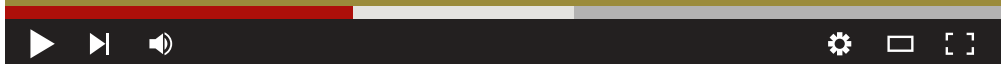


HOW BOKO HARAM EXPLOITS HISTORY AND MEMORY



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Boko Haram has not always been a terrorist organisation. In the mid-2000s, under the leadership of Muhammad Yusuf, its conduct was no more ruthless than myriad other Islamist groups in northern Nigeria. Yusuf's book *Hadhihi Aqidatuna wa Minhaj Da'awatuna* ("This is our creed and the methodology of propagation"), in which he calls for a return to the pristine age of Islam, is quite peaceable. But after clashes between Boko Haram members and state security forces in 2009, and especially after the death of Yusuf in police custody, the rhetoric and strategy of his successor Abubakar Shekau became increasingly violent.

Since its transformation into a terrorist organisation, Boko Haram's activities have resulted in the deaths of more than 20,000 people and the displacement of 5.5 million in the Lake Chad basin. A massive national and cross-border military deployment supported by the Civilian Joint Task Force, mercenaries, local hunters and vigilantes has failed to eradicate the group.

Researchers and security analysts generally argue that Boko Haram is sustained by poverty and inaction on the part of the Nigerian government. More specifically, Islamic scholars contend that its survival is enabled by jihadi-salafi ideology, which demands strict adherence to the sacred texts in their most literal form and an absolute commitment to jihad as a means of creating a state based on Islamic law. These explanations are too simplistic. Ideology certainly plays a key role in the evolution and sustenance of terrorist organisations. However, emerging evidence suggests that Boko Haram has also exploited memory and historical narratives to ground ideology in local context.

Boko Haram's leaders are aware that not all Muslims or Islamic groups in the Lake Chad basin subscribe to jihadi-salafi ideology. They are also alive to the impact on the population of years of mismanagement of state resources. To sustain its resistance to the Nigerian state and broaden its appeal among Muslim communities with different ideological affiliations, the group has reframed and intertwined the history of Islam, the Kanem-Bornu empire and corruption in Nigeria.

Boko Haram's appeal is reinforced by the consequences of environmental degradation and a failure to maintain law and order in its Kanuri heartland, the borderlands of Nigeria, Chad, Niger and Cameroon. Most Kanuris, within and outside Nigeria, oppose the violence Boko Haram perpetrates. Yet the group has succeeded in co-opting their language, religion and territory.

The road leading to the prison, one of many detention facilities for men suspected of belonging to Boko Haram, is full of potholes. It is guarded by three military checkpoints barricaded with sandbags, logs and rocks. The security forces manning the barriers, equipped with aged AK-47s, look tired and aggressive.

The response of the Nigerian state to the threat Boko Haram poses has been predominantly military. The use of force is driven by the assumption that the adversary is a gang of ignorant, poverty-stricken fanatics who have twisted Islamic theology for personal gain. Few listen to its leaders and fighters in an effort to ascertain their motivation. My visit to the detention centre was part of a European Union (EU)-funded deradicalisation programme seeking to rectify this oversight.

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No one I spoke to should be dismissed as an ignorant fanatic driven only by poverty and deprivation

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I was selected by the EU team to act as an “emergency translator” due to my language skills and knowledge of the terrain where Boko Haram recruits. I come from Sugu, Ganye local government, Adamawa state. To date, I have translated into English more than 50 YouTube films of Boko Haram *tafsir* (sermons) as well as scores of audio messages and flyers. These are an important, yet untapped, resource for anyone seeking to understand the ideology of the group, providing valuable insights into the way it has evolved. Through this research, it became obvious to me that its leaders are compelling and convincing orators who communicate with Muslims in northern Nigeria in a way that resonates with the daily reality of local people’s lives.

