

THE KANEM BORNO EMPIRE

The Kanem Borno was a vast empire founded 1000AD in the Central Sudan close to Lake Chad and, it was one of the greatest in the region. Prior to the establishment of the empire, small feudal states whose growth was stimulated by development of trade constituted the region that later became Kanem and eventually Borno. The empire was believed to have been founded by the Saifawa Dynasty under Mai Dugu. At the height of her powers, she extended to present day eastern Niger, southern Chad, northern Cameroon and northeastern Nigeria covering 300,000 square miles. By the 14th century however, the empire started to witness series of revolt and incursion especially from the Bulala (a break away segment of the royal family) which necessitated the need to move from Kanem with her the initial capital at Njimi to Birni Ngazargamu in Borno under Mai Ali Gaji (1472-1504). The empire thus became known as Kanem-Borno incorporating the initial name of the empire.

THE ORIGIN OF THE KANEM PEOPLE

The subject of the origin of the people is complex. Available evidence suggest that this region was occupied by nomadic tribes the earliest among who inhabited Ngala, Rann, Affade who constitute the Kotoko people who spoke a Chadic language. The Tibesti region was inhabited by the Teda-Daza speaking peoples whose language was of the Nilo-Saharan family of languages. The southern region was inhabited by the Zaghawa, a semi-nomadic group. According to the writings of Al-Ya'qubi in 872 AD, these people (the Zaghawa) lived in a land called Kanem. In addition to the Zaghawa, there were also Hawdin, Mallel and al-Qaqu. War eventually broke out between these people and while records are silent on who won, what is plausible is that, the king of Zaghawa won because available records give prominence to Zaghawa. In addition to the tribes that were in existence in this region, was the Kanuri according to Basil Davidsion, a tribe which eventually became prominent in the region. Thus, by 1000AD a loosely structured but centralized state had emerged in the region east of Lake Chad-Kanem. Kanem literally means the south of Teda-Daza and Yaman. Essentially, the kingdom was a conglomeration of feudal states that had been founded by migrants from the north whose growth was stimulated by trade. The empire was founded by the Saifewa dynasty and she ruled unopposed since inception.

THE POLITICAL ORGANIZATION OF THE EMPIRE

Kanem Borno was ruled by hereditary kings known as Mai. They became addressed as the king of Kanem and Master of Borno. The Mai was a central figure in the socio-economic and political life of the people and he welded tremendous power in the empire. He possessed spiritual powers which were revered. He was conceived as a divine being, exalted by the people and worshipped instead of God. This was because he was believed to bring life and death, sickness and health on the people. This king worship however served as a unifying force in the empire. This practice continued until the introduction of Islam into the empire and, even when Islam was introduced, the tradition only continued in a modified way. The kings embarked in imperial adventures and the defeated kingdoms were incorporated into the empire by marriage ties. The Mai promoted and encouraged trade and commerce and equally ensured safety of traders.

Kanem Borno practiced electoral monarchy which emphasized appointing leaders based on merit and criteria such as knowledge, adequacy, fair sense of judgment, and commitment to Islam. Even though ascension was hereditary, the right to the throne did not naturally pass from father to son because of the nature of the royal dynasty in the empire.

For easy administration, the empire was divided into four provinces headed by governors. These governors also constituted military leaders of the province who defended the empire against internal and external aggression. The Yerima governed the Northern Province and served as checks against internal uprising. The Galadima controlled the lands of the East and West of the territory respectively. The Galadima province extended westward to Kano, Kastina, Daura and other parts of Hausaland. The Chiroma was in some sense was the king's deputy and nominate heir to the throne. There was also Kaigama who doubled as the commander-in-chief of the armed forces.

The military of the empire was controlled by Kaigama, the generalissimo. He equally controlled the Southern province of the empire. The military was divided into two; the force that ensured the security of the internal sections of the kingdom and, the other force warding off external attacks and ensuring expansion of the empire. The military was predominantly made up of the cavalry force who fought to suppress revolt and, was further reinforced during the reign of Mai Idris Alooma who brought in technical experts to train the military leading to better efficiency and, guaranteed expansion of the empire.

Women played important roles in the administration of the empire. The Magira, Queen mother was in charge of the domestic arrangement of the royal court. She had enormous influence in administration, wielded so much political power that she could act as regent in the empire. A Magira was even reported to have imprisoned a Mai for not enforcing Islamic law correctly. There was also the office of the Magara, the sister of the Mai and Gumsu, the most senior of the wife of the Mai. These women welded political power in the empire until its decline in the 19th century.

The population was divided into the aristocracy class and the commoner/slave class. There was however no disparity in administration as both the aristocrats and commoners participated in administration. For instance, the king's court was made up of adviser, councilors and adjudicators who served the purpose of the king and were drawn from both class.

