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The Role of the Military and Commerce in State Formation in Kanem-Borno Upto 1500

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Abstract:

This paper deals with factors of state formation in the Chad basin with particular reference to the State of Kanem-Borno up to 1500AD. It observes that while there are a number of theories explaining the formation of states in the Chad basin, the theory of Trade and Welfare propounded by Hans is relevant to the formation of the state of Kanem-Borno in the period under study.

Keywords: Military, commerce, state formation, Kanem-Borno

1. Introduction

Scholars who had earlier studied State formation in Africa have narrated a lot of theories, hypothesis, assumptions and suggestions on the subject matter. Some of these include Hans, an Anthropologist, who advanced the theory of Trade and Warfare, Akin Mobogunje, a geographer, who propounded the theory of urbanization and State Formation in Africa and there is also the Hamitic hypothesis which posits that the civilization found in Africa is closely associated with the white man's civilization, etc.

In this paper, one is essentially concerned with the theory of Trade and Warfare in explaining State formation. In other words, we shall consider the military and commerce as factors responsible for the formation of States in Kanem-Borno under the Saifawa. The terminal period of the study is 1500 AD. But, before doing that, it is perhaps necessary as a matter of introduction, to provide some cursory examination on the setting of the Lake Chad Basin.

The area known as the Lake Chad basin occupies about ½ million kilometers divided between eight African countries and its most conspicuous physical feature is the Lake Chad itself (M. S. Imam: 2001:12-18). The Lake Chad, at its peak is said to have stretched from the foothills of Tibesiti and Jurab depression in the northeast to south and west to the present modern towns of Bama and Gashua in Nigeria and a greater part of Hausaland up to the Niger bend, including the Gulbi river system through Air in Niger and tails back to Tibesti and Bahr al-Ghazal area, Smith (1974:152). This area, since the ancient times, had provided resources and conditions which attracted human settlements as early as the 2nd millennium BC. Because of its resources, it had attracted quite a number of peoples. It can be regarded as a linguistic melting pot as several linguistic groups are found; Nilo Sahara represented by Kanuri, semantic (Shuwa Arabs) west Atlantic, Fulani, Chadic; Buduma, Kotoko, Mandara, Marghi, Bolewa, Ngism and Karekare. It is the attractiveness of the area, which in part, led to the conglomeration of diverse peoples who consequently formed states in the area.

In examining the role of the military and commerce in state formation in the Lake Chad basin up to 1500 AD, we shall limit our study on the formation of the state of Kanem-Borno under the Zaghawa and the Saifawa, although states such as Wadai, Baghirmi, Fitri, Kotoko, Mandara, Pabir and Hausa, among others, are all within the Lake Chad basin. We shall concentrate on Kanem-Borno, which was the most predominant among the states mentioned. Where other states are mentioned, it is done as a matter of illustration only.

1.1. The Military Factor in State Formation: The Case of Kanem under the Zaghawa

We have to make a few introductory remarks if the theme of the military in state formation can be evaluated in its proper historical context, Scholars of military history are of the opinion that throughout the history of peoples or nations, the military had always played an important role in the formation and indeed development of states and had influenced changes in its system of government (Ukpabi, 1986:32).

In addition, there is a great correlation between the military and politics since a state or political system is a major determinant of a military organization of any given Polity (Ukpabi, 1986:32) viewed in this light, it can be seen that the military and politics are not only intricately interwoven but also must co-exist harmoniously within a given polity. Narrowing down our analysis to the Zaghawa, we may ask how did the Zaghawa use the military as an instrument of state

formation of the state of Kanem in the 9th C. AD when they appeared in the limelight of history in the Lake Chad basin region?

The first mention of Kanem as a state in written Sources is to be found in a text written by Al-Yakubi in the 9th C AD. He simply says that, in this time, i.e. (9th C. AD), Kanem as a state was under the rule of a people called Zaghawa. How did the Zaghawa emerge and rule the people or founded the state of Kanem in the 9th C. AD?