One prisoner at the detention centre stood out. Nicknamed “the Engineer” for his expertise in telecommunications, he spoke excellent English and classical Arabic, and was well versed in Islamic history and international politics. In line with Boko Haram’s founder Muhammad Yusuf, who was killed in 2009, and his successor Abubakar Shekau, the Engineer believes that “Western civilisation is founded on a collaboration between Judaeo-Christian tradition, democracy and Western education that marginalises Islamic values”.¹ He calls for “the return of the caliphate to the Muslim *ummah*”, or community.² The Engineer’s voice is soft and gentle, his smile disarming. He looks innocent, harmless even, but resolute.

The prisoners had very different narratives and posed varying levels of risk. Yet they had certain things in common. Devotion to their faith was one. They also all belonged to large Muslim families within which they had struggled to forge an identity and sense of belonging. This is something that Boko Haram readily offers.

To classify such prisoners as “uneducated” simply because they do not speak English – the yardstick in Nigeria – is erroneous. No one I spoke to should be dismissed as an ignorant fanatic driven only by poverty and deprivation. Although many had not been to school, they all displayed, in Hausa or Kanuri, a capacity for clarity of expression, logic and thought. They were “savvy” and “streetwise” in ways that are seldom acknowledged. All were familiar with the region’s history, as it is characterised by Boko Haram’s leaders in many YouTube clips.

A brief (potted) history of empire

Established in Kanem, an area north-east of Lake Chad, in the mid-11th century, the Kanem-Bornu empire was ruled by successive *Mai* – or kings – of the Muslim Sayfawa dynasty. In the late 14th century the epicentre of the kingdom shifted decisively west of Lake Chad. Its new capital was Birnin Gazargamo, in Yobe state of present-day Nigeria. The Kanem-Bornu empire flourished under the Sayfawa dynasty and was considered the greatest power in the region.

Birnin Gazargamo became a leading centre of Islamic learning, attracting scholars from the Sudan and North Africa. As early as the 12th century a Muslim poet from Bornu was renowned in the court of Sultan Yacub al-Mansur in Seville, Spain, for his songs in praise of the sultan.³ Under Mai Idris Alauma (1564-96), who took the title *Amir al-Mu’minin* – “Commander of the Faithful”, Islam was made the official religion of the empire. The identity and administration of the empire were distinctively Islamic.⁴ To be Kanuri, the dominant ethnic group, was to be a Muslim and Kanuri was the language of commerce alongside Arabic.

The Kanem-Bornu empire expanded through military conquest and burgeoning diplomatic and trade relations with other Muslim polities. The reign of Mai Idris Alauma is regarded as its apogee, with territory encompassing areas of present-day Chad, Niger,

Cameroon and Nigeria, including the Kwararafa kingdom in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria. By the 17th century the empire controlled trans-Saharan trade routes, built garrisons to protect them and signed treaties with rulers in North Africa. In 1638, an ambassador arrived in Tripoli bearing gifts of “30 eunuchs, 100 young Negroes, 50 maidens, a golden tortoise among other items”. In return, the Mai received “200 choice horses, 15 European renegades, several muskets and swords”.⁵ In 1852, British monarch Queen Victoria signed a treaty with the “Sovereign Kingdom of Bornoo”, in part to ensure that her subjects could trade within the empire without hindrance.⁶

The authority and influence of the Kanem-Bornu empire under the Sayfawa dynasty was ended by Muhammad al-Kanemi in 1814, who moved the capital from Birnin Gazargamo to Kukawa.⁷ His son became sole ruler in 1846, and the al-Kanemi dynasty survives through the current rulers of Nigeria’s Borno state. However al-Kanemi rule of the empire was eclipsed in May 1893 with the invasion of Rabeh Fadlallah, a Muslim warrior and slave trader from the old Funj Sultanate of Sinnar in today’s Sudan.⁸ The invasion was opposed by France, which wanted its loyal ally Bukar Garbei installed as Shehu of Borno in Dikwa.⁹ The British government, sensing it might lose out to the French, supported Rabeh, to the chagrin of the Kanuri population of Kanem-Bornu. Rabeh was killed by French forces at Gubja in 1901 and with his death the empire was left leaderless.¹⁰ Its territory was divided between France, Britain and Germany.