PROMINENT LEADERS

HUME (1085-1097)

Hume was credited with accepting Islam and, acknowledging it as the state religion. From his reign onwards, the Saifawa kings who ruled for another eight hundred years were Muslims. This new religion went on to revolutionize every facet of the Kanem-Borno kingdom. He formed alliances with neighbouring tribes and began the expansion of the kingdom.

DUNAMA DIBALAMI (1210-1258)

Dunama was a great warrior and scholar whose patronage of learning spread to North Africa and the Middle East. He was credited with extending the control of the empire from Niger to Nile. He carried his frontier north into Fezzan and westwards beyond Lake Chad in 1252AD where he

campaigns against the Mabina, Kalkin and Afuno. He also conquered the Badi who lived close to Lake Chad. He engaged in the proverbial war lasting seven years, seven months and seven days against the Tubu. Dunama was recorded to possess a strong cavalry force composed of 40,000 horsemen with whom he fought his wars of expeditions. He paid attention to the growth of Islam in the empire and ensured diplomatic relations with the Islamic north. He embarked on pilgrimage to the Holy City of Mecca and while on that trip, he founded Riwaq and Madrasa for Kanem students at Cairo. Arabic sources refer to him as a great Muslim ruler.

MAI ALI GHAJI (1472-1504)

The beginning of the second Kanem-Borno Empire can be dated to the ascension of Ali Ghaji as the Mai (ruler) in 1472. Ali Ghaji was quick to recognize the causes of the problems confronting the people and he provided solutions. For instance, he took steps to restore the discredited authority of the Mai over his councilors and he enforced unity on the ruling classes.

As a person, Ali Ghaji had a forceful personality. He was a clever politician and had served in the army before becoming the Mai in 1472. As a result, he was able to impose his own personal will on the nobles, including the Kaigama-the Commander-in-chief –whose restless ambition had often provoked serious troubles in the empire. Ali Ghaji established the new capital at Ngazagarmu- a walled city which provided the people with a settled administrative centre, a strongly fortified place of refuge and a secure market to which the North African merchants were attracted. In his attempt to unite the different peoples of the empire and forge diplomatic and commercial links with North Africa, Ali Ghaji encouraged the revival and spread of Islam by his own personal examples. For instance, he studied the Koran, followed its teachings in his daily life and married only four wives as ordered by the Koran.

Having restored the dynastic and military strength of the empire, he was able to embark on fresh imperial adventures. The army was thrust east of Lake Chad, subduing the Bulala, and pushed on as far as Darfur. The whole of Bornu was consequently brought under Saifewa rule. As a result, the people were able to master the southerly terminals of the Sahara up to Fezzan and Libya. As a result of these positive developments, especially the security of life and property provided by Saifewa rule for travelers, the trade and prosperity of the empire rapidly developed. Before the death of Ali Ghaji in 1504, the fame of Bornu's power had reached Europe, and its name appeared for the first time on fanciful European maps of Africa. Ali Gaji had laid a solid foundation upon which a line of worthy successors was to build one of the most reputable empires of West Africa.

MAI IDRIS ALOOMA (1571-1603)

Not much is recorded about the history of Kanem-Bornu between the death of Ali Ghaji in 1504 and the ascension of Mai Idris Aloomu in 1572. Idris Aloomu has been described as the most famous of all Borno rulers, under whom Borno reached the peak of its power. He is regarded as the greatest ruler of the empire, a capable soldier, a statesman, an empire builder and a devout Muslim who contributed more than anyone else to the expansion and unification of Kanem-Bornu Empire.

Mai Idris Aloomaa was reputed to be a very good administrator. Actually, before his emergence, Borno was reputed to be well and effectively governed with good political and administrative structures put in place. Borno's government was centralized and this made policy (including foreign policy) formulation and execution easier and quicker. It was only left for the ruler to utilize these structures to benefit Borno and this, Aloomaa did judiciously. He had a good grasp of both domestic and international affairs. Aloomaa attracted political allies and romanced with foreign states who were his admirers. He maintained diplomatic relations with them and got what he wanted for his state. He particularly made use of women in his administration (a feat that was unequalled throughout all the Islamic States during this period). He appointed the Magira, Magara and Gumsu who all played strategic roles in administration. He equally appointed his officials from both the noble and commoner class ensuring merit in political appointments.

Much of Bornu's success under Idris Aloomaa was achieved by war. He maintained an effective standing army. As a result of his diplomatic relationship with Tripoli, Egypt and Libya, he was able to strengthen his army with the importation of fire-arms from North Africa. In a bilateral military pact, he let in veteran Turks to come and train his army in efficiency and military tactics. He thus became the first Sudanese ruler to import firearms from North Africa. These Turkish musketeers helped in training his soldiers in the effective use of these revolutionary weapons.

