

KANEM-BORNU EMPIRE

The **Kanem-Bornu Empire** existed in modern Chad and Nigeria. It was known to the Arabian geographers as the Kanem Empire from the 9th century CE onward and lasted as the independent kingdom of Bornu until 1900. At its height it encompassed an area covering not only much of Chad, but also parts of modern southern Libya, eastern Niger, northeastern Nigeria and northern Cameroon. The history of the Empire in the *longue durée* is mainly known from the Royal Chronicle or *Girgam* discovered in 1851 by the German traveler Heinrich Barth.

Theories on the origin of Kanem

Kanem was located at the southern end of the trans-Saharan trade route between Tripoli and the region of Lake Chad. Besides its urban elite it included a confederation of nomadic peoples who spoke languages of the Teda–Daza (Toubou) group.

Founding by immigrants c. 600 BCE

The origins of Kanem Empire are very unclear. Until today, historiographical debates oppose the followers of a foundation of Kanem-Bornu by populations from the ancient Near East and followers of a more local development. Latest researches try to connect the creation of Kanem-Bornu with exodus from the collapsed Assyrian Empire c. 600 BCE to the northeast of Lake Chad. The intensity of scholar discussions around this theory proves that the question haven't been solved yet, and we must be very cautious concerning early formation of Kanem-Bornu

Founding by local Zaghawa c. 700 CE

According to the more conventional theory, the empire of Kanem began forming around 700 CE under the nomadic Tebu-speaking Zaghawa. The Zaghawa were supposedly forced southwest towards the fertile lands around Lake Chad by political pressure and desiccation in their former range. The area already possessed independent, walled city-states belonging to the Sao culture. Under the leadership of the Duguwa dynasty, the Zaghawa would eventually dominate the Sao, but not before adopting many of their customs.[4] War between the two continued up to the late 16th century.

Islamization c. 1068 CE

Rise of the Sayfawa dynasty

The major factor that influenced the history of the state of Kanem was the early penetration of Islam. North African traders, Berbers and Arabs, brought the new religion. Towards 1068, Hummay, a member of the Sayfawa establishment, who was already a Muslim, discarded the last Duguwa king Selma from power and thus established the new dynasty of the Sayfawa. Islam offered the Sayfawa rulers the advantage of new ideas from Arabia and the Mediterranean world, as well as literacy in administration. But many

people resisted the new religion favoring traditional beliefs and practices. When Hummay had assumed power on the basis of his strong Islamic following, for example, it is believed that the Duguwa/Zaghawa began some kind of internal opposition. This pattern of conflict and compromise with Islam occurs repeatedly in Chadian history.

Foundation of the new capital Njimi

When the ruling dynasty changed, the royal establishment abandoned its capital of Manan and settled in the new capital Njimi further south of Kanem (the word for "south" in the Teda language). By the 13th century, Kanem's rule expanded. At the same time, the Kanembu people drew closer to the new rulers and increased the growing population in the new capital of Njimi. Even though the Kanembu became the main power-base of the Sayfuwa, Kanem's rulers continued to travel frequently throughout the kingdom and especially towards Bornu, west of lake Chad. Herders and farmers alike recognized the government's power and acknowledged their allegiance by paying tribute.

Expansion to Bornu

Mai Dunama Dabbalemi

Kanem's expansion peaked during the long and energetic reign of *Mai Dunama Dabbalemi* (ca. 1203–1242), also of the Sayfawa dynasty. Dabbalemi initiated diplomatic exchanges with sultans in North Africa and apparently arranged for the establishment of a special hostel in Cairo to facilitate pilgrimages to Mecca. During his reign, he declared *jihad* against the surrounding tribes and initiated an extended period of conquest. After consolidating their territory around Lake Chad the Fezzan region (in present-day Libya) fell under Kanem's authority, and the empire's influence extended westward to Kano (in present-day Nigeria) and thus included Bornu, eastward to Ouaddaï, and southward to the Adamawa grasslands (in present-day Cameroon). Portraying these boundaries on maps can be misleading, however, because the degree of control extended in ever-weakening gradations from the core of the empire around Njimi to remote peripheries, from which allegiance and tribute were usually only symbolic. Moreover, cartographic lines are static and misrepresent the mobility inherent in nomadism and migration, which were common. The loyalty of peoples and their leaders was more important in governance than the physical control of territory.

Dabbalemi devised a system to reward military commanders with authority over the people they conquered. This system, however, tempted military officers to pass their positions to their sons, thus transforming the office from one based on achievement and loyalty to the *mai* into one based on hereditary nobility. Dabbalemi was able to suppress this tendency, but after his death, dissension among his sons weakened the Sayfawa Dynasty. Dynastic feuds degenerated into civil war, and Kanem's outlying peoples soon ceased paying tribute.

Shift of the Sayfuwa court from Kanem to Bornu

By the end of the 14th century, internal struggles and external attacks had torn Kanem

apart. Between 1359 and 1383, seven *mais* reigned, but Bulala invaders (from the area around Lake Fitri to the east) killed five of them. This proliferation of *mais* resulted in numerous claimants to the throne and led to a series of internecine wars. Finally, around 1380 the Bulala forced *Mai* Umar Idrismi to abandon Njimi and move the Kanembu people to Bornu on the western edge of Lake Chad. Over time, the intermarriage of the Kanembu and Bornu peoples created a new people and language, the Kanuri.