Although our knowledge on the formation of the Zaghawa as a people is quite hazy, we can make some general assumptions and suggestions that the Zaghawa used their military superiority to attain that position in the 9th C. AD. We may assume that by the 9th C. AD, the area called Kanem was populated by various groups; the Ngalaga, the Kangu, the Kayi, the Kubri, the Kagawa, the Tomagra, and the Malal and, of course, the rulers of the state, the Zaghawa. Going by the Hypothesis of Abdullahi Smith, it seems quite possible that there have been much feuding among the various groups in Kanem based not only on ethnic differences but also on the control of scarce resources such as, farmlands, domestic animals and the control of trade routes (Smith: 1974: 15), (Alkali M.N, 1978:18); Thus, by the 9th c AD, several warring groups had emerged but all of them came under the hegemony of the Zaghawa who by this time had their own king and also fairly urbanized with their capital at Manan. What gave the Zaghawa to hegemonize or dominate the various warring groups in Kanem in the 9th C. AD? We can only speculate and ascribe this development for their military ingenuity, which we can, at this stage of our knowledge, suggest that it superseded the military capability of other peoples of the area of Kanem whom they eventually came to dominate.

The possible evidence of military superiority of the Zaghawa over several groups in the state of Kanem can be a plausible hypothesis as the Zaghawa triggered off state formation in an area (Kanem) where iron working technique had been known since the 4th C. AD and where the possession of horses was a guarantee of a superior fighting power. Equipped with weapons made of iron, and having the advantage of contacts, however rudimentary, with the outside world, this group, the Zaghawa, it is assumed, gradually brought under its sway the agricultural and pastoral peoples living in the area south east of Kavar between Lake Chad and the Bahr-al-Ghazal, the region later to be Known as Kanem.

The Bar al-Ghazal region is noted for its breed of excellent horses. We can suggest that the possession of horses by the Zaghawa increased their mobility and, also exposed them to the outside world from where they possibly borrowed ideas, device and military strategy which they effectively used to their advantage over their neighbours and brought them under their domination thus forming the state of Kanem in the 9th C. AD. They are said to, have dominated the Lake Chad region and up to Bahr al-Ghazal. The issue of horses is also mentioned by Al-Muhallabi that the wealth of the Zaghawa consists of; Livestock, sheep, Cattle, Camel and Horses (Letuzion & Hopkins, 1973:322-325).

It is therefore notable to assume that the horses might have to net the cavalry force with which the Zaghawa subdued their subjects and ruled the state of Kanem in the 9th C. AD following the formation of the state of Kanem. The next obvious stage was the expansion of the polity. At the end of the 9th C. AD, the kingdom of the Zaghawa evidently expanded considerably and was no longer confined to the region inhabited by kindred peoples speaking Saharan languages. It is suggested that Kanem proper lying between Lake Chad and Babr al-Ghazal was still by thin time formed the center of the kingdom but other peoples on the periphery had been brought under its sway. According to Al-Muhallabi, the extent of Kanem's peak under the Zaghaw at this period was:

its length was 15 days journey and its width the same. At that time, the largest state in the central Sudan and contributed greatly to the expansion of the Sahara languages a cultural assimilation of neighbouring peoples, it was only later that the state of Borno and Hausaland emerged and became dominant in the central Sudan (Levtzion & Hopkins 1973, 322-325).

The expansionism of the state of Kanem under the Zaghawa which extended well into Kavar and Bilma salt mines was as a result of an organized military force; a cavalry which the kings used to effectively subdue the people. The military factor is therefore central to the formation of the state of Kanem under the Zaghawa. We have reason to believe that when the Saifawa took over the mantle of leadership from the Zaghawa, it was not, as a result of military prowess of the new rulers or dynasty but certainly, as a result of the decaying State of Kanem where the subject people who revolted against the un-Islamic practice of kingdom by the kings as the wind of change brought by, Islam did enforce in the psyche of the subject peoples of Kanem and stimulated them to revolt against this pre-Islamic practice in the land. We may conclude this section by saying that it is possible that the Zaghawa were the first group in Kanem to have obtained the knowledge of the working of iron as it was in abundance in the polity (as far as 4th C. AD). In addition, Dierek Lange has shown that the early Zaghawa may be connected with the working of iron which they probably used to raise up a formidable fighting force and established the State of Kanem, thus signifying the importance of the military in State formation in Kanem.

Furthermore, there are stories of associations between blacksmith foundation of dynasties and sacred kingship in many areas in the Lake Chad basin and possibly beyond. The Zaghawa, of course, are noted for their possession of iron and horses and institutions of sacred kingship and therefore may adequately fit well into the process of state formation in the lake Chad basin.

1.2. The Role of Commerce in State Formation of Kanem under the Zaghawa

We have seen above, how the military factor assisted the Zaghawa in forming the State of Kanem in the 9th C. AD and which lasted up to the 11th century when the Saifawa took over the mantle of leadership.

If the military factor was essential in the business of State formation under the Zaghawa, perhaps the commercial element is even of far greater importance in State formation process, as far as the State of Kanem and indeed of all the State in the Chad basin are concerned. Commerce and commercial activities simply involve the production and exchange of goods in terms of import and export, the market and state of goods, the custom duties and revenues associated with it

for both the rulers, merchants, etc. How did the role of commerce assist the Zaghawa in forming the state of Kanem in the 9th C. AD? In order to understand the role of commerce in the process of State formation, we have to rely heavily, once again, on the account of Al-Muhallabi.

Writing on the socio-economic organization of the Zaghawa Al-Muhallabi said:

The Zaghawa have two towns, one of them called Manan and other Tarazki; both situated in the first clime, and their latitude is 21. The kingdom of the Zaghawa was a great kingdom among the kingdom of the Sudan. This kingdom borders on the east on the kingdom of Nubia, the houses of the Zaghawa are air reed huts as is also the palace of the king whom they exalt and worship instead of Allah... His attire consists of trousers of thin wool which he wraps himself in excellent garments made of simple piece of wool and Susi, Silk and costly brocade. He has unlimited authority over his subjects and he enslaves among them any one he wants. His wealth consists of livestock, such as sheep, cattle, camels and horses and the greater part of the crops of the county is sorghum, cowpea and then wheat (Letzion and J. P. Hopkins, 322-325).

Earlier, we have suggested that the Zaghawa may be connected with the working of iron; production of tools, weapons etc. which gave them a formidable military with which they dominated the people of Kanem; We may further suggest that from iron working, the Zaghawa may have ventured into trading and other crafts work and services which they plied between the nomadic and sedentary population of Kanem as can be inferred from this passage provided by Al-Muhallabi.

Information on the Zakhawa reveal that they were not only trading with Kanem but also with North Africa through Kavar and Fezzan. It is even possible as suggested by Leclant and Hakam, that before the Muslim conquests, the Zaghawa may have been trading with the Nile valley.

Marry last provides the following information on the trading activities of the Zaghawa.

The local Zaghawa trading economy was based on agricultural produce, fishing and craft manufactures (including) presumably tools, arrow and spearheads made of stone (A. Ajayi & M. Crowder 1974). But the Zaghawa were also involved in international trade as this passage from Al-Yakubi makes it clear. The people of Zawila are Muslim, all of them Ibadiyya, and go on pilgrimage to Mecca ... they export black slaves from among the Miriyyan, Zaghawiyyin because they live close to Zawila whose people capture them. (Levtzion & J. P. Hopkins op. cit., 323).

This was in the 9th C. AD. By the 10th C. AD, the Zaghawa kingdom had control of Kavar (or at least the Bilma section of (Kavar). This was important for the emergence of the state of Kanem under the Zaghawa because Kavar was an extremely valuable commercial place. Its strategic location as the jumping off point for the Trans-Saharan trade but also had prosperous and well-populated series of oases and markets. In addition, it was a center of mining and marketing over a large area of the import arid export of alum. The King of the Zaghawa is also credited to have dealt in the slave trade within - Berbers and Arabia. The Zaghawa drew a lot of revenue from this trade with which they built their military power and consequently ascended over their neighbours in the region of Kanem. Without commerce and revenue, the military could not be sustained and State formation itself would not have been possible at all Here lies the importance of commerce in state formation. We may also suggest that the respect the Zaghawa commanded from both the nomads and the settled groups in Kanem was partly due to their rule in the commercial network of the kingdom as they supplied essential goods and services to the people. Conclusively, we can say that their possession of the military and the role in the commerce gave an edge over their neighbours and assisted the process of State formation in the region of Kanem in the century AD.

1.3. The Role of the Military in State Formation in Kanem-Borno Under the Saifawa

State formation in Kanem, according to traditions of the Kanem peoples, is associated with the exploits of a Yemanite pre-Islamic hero called Saif Ibn Dhiyazan. The dependants of Saif, according to traditions, gained control of nomads, the Maghumi, living to the north east of Lake Chad. The legends emphasize that the descendants of Saif subsequently established ascendancy as chiefs of the Maghumi over a number of other tribal groups or of such groups who together came to constitute the Kanembu or Kanuri people, (A. Smith 1974:158). In other words, the descendant of Saif Ibn Dhiyazan established a dynasty of Mais of the Saifawa in the 9th C. AD. Although there is a wide gap that exists between the period of Saifawa and the emergence of the dynasty of the Mais, we can suggest that the first Kanuri Empire was formed as a result of the military superiority of the Magumi over other groups in Kanem. For instance, we can emphasize the significance or military superiority in the process by which the Magumi forced over groups or sub groups into a people loyal to the Saifawa needs to be mentioned. It seemed that the Saifawa appeared to have relied on the effective use of Calvary. The region of Bahr al-Ghazal, where this development is very likely to have taken place, according to Smith, retains its reputation for horse breeding down to the present time (Smith: 1974:158).

We can suggest that the control of the military (cavalry) by the Magumi put them in an advantageous position vis-a-vis their neighbours and hence they formed the State of Kanem by controlling key institutions of the State and thereby brought other groups under their control.

With the formation of the State of Kanem, the next stage in the development of the State was expansionism which was also made possible by the military. Thereafter, Smith maintains that rapid territorial expansion began under Mai Dunoma Humemi but the most remarkable expansion, the source continues, came under Mai Dunoma Dabalemi who came to the throne in 1255 when the kingdom had sufficient resources (Smith, 1974: Ibid). His reign of thirty-eight years saw and witnessed significant achievements such as the centre; of the Fezzan, Kavar, Traghen under the rule of Banu Khattab Arabs (Smith ibid). It can be deduced that Mai Dunoma's expeditions north into the desert shows the military strength of that period. The Mai appointed a governor at Traghen and also stationed a military garrison there. (Alkali 1978:124). Mai

Donoma's military activities were also directed towards the Zaghawa, Yadina, Badi and Jaja all along the Lake Chad area and brought these people under his control (Smith 1974:166) (Alkali 1978:124).

This expansion under Mai Dinuma Dabbalemi was made possible as a result of a cavalry force, which stood at 41,000 soldiers (Smith, Ibid). After Mai Dunoma Daballemi, the State collapsed and the Saifawa were forced by the Bulala of Fitiri to emigrate from Kanem into Borno in the late 14th century. The state collapsed but the dynasty continued in Borno but not until after a period of one hundred years of wandering. It was in 1470 that Mai Ali Gaji founded a permanent site at Birni Gazargamo, which served as the seat for the empire. This came as a result of the military strength of the Mai. The successors of Mai Ali Gaji are credited to have relied on the military in order to defend peoples under their control. The military therefore was responsible for the emergence of the State of Borno and ensued its expansionism in the Chad basin and the entire central Bilad Al-Sudan.

1.4. The Role of Commerce in State Formation in Kanem-Borno under the Saifawa Upto 1500 AD

The second factor, apart from the military, which helped State formation in Kanem-Borno, is undoubtedly commerce. The region west of Lake Chad in which the state of Borno was located, according to Alkali, is better suited for agriculture and pastoral activities than Kanem (Alkali, 1983:52). It is also clear that Borno was situated between North African trade routes (central Saharan route) and southwestern polities like Mandara and Hausaland. In other words, its position at the crossroads of the Lake Chad region and its location between the trade empires and southern polities mentioned above put her at a strategic commercial entrepot in the Trans-Saharan trading network, (Mukhtar 2003 :46). This is because foreign commerce, particularly across the Sahara, was in every period of great importance as items of trade included salt from Bilma mines in Kavar and Ghadames were taken to Borno and Hausaland. Trade passed Fezzan, Kavar and Borno, it is as a result of the importance of salt that Mai Idris Alooma raided into the area and stayed for sometimes at Bilma perhaps as a result of keeping, the road open for trade. (Smith, 1974:153). It is suggested that as a stimulus to a political and military development in the central Sudan, guns and other weapons were imported (Smith Ibid: 153). Furthermore, from North Africa and sometimes from still further a field, came a variety of luxury goods, silk and other fine clothes, glass, glassware and other things.... (Fisher and Fisher 1980:64) (Mukhtar 1992: 124). Some of the exports from Borno northwards, according to a source, included cloth, ivory, perfume, wax, beads, skin, ostrich feathers; hide and skin were the most important. (Mukhtar 1992:125) similarly, natron was a very important item for trade from Borno to Nupe via Kano (Bovil 1965:214). Barth estimated that 20,000 loads of natron on horses, oxen and asses passed through Kano each year on their way to Borno and to Nupe (Barth: 204).

1.5. The Contribution of Commerce

We can tentatively suggest that commerce contributed to the establishment of formation of Borno as a state in various ways. On the whole goods imported from North Africa were in the luxury class. Others included foodstuff, salt, natron etc. Such trade also provided market outlet for peasant farmers and local craftsmen and with the increase of trade, came increasing diversification of economic roles within society. There was increase in the population and population diversity in Borno to which trade contributed under the foundation of state power. Also of great benefit to the authorities were the custom duties levied on trade whether in luxury from abroad or outside the city walls where items could be provided for sale. In addition, exchange in techniques, ideas and ideals flowing along the channel maintained by trade were all important in consolidation of Borno.

The Saifawa Mais founded Borno not in the military might alone but with the favourable economic conditions offered in the form of trade. Their control of trade routes; market centers and benefits of custom dues and exchange of goods with the outside would put them in a comfortable position to control the key institutions of the State. In Kanem the Mghumi did just that. In Borno, the Saifawa Mais continued with this policy to establish and consolidate the State. We can tentatively surmise that Borno, as we have already pointed out, had been the supplier of important items of trade to neighbouring States and North African countries. With the expansion of the state, the Volume of this trade grew tremendously and he Mais benefited from it and defended it with enormous resources as the case of Mai Idris Alooma earlier indicated.

Trade therefore served as a factor of establishment of Borno and as a factor of expansion of the State as well. We can therefore conclude that the spread of Borno influence in our period was not based only on military but also on economic factors as the economy formed the basis on which the military and the entire bureaucracy depended on the state for proper function. Without the favourable economic environment in which the Saifawa happened to find themselves in, it could perhaps be practically impossible for the Mais to establish or form a new state west of Lake Chad following the abandonment of Kanem in the late 14th century. Economic factors particularly the role of commerce is therefore a very essential element in the state formation process of Borno and indeed all the states formed in the Chad basin during and before our period of study.

2. Conclusion

In this paper, we are able to prove, albeit in a tentative and fragmentary form, that the emergence of States in the Chad basin was achieved partly as a result of the efficacy of the military. In the same vein, commerce played a significant role in the emergence of the States of Kanem and Borno. Commerce sustained the military and the entire bureaucracy. These two factors taken together are central for the emergence of states in the Lake Chad basin. This is in line with J. Han's theory of Warfare and Trade in the emergence of states.

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