The military policies of Idris Aloomaa were dictated by dynastic, imperial and religious ambitions. His major concern was to consolidate Saifewa power over existing parts of the Empire, to expand imperial frontiers so that greater revenue and wealth would accrue to Bornu through plunder, increased tributes and control of trade route to North Africa. Thus, with a well-trained and well-led army, Idris Aloomaa was engaged in 330 campaigns in order to extend the frontiers of the Bornu Empire. Starting from within Bornu itself, Idris Aloomaa carried out five successful raids against the Bulala, and subdued the heterogeneous tribes, some of which had been allowed by his predecessors to undermine the strength of the empire. He equally attacked the So who possessed many extensive districts near Bornu. After destroying their crops, he besieged and captured their stronghold of Damasak. In the same way he drove the anti-Muslim Tetala people who had settled twenty-five miles of Njimi into the hinterland of Lake Chad, he subjugated the troublesome Ngizim people on the south-west frontier.

The main obstacles to the expansion of his empire were the Bulala of Kanem and the Tuaregs of Air. Idris Aloomaa therefore turned north-west where his men defeated the Tuareg Berbers and pushed them far north of Air after a successful capture of important stronghold of Bilma. In the west, he faced Kano, captured the whole state. In the north, he captured Tebu, subjugated the whole country and stayed for a long time in Bilma- a town of strategic and economic importance because it was on the caravan trade route to North Africa. It was also an important salt-mining centre.

Aloomaa being an intelligent and shrewd tactician did not use naked force to propagate his military conquest all the time. He used the tactic of "war by proxy". This means that he would give military support to a friendly state against a hostile state. For example, he gave military support to the Kotoko, the neighbours of Tetala to harass Tetala by continuous incursions with their boats until the Tetala retreated into the swamps of the Lake Chad. He also gave tacit support to Kelwati to invade the territory of the Tuareg continually until the Tuareg were forced to make peace. Such

was the tactic of Aloomo in soldering that made him, a very successful administrator and state builder; a recipe for an actor or practitioner of international diplomacy.

In the East, Idris Aloomo embarked upon a successful diplomatic and military struggle with the ruler of Kanem, Sultan Abd-el-Jelil who was a determined enemy of Bornu, and who sought the control of several towns along the Kanem-Bornu border. In the ensuing struggle, Aloomo was able to break the power of the Sultan and finally, the whole of Kanem was attached to Bornu. With this victory, Aloomo had successfully subdued an extensive area in all directions, and had unified all the conquered areas into a very large empire spreading from Damask, Tuareg and Kano in the North, and to Tebu, Bilma, and Dafur in the East and to Biu in the South.

As a devout Muslim, under Idris Aloomo Islam continued to be the state religion during his reign. He compelled Islam on all the inhabitants of the empire including the surrounding territories whose inhabitants were pagans. He tried to reconcile theory with the practice of the religion in his administration of the empire. His judicial reforms followed those of any typical Muslim state. He maintained a strong centralized system of government and governed through a state council of twelve made up of titled nobility and administrators. The nobilities held military titles which gave them responsibility for the defense and supervision of specific parts of the empire. Actual administration tax collection, raising of military levies and supervision of local chiefs were left in the hands of the administrators who were either freeborn commoners or men of servile origin.

Economic prosperity of the empire grew under Idris Aloomo as trade continued to grow because of the stability of the empire. Articles such as muskets, fire-arms, horses and textiles came to the empire from North Africa in exchange for salt, cattle, slaves, copper and kola from Kanem-Bornu. The empire remained at this pinnacle of power until about 1750 A.D. Idris Aloomo had extended the territorial limits of the empire to its highest point, and had given the empire greatest fame and reputation, introduced socio-political reforms and encouraged the development of trade.

However, little is known about the internal affairs of the empire after the reign of Idris Aloomo. But compared with the warfare of the 16th century, Bornu appeared to have been relatively peaceful during this period. Bornu became a centre of Islam and the Kanuri language became dominant in the region. Slave-raiding further south remained an important source of royal income, and the Hausa states of Kano, Katsina, Zaria and Daura continued to pay tributes until the end of the 18th century.

FACTORS THAT AIDED THE RISE OF KANEM BORNO

The geographical location of the empire contributed significantly to agricultural production thus, agriculture was the major occupation of the people. Until it's shrinking occasioned by desertification, Lake Chad contributed significantly to the fertility of the region. Even the region was prominent for cereal production, exotic cereal such as Masara (flint maize), and wheat among others, in the 17th and 18th centuries, they equally cultivated fruits such as pomegranates, fig, lemon and lime. Crop production, cattle rearing and animal skin (leather works) served as the major source of exchange.