But even in Bornu, the Sayfawa Dynasty's troubles persisted. During the first three-quarters of the 15th century, for example, fifteen *mais* occupied the throne. Then, around 1460 *Mai* Ali Dunamami defeated his rivals and began the consolidation of Bornu. He built a fortified capital at Ngazargamu, to the west of Lake Chad (in present-day Niger), the first permanent home a Sayfawa *mai* had enjoyed in a century. So successful was the Sayfawa rejuvenation that by the early 16th century *Mai* Idris Katakarmabe (1487–1509) was able to defeat the Bulala and retake Njimi, the former capital. The empire's leaders, however, remained at Ngazargamu because its lands were more productive agriculturally and better suited to the raising of cattle.

Kanem-Bornu peaked during the reign of the outstanding statesman *Mai* Idris Aluma (c. 1564–1596). Aluma is remembered for his military skills, administrative reforms, and Islamic piety. His main adversaries were the Hausa to the west, the Tuareg and Toubou to the north, and the Bulala to the east. One epic poem extols his victories in 330 wars and more than 1,000 battles. His innovations included the employment of fixed military camps (with walls); permanent sieges and "scorched earth" tactics, where soldiers burned everything in their path; armored horses and riders; and the use of Berber camelry, Kotoko boatmen, and iron-helmeted musketeers trained by Turkish military advisers. His active diplomacy featured relations with Tripoli, Egypt, and the Ottoman Empire, which sent a 200-member ambassadorial party across the desert to Aluma's court at Ngazargamu. Aluma also signed what was probably the first written treaty or cease-fire in Chadian history (like many cease-fires negotiated in the 1970s and 1980s, it was promptly broken).

Aluma introduced a number of legal and administrative reforms based on his religious beliefs and Islamic law (sharia). He sponsored the construction of numerous mosques and made a pilgrimage to Mecca, where he arranged for the establishment of a hostel to be used by pilgrims from his empire. As with other dynamic politicians, Aluma's reformist goals led him to seek loyal and competent advisers and allies, and he frequently relied on slaves who had been educated in noble homes. Aluma regularly sought advice from a council composed of heads of the most important clans. He required major political figures to live at the court, and he reinforced political alliances through appropriate marriages (Aluma himself was the son of a Kanuri father and a Bulala mother).

Kanem-Bornu under Aluma was strong and wealthy. Government revenue came from tribute (or booty, if the recalcitrant people had to be conquered), sales of slaves, and duties on and participation in trans-Saharan trade. Unlike West Africa, the Chadian region did not have gold. Still, it was central to one of the most convenient trans-Saharan routes. Between Lake Chad and Fezzan lay a sequence of well-spaced wells and oases, and from Fezzan there were easy connections to North Africa and the Mediterranean Sea. Many products were sent north, including natron (sodium carbonate), cotton, kola nuts, ivory, ostrich feathers, perfume, wax, and hides, but the most important of all were

slaves. Imports included salt, horses, silks, glass, muskets, and copper.

Aluma took a keen interest in trade and other economic matters. He is credited with having the roads cleared, designing better boats for Lake Chad, introducing standard units of measure for grain, and moving farmers into new lands. In addition, he improved the ease and security of transit through the empire with the goal of making it so safe that "a lone woman clad in gold might walk with none to fear but God."

Decline and fall of the Bornu Empire

The administrative reforms and military brilliance of Aluma sustained the empire until the mid-17th century, when its power began to fade. By the late 18th century,[*disambiguation needed*] Bornu rule extended only westward, into the land of the Hausa. Around that time, Fulani people, invading from the west, were able to make major inroads into Bornu. By the early 19th century, Kanem-Bornu was clearly an empire in decline, and in 1808 Fulani warriors conquered Ngazargamu. Usman dan Fodio led the Fulani thrust and proclaimed a jihad (holy war) on the irreligious Muslims of the area. His campaign eventually affected Kanem-Bornu and inspired a trend toward Islamic orthodoxy. But Muhammad al-Kanem contested the Fulani advance. Kanem was a Muslim scholar and non-Sayfawa warlord who had put together an alliance of Shuwa Arabs, Kanembu, and other seminomadic peoples. He eventually built in 1814 a capital at Kukawa (in present-day Nigeria). Sayfawa *mais* remained titular monarchs until 1846. In that year, the last *mai*, in league with Ouaddai tribesmen, precipitated a civil war. It was at that point that Kanem's son, Umar, became king, thus ending one of the longest dynastic reigns in regional history.

Although the dynasty ended, the kingdom of Kanem-Bornu survived. But Umar, who eschewed the title *mai* for the simpler designation *shehu* (from the Arabic *shaykh*), could not match his father's vitality and gradually allowed the kingdom to be ruled by advisers (*wazirs*). Bornu began to decline, as a result of administrative disorganization, regional particularism, and attacks by the militant Ouaddai Empire to the east. The decline continued under Umar's sons, and in 1893 Rabih az-Zubayr, leading an invading army from eastern Sudan, conquered Bornu. He was defeated by British soldiers in 1900.