

A History of Borno: Trans-Saharan African Empire to Failing Nigerian State

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Author: Vincent Hiribarren

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Reviewer: Peter Yearwood

The title of *A History of Borno, Trans-Saharan African Empire to Failing Nigerian State* has two ambiguities. Situated in the Sahel, Borno did not span the Sahara. It was Trans-Saharan by being linked culturally and economically to the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, rather than to the Atlantic. Whether the failing state is Nigeria or Borno is also unclear. As Toyin Falola has already pointed out, even *A History of Borno* may be a misleading title.⁽¹⁾ Hiribarren notes that it is, 'a semi-arid region with one of the lowest incomes in the whole country', and is 'one of the least studied areas of modern-day Nigeria' (p. 166). There are two obvious reasons for studying the history of Borno. Hiribarren gives both of them. The first is that the history is long. Borno as an organised state goes back to the eighth century. Legend takes it back further, as Bahr Nuh (the Sea of Noah) is another name for Lake Chad. It was the oldest state in Sub-Saharan Africa, a template for those which emerged later, and long a dominant power in the region. The book's cover, with a 19th-century engraving of a 'Trooper of the Sheikh of Bornu's bodyguard' from Friedrich Ratzel's *History of Mankind*, powerfully evokes that immemorial past. Much more recently, as the author also notes, the area has become the homeland of Boko Haram. Understanding the history of Borno must be crucial to explaining why that movement emerged there and why it has endured so long. Analysts have so far avoided doing this. The often repeated assertion that Boko Haram wants to revive the Sokoto Caliphate, forgets that it is centred on a Sheikhdom which in the 19th century reconstituted itself in opposing the jihad which established the Caliphate.

A History of Borno deals with neither of these obvious topics. It begins not in 810, but in 1810, with the Libyan scholar Muhammed al-Kanemi organising Borno's resistance to the jihad, and beginning to displace the ruling Mais of the millennial Saifawa dynasty. His descendants established the new dynasty of Shehus (Sheikhs) which survives to this day. Hiribarren is not much concerned even with this relatively recent history. Towards the end of the book he promises to 'interrogate the role played by Boko Haram in the redefinition of the borders and territory of Borno and Nigeria' (p. 167). That is his final mention of Boko Haram. The interrogation is never conducted. Rather than dealing with the distant past, or with Boko Haram, Hiribarren's book seeks instead to 'establish the history of the spatial framework of Borno' (p. 3). He claims that under the Shehus of the al-Kanemi dynasty, Borno had a strong sense of territoriality which would be taken over, recycled, and perhaps fossilised, by the British conquerors, becoming foundational for the

present failing Nigerian state. On the face of it, this is a strange case to argue. In passing he mentions that Borno is 'relatively flat'. As I have been neither to Kansas nor to Saskatchewan, I cannot judge the relativity, but I can affirm the flatness. A history of a longer *durée* than Hiribarren provides, would show a polity slithering round Lake Chad from the northeast to the south and eventually to the west. Unlike Hausa towns, those of Borno were not solid and well-walled. If destroyed, they were seldom rebuilt in the same place.⁽²⁾ Fluidity rather than fixedness would seem better to characterise Bornoan history.

The uncertainties of the title reflect those of the book. It is often difficult to work out just what the author is trying to say. Frequently he makes bold assertions, but these are soon followed by so many qualifications or concessions to potential critics that it is not clear how much, or what, of the original point remains. Strikingly, in two pages of conclusion to his last chapter, he seems to begin by putting forward the enduring territoriality of Borno as exceptional in Africa, but ends up by presenting it as paradigmatic (pp. 188–9). Territoriality is important for him. His most striking claim is that in the pre-colonial period, 'notions of 'space' and 'limits' are ... present in Borno and Hausaland as much as in Europe in the nineteenth century' (p. 35). As evidence, he presents a drawing given to Friedrich Horneman by a Hausa marabout in 1798. As this was before the Fulani jihad, many Hausa principalities still acknowledged some sort of Bornoan suzerainty. They appear in the drawing encircled by heavy lines with Borno as a 'dominating eastern power' (p. 34). I know very well how such maps come to be made. Shortly after I arrived in Nigeria, I was asked to edit the first volume of Jos Oral History and Literature Texts. As this dealt with several small, poorly studied, groups on or round the Jos Plateau, I thought that a map might be useful. I had several sessions with my closest colleague, who comes from the area. We looked at a variety of maps, which had a variety of groups with a variety of names spelled in a variety of ways. I asked which groups had an independent existence, which names should be used, and whether they had borders with this group or with that. I then got down to drawing. As with the map presented to Horneman, each group was clearly bounded. Because this was done on a topographical map, the result may have been of use to readers unfamiliar with the area, but it reflected a European rather than a Tariya or a Mwaghavul conception of political space. Hiribarren readily accepts that Horneman's map does not depict 'any geographical reality' (p. 35). Maps like these would be a leading cause of death among early European explorers.

Hiribarren notes that Borno appears on maps as early as the 16th century (p. 191), but these maps were created in Europe, not in Borno. Africans seldom, if ever, made maps. In modern European culture, map-making was of great importance. Boundary lines defined the states they enclosed. Delimiting borders was central. In other societies peripheries might sensibly remain peripheral. As a prince in Sulawesi is reported to have replied to a question about boundary wars with his neighbour, 'Mijnheer, we had much better reasons to fight with one another than these shabby hills'.⁽³⁾ Until the 1880s Europeans in Africa had a similar attitude. Coastal towns were occupied, partly to attract trade from the interior, but the interior was not worth fighting over. This changed in the 1880s. Europeans drew lines on their maps of Africa. These lines were prescriptive rather than descriptive. Hiribarren repeatedly emphasises the lack of interest in, and knowledge of, Africa among European political leaders. There is truth in this, but it can be exaggerated. The photograph of the Cabinet Room in Lord Beaverbrook's *Politicians and the War 1914–1916*, clearly shows maps of Africa and of Kamerun.⁽⁴⁾ The framework of the partition was set early on, at the highest level in Europe, and has to be understood at that level. Germany began the process of delimiting West Africa. In 1884 it did not just take control of Douala on the coast, it insisted on pushing lines into the interior, first to the Cross River, then to the Benue, and across the Benue to the right bank, thus pointing the way for an eventual extension to Lake Chad. The British had reservations, but did not seriously try to block this. Lord Salisbury accepted that an arbitrary boundary might cut through the southern area of 'heathen tribes, split up into small districts and powerless against Europeans...', but it should not divide 'the large Mussulman territories, in which there is concentrated power and a higher civilization...'.⁽⁵⁾ This perception of Northern Nigeria as a place where Islamic rulers had voices which might have to be listened to, while pagan peoples might safely be ignored, predominated in the colonial period. Just before the outbreak of the First World War, the British Commissioner of the delimitation of the Nigeria-Kamerun border, which had at last been completed, described pagan peoples as bearing 'a great resemblance to monkeys, being small in stature, but

extraordinarily active'.⁽⁶⁾ The language may have been toned down, and the heathens have become Christian, but the perception persists.

Because London's primary concern was to keep France off the navigable Benue, it let Berlin create a German wedge to serve that purpose. Adamawa, the large eastern emirate of the Sokoto Caliphate, was divided. Great Britain held on to the capital, Yola, on the Benue, but Germany was given the bulk of its territory to the east, north, and south. In the next stage, pushing the line from Yola to Lake Chad would give Great Britain most of Borno, but a significant eastern portion would fall to Germany. The views of the Lamido in Yola, of the Shehu in Kukawa, or even of the Sultan in Sokoto, were not sought. While Hiribarren strives to assert African agency, and derides 'tea and macaroons' readings of the Scramble for Africa (p. 6), the over-riding fact remains that the partition began on European maps, where the imperial powers divided the large Islamic states for reasons which had nothing to do with existing local conceptions, or realities, of territoriality. And they knew very well that they were doing this. As yet, neither the British nor the Germans had a significant presence on the ground. Their traders were barely tolerated on the Benue, and they were nowhere near Borno. Their maps, reflecting an earlier age of exploration, might show latitude accurately, but longitudes were still uncertain. Sir George Goldie, Chairman of the Royal Niger Company, told the Foreign Office, meridians 'move about in Africa like mountains ... An error of a degree or even half a degree might otherwise cost England Kuka[wa], and therefore all Bornu'.⁽⁷⁾ Then Africa threw up a surprise. The Sudanese warlord Rabih, who had been pushing westward across Africa to occupy Baghirmi, conquered Borno in 1893, and established his capital at Dikwa, south of Lake Chad. Lord Rosebery, the Foreign Secretary in the new Liberal government, decided to take a flutter on Rabih, whose armies might prove a better barrier to the French push for Lake Chad than lines on Anglo-German maps. The Germans were not told of the approach to Rabih until after they had signed their treaty with the British. Their response was to shift the eastern border of Kamerun, so as to give France access to the Mayo Kebbi, part of the navigable Benue system. This is all quite well covered in the literature of the Scramble, especially in G. N. Sanderson's exceptionally detailed and perceptive *England, Europe and the Upper Nile* ⁽⁸⁾, though none of it appears in *A History of Borno*. Hiribarren has little interest in, or feel for, the dynamics of the diplomacy of imperialism. He even makes (twice), the howler of describing Wilhelm II as King/Kaiser during the unification of Germany (pp. 28, 30).

Accounts of the Scramble focus on the Nile rather than the Niger, and usually stop with Fashoda in 1898. The rivalry for Lake Chad was played out later, and is neglected in the secondary literature. Surprisingly, while the French defeated Rabih and, later, his son Fadl Allah, they withdrew peacefully from Borno, to allow the British and Germans to move into the territories allotted them by their 1893 treaty. While Goldie had worried that the maps placed meridians too far to the west, in fact they were too far to the east. It quickly became apparent that tracing the boundary on the ground from Yola to Lake Chad was likely to place Dikwa in the British sphere, leaving Germany with next to nothing in Borno. London declined to take advantage of this. Anglo-German negotiations led to an adjustment in 1906 which created a small German Emirate with a Shehu in Dikwa, while the British kept most of Borno, with another al-Kanemi Shehu, and a new capital at Maiduguri. As this has not been well studied, I once contemplated doing it myself, but concluded that the multi-lingual, multi-archival research required would be beyond me. On the face of it, Hiribarren has completed the task which I had shirked. A bibliography of some 50 pages includes archival sources in Nigeria, England, and Germany (though not France), and interviews in Borno. This is why I have undertaken a review of a book focussed on a topic which I had long since abandoned. I wanted to see how far the topic had been advanced. Unfortunately, on the key question of why the French so readily withdrew from the territory they had just conquered, *A History of Borno* has little to say: 'The French presence in Borno before the British and German 'effective occupation' remains quite obscure according to the different sources' (p. 87). I was also particularly concerned to look at Hiribarren's treatment of the re-unification of Borno after the British took Dikwa at the beginning of the First World War. I had done two studies of the repartition of Africa in 1914–20 ⁽⁹⁾, but found the Borno negotiations very difficult to follow. Eventually I managed to work them out, and published my results in the Borno Museum Society Newsletter, which, despite its title, is a serious academic journal.⁽¹⁰⁾ Hiribarren fully recognises my work, credits me with 'very precise details'

(p. 234, n. 14), and generously acknowledges comments which I made on an early draft of his chapter on it. I hoped that his work would build on and supersede my own, but for these very precise details, those interested in the question will still have to seek out an obscure journal.[\(11\)](#)

During the war, British policy at the highest level was to let the French have Kamerun, in the hope of smoothing relations elsewhere. Junior officials and men on the ground wanted to cement alliances with the Moslem leaders of Northern Nigeria whose co-operation had been essential for the prolonged war in West Africa. They hoped that Paris might allow them to gain territories which would rectify what appeared as the injustices of the original partition. Unlike Adamawa, the portion of Borno under German rule was small. The French readily agreed to let the British have it, though incompetence at almost all levels made a mess of the details, which placed territories in dispute and ended with a clash between a British patrol and a small disputed pagan village, where a soldier and three villagers were killed, provoking an official protest from the French authorities. When the peace treaty was drafted, common sense prevailed over Borno, but at the cost of dividing the neighbouring Sultanate of Mandara. It might have been united under French rule, but British pique insisted on its division. The Scramble therefore ended, as it had begun, with lines on European maps overriding political realities in Africa.

Readers of this review may suspect that I have focussed over-critically on a small part of the book with which I am personally familiar. In fact, the review so far has covered roughly three quarters of *A History of Borno*. Hiribarren's underlying problem is that 'territoriality' is not a very useful idea for an analysis of Borno's modern history. Because he also wants to show that Bornoan and European conceptions of political space were substantially the same, he does not give the 'power of maps', which he recognises (p. 93), the centrality which it needs in any analysis of what happened to Borno between 1885–1920. At the same time as he asserts the importance of territoriality, he points to a different approach which might have been more fruitful. He describes the borders of Borno and Hausaland in the 19th century as Westphalian (p. 42). Rather than concentrating on the borders, he might better have looked at the political system more generally. Historically, the modern European paradigm, which has become universal, has not been the only one in which cultural and religious unity coexisted with political division. Classical Greece was one such area, as was recognised by contemporaries and by modern theorists of international relations who closely follow Thucydides' analysis of the Peloponnesian wars. China after the fall of the Han was another such. While the history of China is usually conceived in terms of over-reaching empire, the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, written more than a millennium later, shows the resonance of this period in the Chinese consciousness. Europeans of the late Renaissance recognised a similar balance of power system between the major Islamic powers of the Ottoman Empire, Persia, and the Mughal Empire. They tried to link the emergent European system to it. In south-western Nigeria a similar system existed between the Yoruba polities after the fall of the *Ẓay* Empire at the beginning of the 19th century. Yoruba historiography is enormously rich. *A History of Borno* would have benefitted greatly from a comparison between the Hausa-Fulani-Kanuri area and Yorubaland, especially as both ended up mainly in a Nigeria in which the British system of indirect rule dictated collaboration with existing African rulers. Hiribarren discusses the Anglo-Kanuri partnership which, he suggests, recycled or fossilised Borno. In Yorubaland, the British tried to re-work the recently established hegemony of Ibadan into what historians have called the New *Ẓay* Empire.[\(12\)](#)

Hiribarren rightly stresses the conservative nature of British overrule, which explains their readiness to make use of existing political structures, such as Borno. At the back of his mind there is a contrast between this British conservatism and the radicalism of revolutionary France, which abolished the historic provinces to replace them with smaller, arbitrary departments of roughly uniform size (p. 72). He does not push the point, as he has to recognise that in West Africa the French did make pragmatic use of local *rois nègres*. (p. 65). Nevertheless, it is a good idea to have in mind. The Constituent Assembly wanted to sweep away powerful local attachments to create a nation-state based on French patriotism. For the British, Nigeria was an administrative convenience. Fostering a sense of Nigerian national identity was not one of their objectives. As much as possible they tried to make use of existing political structures. The peoples of Nigeria reacted to this in creative ways. Yorubas developed a deep sense of identity centred neither on *Ẓay* nor on Ibadan, nor on Lagos, but on Ife. In the North, Islamic elites created a strong sense of regional identity based on religion.

They would be the predominant group in Independent Nigeria. Their position could be contested both by egalitarian democrats and by non-Hausa-Fulani groups. Hiribarran touches on this. He acknowledges that Borno's 'position as part of the Nigerian North has always been ambiguous' (p. 185). He considers some of the options with which the Kanuri have experimented, but he does not push his analysis very far. For instance, he suggests that the disproportionate number of Kanuris in high administrative traditions, culminating in the 'infamous dictator Sani Abacha' may reflect a statesmanship tradition deriving from the 'prolonged existence of a state in the Chad basin'. However, as so often, he concludes tamely that 'in the absence of detailed studies of these politicians, this argument remains a hypothesis' (p. 186). I was in Nigeria for most of Abacha's dictatorship. It was known that he was a Kanuri from Kano, but this seldom featured in discussions of his rule. Nigerians responsive to Hiribarren's line of argument might be more inclined to link him to the brutality of Rabih, rather than to the statesmanship of the Saifawa Mais or the al-Kanemi Shehus of Borno.

The final chapters cover several topics, though seldom in great depth. The most important deals with the plebiscites of 1959 and 1961, in which the Trust Territory of Northern Cameroons, which included Dikwa, voted first against and then for joining Nigeria. The unexpected result of the first plebiscite revealed the unpopularity the ruling elite, linked as it was to the Nigerian Northern People's Congress. Hiribarren notes this, but hardly explains it. He pays little attention to ethnic differences in the area, and no attention to religious ones. To what degree was this a revolt of economically oppressed Moslem talakawa? to what degree of culturally marginalised pagans and Christians? There is no clear answer, and Hiribarren is not helped by the incompatibility of the figures for the circles of Dikwa Emirate between the text on p. 154 and figure 21 on p. 158, which is partly the result of placing figures in the wrong column, which proper editing should have caught. Other chapters cover the carving of Yobe State out of Borno State in 1991, the Kanuri sense of identity and destiny, and cross-border trade, but these are too short to provide interesting conclusions.

Borno is well worth studying. It stands out as an African state with history. Boko Haram has linked it with major transnational issues. A History of Borno is a missed opportunity. It lacks the drive of a good, document based, narrative history, but territoriality is not a sufficiently challenging idea to make it a compelling theoretical one. It must nevertheless be hoped that Hiribarren has done enough to direct scholarly interest towards Borno, and that his book will be the harbinger of further studies which will advance our understanding of the area and the history which has made it what it now is. If so, we shall all be in his debt.

Notes

1. Toyin Falola, 'Review of Vincent Hiribarran, A History of Borno, From Trans-Saharan Empire to Failing Nigerian State', *American Historical Review*, vol. 123, 3 (June 2018), 1059-60. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Editorial note in E. W. Bovill, *Missions to the Niger*, Volume IV, The Bornu Mission, 1822-25, Part III, (Cambridge, 1966) p. 599. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Clifford Geertz, 'Politics past, politics present: some notes on the uses of anthropology in understanding the new states', in *The Interpretation of Cultures* n.p., 1973, citing V. E. Korn, *Het Atadrecht van Bali* (The Hague, 1932), p. 440. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Lord Beaverbrook, *Politicians and the War 1914-1916* (London, 1928, 1932, 1960), facing p. 17. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Marquess of Salisbury (Prime Minister) to Malet (Berlin), 4 November 1885, FO403/71/129, British Foreign Office Archives, The National Archives, Kew. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Captain W. V. Nugent, R.A., 'The geographical results of the Nigeria-Kamerun Boundary Demarcation Commission of 1912-13', *The Geographical Journal*, 43 (1914), p. 634. [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Royal Niger Company to F.O. 8 September 1893, quoted in J.C. Anene, *The International Boundaries of Nigeria, 1885-1960, The Framework of an Emergent African Nation* (London, 1970), p. 12. Kuka is Hausa for the baobab tree. The Shehu's capital was more often given the plural form Kukawa. Both forms may be found in contemporary documents. [Back to \(7\)](#)

8. G. N. Sanderson, *England, Europe and the Upper Nile 1882-1899, A Study in the Partition of Africa* (Edinburgh, 1965). Perhaps because of its title, this book has been neglected by historians of West Africa. It does not appear in Hiribarren's otherwise exemplary bibliography.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Peter J. Yearwood, 'Great Britain and the repartition of Africa, 1914–1919', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 18, 3 (October 1990), 316–41, "'In a Casual Way with a Blue Pencil': British policy and the partition of Kamerun, 1914-1919", *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 27, 2 (1993), pp. 218–44.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Peter J. Yearwood, 'The reunification of Borno, 1914–1919', *Borno Museum Society Newsletter* 25 (October - December 1995), 24–44.[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. It is not easy to find. The British Library does not have that issue, but I understand that it is available through the School of Oriental and African Studies.[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. The classic treatment is J. A. Atanda, *The New ?y? Empire, Indirect Rule and Change in Western Nigeria 1894–1934* (London, 1973).[Back to \(12\)](#)

The author has responded to say: 'I would like to thank the reviewer for his very thorough review. Academic books are seldom read in their entirety and it was a pleasure reading such a long review.'

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