The empire intercepted major trade routes that developed along the Saharan Desert that connected West Africa to North Africa serving as an entrepot between these region. The location of the empire linked it with places like Libya and Tunisia in the far north, also with Nubia on the middle Nile and Egypt to the far north-east. The capital, Ngarzagamu was thus an entrepot of the trans-Saharan trade, large community of foreign merchants lived near the palace in a special quarter called Wasiliram, exchanging commodities such as slaves, ivory, ostrich feathers, leather and gold dust. Kanem Borno was heavily involved in the trans-Saharan trade and this trade contributed tremendously to her rise. In fact, one of the major trade routes of the trans-Saharan trade passed through the empire running from Songhai to Borno to Bilma down to the Libyan hinterland of Fezzan where it branched off at Murzuk to Tripoli and Benghazi (two principal entry ports). This route was principally a slave trade route. Aside from slaves, goods such as cotton, gold, ivory, gum, salt, weapon, copper etc. were also exchanged along this route. Borno was particularly rich in gold. Leo Africanus recorded that in the 17th century, gold dust and ingots were exported across the trans-Saharan trade routes from Hausaland and Borno. Borno was also blessed with salt producing centers prominent among which was Bilma. Salt produced alongside horses were exported to Ghana in exchange for gold. In addition to engaging directly in the trade, the empire also accrued revenue from taxes levied goods and tolls paid at the entrance of the empire. Tributes from vassal states also contributed enormously revenue to the kingdom. Through this revenue, the empire was able to effectively off-set administrative cost and ensure maximum security in the empire.

Islam became a formidable force in the empire starting from the 8th century AD. Mai Hume Jilmi (1085-1097) accepted Islam and made it a state religion. Islam subsequently became a unifying force in the empire allowing for easy administration by the Mais. Islamic laws and modes of administration was adopted, and mosques were built to further reinstate the religion. Accepting Islam was however strategic for trade. The Arabs and Berbers who came into the empire to trade were Muslims as such, accepting Islam further cemented the economic and diplomatic relationship that existed between the empire and the Northern states of Cairo, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and even as far as Turkey, Spain and the Middle East. Mai Idris Alooma was particularly notable for fostering the course of Islam and ensuring continued economic and political relationship with the Islamic world.

The role of the military force of the empire on her rise cannot be overemphasized. Composed of the cavalry and infantry forces heavily armed with sophisticated arms and ammunitions, the army of the Kanem-Borno Empire embarked on military conquest to subdue and police neighbouring states. These wars of conquest were carried out on the East and the Niger River to the West. This expansionist move was informed by search for land for agricultural purposes, control of salt mines as well as control of major trade routes.

THE DECLINE OF THE EMPIRE

The empire began to decline as a result of incessant attacks from the Tuaregs in the North and the Jukun in the south, and the Bulala. Environmental factor occasioned by the desiccation of Chad which made the region less habitable and less fertile. This led to drought and famine making the land uncultivable and hampering agricultural production. This had tremendous effect on the

economy a situation that was further compounded by slave trade. With Borno's involvement in slave trade, other trade declined. Internal frictions and rivalry within the empire especially because of the succession practice in the empire coupled with the inability of successive Mais after Alooma to consolidate the empire eventually led to its decline.

The 19th century Jihad which was geared towards the purification of Islam significantly contributed to the decline of the empire as the empire was considered a pagan state. In 1808, the Usman Dan Fodio led Jihad had reached Birni Ngazargamu leading to it being ceased by the Fulani jihadists. The Mai at the time of invasion requested the intervention of Muhammed al Amin better known as Muhammed Al-Kanemi a non-Saifawa warlord (Kanembu), scholar and diplomat. Al-Kanemi assumed implicit power over the empire, he was able to ward-off the jihadist (on two occasions, 1808 and 1810) and built a new capital at Kukawa in 1814. The Mai attempted to regain his empire but, he met his Waterloo as he was killed at Ngala in 1817. The next Mai, Ibrahim ceded all power to Al Kanemi and only kept the royal title. Al-Kanemi attempted to regain all the empire's territory that had been taken by the Fulani and even extended further to Hausaland. In this ensuing battles however, Al Kanemi was severely defeated and barely managed to escape. He died in 1835 and was succeeded by his son, Omar. He was able to bring an end to the long war against the Fulani by signing a peace treaty. His reign was relatively peaceful until the revolt by Zindar in 1846. Ibrahim seized this opportunity to reclaim the throne but was eventually captured and put to death. Omar had a long peaceful reign, paid attention to religion and adopted the title Shehu. He handed over administration to a small group of slaves and royal favourites. Kings after Omar however failed to consolidate the empire and she was soon opened to invasion which gradually led to her demise. Towards the end of the 19th century, Bornu collapsed following the invasion by an Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, Rabeah Zubeir. His short seven years reign in Borno was recorded to be too harsh evident with over taxation and poverty. His reign was immediately followed by European invasions, first by the French and the British who eventually annexed the empire into the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria.