the Sao, the common heritage of the Kanuri and the Sao-Kotoko, reaching back to classical times, will come into better focus.