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The depiction of the glorious history of Islamic empires globally between the 8th and 19th centuries, and specifically of the Kanem-Bornu empire, is starkly contrasted with that of the modern Nigerian state

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Yusuf fulsomely praised the Sayfawa rulers for promoting Islam but condemned the al-Kanemis for collaborating with Western “infidels”. He described decolonisation, and the parcelling out of the former territories of the Kanem-Bornu empire to Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon, as a catastrophe for the Muslims of the region. In his narrative, the collapse of the empire led directly to corruption in the traditional and religious systems: “our land was an Islamic state before Europeans turned it into a land of *kafir*”, or unbelievers.¹¹ The depiction of the glorious history of Islamic empires globally between the 8th and 19th centuries, and

specifically of the Kanem-Bornu empire, is starkly contrasted with that of the modern Nigerian state (portrayed as having rapidly succumbed to all-pervasive corruption) and its neighbours (which succumbed to war and internal strife).

Exploiting history and selective memory

When I interviewed the prisoners in the detention centre, they were all familiar with the history of the Kanem-Bornu empire – everyone in north-east Nigeria is aware of it to some degree. Boko Haram publications, such as Yusuf's *Tarihin Musulmai*, reference the aforementioned historical narrative and it has featured prominently in *tafsir* and talks by Boko Haram's most prominent ideologues. The deployment of a Multinational Joint Task Force against the Boko Haram insurgency in 2011 and subsequent assaults may have made movement more difficult for its leading figures, but they have had little impact on the dissemination of messages and information by word of mouth.

Even today it is not uncommon for an Islamic preacher to arrive in a village or town unannounced and on foot. When he does, all the young Muslims will gather to listen. This is a tradition that has been largely unaffected by the conflict. It still happens in my village. For example, a group called *al-Jannah Tabbas* – "Paradise is certain" – is still free to preach extreme and intolerant views because it does so without resorting to violence. It is common for preachers to come from Chad, Niger and Cameroon to places such as Maiduguri, the capital of Borno state, and then return home.

The Boko Haram version of history is selective, idealised and questionable. In reality, the Kanem-Bornu empire was considerably more volatile and at times far less glorious than is claimed. Boko Haram indicts colonialists for dismantling the empire and dividing it among themselves, but Muslim infighting was largely responsible for its collapse. However, seeking to ascertain what is true and what is not true is to miss the point of the narrative altogether.

History is a narration of the past in such a way as to make sense of the present. Similarly, memory is conceived as the active and selective process of reconstructing the past for a particular purpose, irrespective of what is being remembered. Historical narrative becomes the framework through which members of socio-political

and religious groups recall their past in relation to others. The history of the Kanem-Bornu empire embraced by Boko Haram is essential to the region and fundamental to its objectives, not least because it underpins the collective ethno-religious identity of the descendants of the Kanem-Bornu empire and instils a shared sense of victimhood and mission. Its leaders have been strategic in their selectivity, choosing details that best suit their agenda and embellishing the narrative to appeal to listeners and mobilise them.

If told in isolation, the story of the Kanem-Bornu empire might not have been sufficiently relevant and appealing to listeners. However, Boko Haram's leaders shrewdly link the empire's success to the prolific expansion of Islam and Islamic values. They relate how the Islamic state founded by the Prophet Mohammed in Medina was rooted in shari'a and founded on principles of justice and equality; how this Islamic state ultimately grew to become the Ottoman Empire; and how Western pressure led to its dissolution in 1924 by Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey.¹² Since then, according to the narrative, Western civilisation – whose agents also destroyed the Kanem-Bornu empire – has been imposed on Muslims, and Islam has found itself subjugated by the Christian West.

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The linkage of the regional history with the wider story of Islam is therefore of critical importance

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Boko Haram's leaders identify three pillars of Western civilisation: its Judaeo-Christian tradition, democracy and education.¹³ This claim is also strategic in conception. The Judaeo-Christian tradition is considered the foundation of the liberty and laxity of Western civilisation. Doctrinally, Christians are said to have tried to turn Jesus into God and this is *shirk*, or idolatry – associating another god with Allah. As for secular education, Yusuf insisted that it was a deliberate conspiracy to control Muslim societies, one that has polluted public morality, deepened poverty and enabled corruption to flourish.¹⁴

In Shekau's *tafsir* too, secular education is to blame for destroying the thinking of many Muslims through a system that is forbidden by the Prophet of Allah.¹⁵ Consequently, Boko Haram admonishes its followers to reject secular education and all its scientific theories – “Western education corrupts pure Islamic morals, mixes males and females, and teaches that a woman can marry another woman”¹⁶

– and point to the fact that at its zenith the Kanem-Bornu empire was renowned as a centre of Islamic scholarship and learning throughout the Muslim world.

As far as the scourge of democracy is concerned, Boko Haram insists that the exercise of all authority must be guided exclusively by the Qur'an, *Sunna* (traditional Muslim law based on the Prophet's words or acts) and *hadiths* (reported words, actions or habits of the Prophet). Instead of the separation of religion and state in Western civilisation, the state must be created in the service of religion;¹⁷ according to the Qur'an, Allah says "whosoever judges not according to God's revelation – they are the infidels".¹⁸ Again, listeners are reminded that their land was once a mighty Islamic state.

Boko Haram seeks to instil in its members a sense of personal responsibility and religious duty to defend the Islamic legacies of the fallen empire. The linkage of the regional history with the wider story of Islam is therefore of critical importance. Reference to the Kanem-Bornu empire is a direct appeal to a sense of grief and indignation that accompanied the fragmentation of the empire by colonialists. It is equally important – and revealing – that the history is told in Hausa and Kanuri, the language of the Kanem-Bornu empire that is still spoken in the Lake Chad basin. While both fluent in Arabic, Yusuf was, and Shekau is, Kanuri. Most of their *tafsir* have been transcribed into Kanuri.

The definition of the three pillars of Western civilisation fortifies Boko Haram's jihadi-salafi ideology and prepares the ground for targeting Christians, "Western" institutions and Muslims regarded as liberal or lax. Above all, Boko Haram's interpretation of regional and Islamic history has increasingly been used to articulate and justify the need to overthrow the contemporary Nigerian state.

New elites, new tactics

The Boko Haram narrative contends that the state built on the ruins of the Kanem-Bornu empire brought nothing but corruption, immorality, inequality, injustice and neglect. Corruption, it is said, largely determines how Nigeria works, and for whom or against whom it works. From the 1970s onwards, oil revenues created new tensions between regions, states and ethnic groups, exacerbating inequalities and diminishing the quality of life. The reintroduction

of multiparty democracy in 1999 after more than three decades of almost exclusively military rule simply produced new political elites with the same flaws as their predecessors.

Initially, Boko Haram was not averse to taking advantage of state officials when it served its own ends. This was particularly true in its formative years in the early 2000s. In multiparty Nigeria, Boko Haram was considered one of many sources of potential votes. The governor of Borno state, Ali Modu Sheriff, provided funding, motorbikes and religious buildings before and after his election in 2003; and one of Yusuf's aides was appointed state commissioner for religious affairs. In general, however, Nigeria's political classes were summarily indicted as the successors to the colonialists.

Mostly the product of Western-style education, Nigerian politicians have always been accused by Boko Haram of sustaining the imposed Western system and neglecting the legacies of the Kanem-Bornu empire and Islam altogether. The profligacy of state governors, Christian and Muslim alike, is frequently castigated. Politicians are censured for actively promoting a secular state with symbols such as the national anthem, pledge of allegiance and flag.¹⁹ Shekau calls on his followers to reject these: words such as "pledge", "obedience", "service", "honour" and "glory" are worthy of Allah alone.²⁰ "True" Muslims are exhorted not to live and work under a secular government and to forcibly replace it with an Islamic one.

After Boko Haram's uprising in 2009, its rhetoric – and conduct – turned violent. Religious and traditional rulers were increasingly targeted for conniving with corrupt government officials and infidels to steal from the poor. Shekau declared, "we will slaughter and kill you, for Allah says, if you meet the infidels in battle, cut off their necks".²¹ Under his leadership attempts have been made on the lives of, among others, the Shehu of Borno and the Emir of Kano. Islamic scholars are also frequently attacked for opposing Boko Haram or simply for being undesirable "competition".

Kanuri ground

Boko Haram's exploitation of a historical narrative as a means of encouraging resistance is buttressed by the cultural, physical and economic environment of the former territory of the Kanem-Bornu empire. The Lake Chad basin has a population estimated at more than

35 million. The influence of ethnic Kanuris is extensive and Kanuri identity transcends artificial colonial borders. Most live in the Nigerian states of Borno, Yobe and Bauchi; in the regions of Kanem and Lac in Chad, Far North in Cameroon and Diffa and Zinder in Niger.

Kanuris of the border region tend to be illiterate and their precarious livelihoods depend on agriculture, fishing and pastoralism – all of which have been affected by severe environmental degradation due to poor rainfall and desertification. The Borno irrigation scheme fed by the Yedserem, Ngadda and Gubio rivers is moribund. The Tiga and Challawa dams, located between Nigeria and Niger, only function during the rainy season and not at full capacity even then. Since 2000, many of the workers on these irrigation schemes have lost their jobs. The entire population of the region is a victim of government neglect and climate change.

“ The conflict in north-east Nigeria is not a Kanuri uprising; nor is it fought in the name of Kanuri ethnic identity ”

However bleak the backdrop, the conflict in north-east Nigeria is not a Kanuri uprising; nor is it fought in the name of Kanuri ethnic identity. However, most of Boko Haram’s recruits are Kanuri and the Kanuri heartland provides the space and the local networks, fishing unions, market groups and farming communities for recruitment and mobilisation. The Kanuri language facilitates the movement of arms, training of new recruits and establishment of camps. In 2013, letters were sent to known Kanuri soldiers, threatening them with death if they refused to stop fighting for the Nigerian government.²² The same year, a senior Kanuri customs officer was arrested for allegedly assisting Boko Haram insurgents to smuggle several trucks loaded with arms and ammunition into Nigeria.²³

The terrain of the region – with its vast forests, the Mandara mountains and unprotected borders – is in many respects ideal for waging guerrilla warfare. International borders are porous and cross-border collaboration to maintain law and order weak. Boko Haram established camps in Sambisa, Bulabulin, Yujiwa-Alagarno, Balmo, Talafa, Gorun, Buni Yadi unhindered and in many other places that remain unknown to security forces. A number of Boko Haram’s leaders are from neighbouring states – Yusuf’s former aide Mamman Nur is from Cameroon – and some of its operations within Nigeria and in the border region have been carried out by non-Nigerian

Kanuris who are able to move around as they please. For example, Ali Jalingo, a Nigerien captured in Makurdi, Benue state, in January 2013, masterminded several bombings in Borno state.²⁴

Persistent threat

Prior to 2010, Boko Haram is believed to have attracted over 280,000 followers and sympathisers across the Lake Chad border region, with recruitment particularly high at the beginning of the uprising in 2009.²⁵ Forced conscription has become common since 2009, but many still join voluntarily.

Radical Islamist sects have been a feature of the socio-political landscape in northern Nigeria since the country gained independence in 1960. Even if Boko Haram had not turned to violence, extremist preaching would have persisted; and were Nigerian and other security forces to kill every Boko Haram supporter in the Lake Chad region it would still not alter the extant conditions in which the state has no legitimacy and which nurture radicalisation.

Force alone is not a solution to the conflict. Whether the Nigerian state is capable of adopting new approaches is highly debatable. However, if it were willing to listen more closely to the “terrorists” and their sympathisers, and to interpret and learn from what they heard, the threat to Nigeria’s territorial unity could be more effectively countered. Contrary to some optimistic pronouncements since the election of a new president and government in 2015, military defeat will not eliminate Boko Haram or extremism in the Lake Chad basin.

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Force alone is not a solution to the conflict

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The government’s initial perception of Boko Haram as ignorant fanatics motivated by hunger and deprivation is flawed. My interviews with (alleged) members in custody established that although they lack Western-style education, most display an innate aptitude for rational thinking and strategic organisation in their own surroundings. Wider acknowledgment of this reality, and the creative way Boko Haram’s leaders exploit history and memory, is imperative.

On the ground, it is noteworthy that very few Nigerian soldiers speak Kanuri, in contrast to their more effective Chadian counterparts; and that prisons, refugee camps and border communities are the most fertile recruiting grounds for Boko Haram. Better understanding of the adversary might, at the very least, improve intelligence-gathering. More importantly, it should inform all legal, political and military engagement with Boko Haram.

Notes

- ¹ Author's translation, Abubakar Shekau (2004), "Western civilization is Atheism and anti-Islam", *YouTube*, accessed and translated on 12 March 2014; author's translation, Abubakar Shekau (2006), "The Islamic doctrine of Tawhid, Oneness of Allah", *YouTube*, accessed and translated 21 March 2014.
- ² Author's interview, 4 June 2015.
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- ⁴ Ibn Fartua, Ahmed (1928), "The First Twelve Years of Reign of Mai Idris Alauma", *Sudanese Memoirs*, R. H. Palmer (ed.), Lagos, Nigeria: Government Printers, vol. 3, pp.22–30, 67–9.
- ⁵ Barth, Heinrich (1857), *Travels and Discoveries in the North and Central Africa*, London: Vol. II, Appendix 5, p.659.
- ⁶ For a complete copy of the treaty see Kirk-Greene, A.H.M. (1959), "The British Consulate at Lake Chad: A Forgotten Treaty with the Sheikh of Bornu" in *African Affairs* 58 (233), pp.334–9.
- ⁷ Brenner, Louis (1971), *The Shehus of Kukawa: A History of the Al-Kanemi Dynasty of Bornu*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 48-66.
- ⁸ Cohen, Ronald (1967), *The Kanuri of Bornu*. London: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, pp. 18-19.
- ⁹ Hallam, W.K.R. (1977), *The Life and Times of Rabih Fadl Allah*, Devon, p.279.
- ¹⁰ Mukhtar, Yakubu (2000), *Trade, Merchants and the State in Borno*, c.1893–1939, Köln: Rüdiger Koppe Verlag, p.30.
- ¹¹ Author's translation, Muhammad Yusuf (2007), "Tarihin Musulmai, History of Muslims", *YouTube*, accessed and translated August 2013.
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ Author's translation, Abubakar Shekau (2006), "The Islamic doctrine of Tawhid, Oneness of Allah", *YouTube*, accessed and translated 21 March 2014.
- ¹⁴ Author's translation, Muhammad Yusuf (2007), "Tarihin Musulmai, History of Muslims", *YouTube*, accessed and translated August 2013.
- ¹⁵ Author's translation, Abubakar Shekau (2004), "Western civilisation is Atheism and anti-Islam", *YouTube*, accessed and translated on 12 March, 2014.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ Author's interview with a member of Civilian Joint Task Force, Damaturu, Yobe state, 13 March 2014.
- ¹⁸ *Qur'an* 5:44.
- ¹⁹ Author's interview with Yusuf Abdulazeez (pseudonym), a former member of Boko Haram in Yola, Adamawa state, 15 February 2014.
- ²⁰ Author's translation, Abubakar Shekau (2004), "Western civilization is Atheism and anti-Islam", *YouTube*, accessed and translated on 12 March, 2014.
- ²¹ Author's translation, Abubakar Shekau (2014), "The Abduction of Chibok Girls", *YouTube*, accessed and translated 13 November, 2014.
- ²² Author's interview with unnamed soldier, Ganye, Adamawa state, 22 December 2013.
- ²³ Kwaru, M. (2013), "Boko Haram: Senior customs personnel arrested over arms importation in Borno", *Peoples Daily*, 29 May 2013.
- ²⁴ "Terror Suspect Escapes Arrest in Benue", *Daily Onus*, accessed 7 January 2013.
- ²⁵ Danjibo, Nathaniel (2010), *Islamic Fundamentalism and Sectarian Violence: The "Maitatsine" and "Boko Haram" Crises in Northern Nigeria*, Peace and Conflict Studies Programme, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, p. 6.

Territory of Kanem-Bornu empire at the end of the 16th century



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