

# The Boundaries of Borno in the Nineteenth Century: The Perception of Travellers\*

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## Abstract

This article deals with the boundaries of Borno as perceived by nineteenth century travellers. Indeed, numerous European travellers such as Denham, Barth or Nachtigal tried to reach the central African kingdom for three main reasons: commerce, diplomacy and science. In addition, the Bornuese perception of the boundaries is also studied through the testimony of Aden Mahamma, a pilgrim from Borno. Using published narratives, reports, articles and maps, this article argues that conceptions of boundaries existed in the travellers' narratives as well as in the Bornuese mentalities. Admittedly, the different travellers had a Eurocentric perception of Borno and conceived Bornuese boundaries as a mixture between lines and undefined zones; however, the Bornuese seem to have conceived their own territory clearly and had a sense of belonging to a specific territory demarcated by boundaries.

**Keywords:** Borno, Bornu, nineteenth century, boundaries, territory, travellers, explorers, Denham, Barth, Nachtigal, Adem Mahamma.

## Introduction

In the nineteenth century, many European expeditions aimed at discovering Bornu for three main reasons. Firstly, the Europeans wanted to visit the kingdom of Borno to establish diplomatic and commercial ties with its ruler, the Shehu. Secondly, the Lake Chad area was arousing interest among geographers and explorers willing to reach and "discover" the lake's shores. Finally, the Europeans intended to obtain scientific information about the fauna, flora and mineral resources of the region.

This interest in the kingdom of Borno comes from the Arabic oral and written sources which depict the kingdom of Kanem-Borno as a rich and influential central African kingdom. Indeed, since its conversion to Islam in the eleventh century, the kingdom of Kanem-Borno has been linked to the Islamic world through trade, pilgrimage and diplomatic correspondence as stressed by Palmer (1936). In 1850, the British explorer, James Richardson rejoiced when he reached Borno:

*When we reached the camping-ground a pleasant announcement was made. We were at length upon Bornou soil! I could hardly believe my ears. Oh, marvel, after all our dangers and misgivings! Thanks to Almighty God for deliverance from the hands of lawless tribes! I shall never forget the sensation with which I learned that I was at length really in Bornou, and that the robber Tuarick was in very truth definitively left behind.*  
(Richardson, 1853, p.153)

Thus, Bornu was in the main objective of a consequent number of expeditions which were funded by the European governments and in particular by the British government. One of the objectives of these expeditions was the publication of a narrative, usually, in the form of a diary.

Thus, from 1798-1799, a German explorer, Hornemann probably journeyed to Borno. When explorers visited the country during the nineteenth century, they discovered a new dynasty ruling over a diminished kingdom of Borno. Indeed, Denham, Clapperton, Oudney, Tyrwhitt and Toole travelled to Borno in 1822-1824, Overweg and Richardson in 1850-1851, Barth in 1850-1855, da Segni in 1850, Vogel in 1854-1855, Beurmann in 1862-1863, Rohlfs in 1865-1867, Nachtigal in 1870-1871, Matteucci and Massari in 1880, Monteil in 1890 and finally Macintosh in 1891.

Among them, only Hornemann, Denham, Clapperton, Richardson, Barth, da Segni, Rohlfs, Nachtigal and Massari left narratives whereas Vogel only wrote letters to the *Times's* editor. Exploring the Sahara and the "Sudan" was dangerous as only half of the explorers survived (Denham, Barth, da Segni, Nachtigal and Monteil). However, the remaining narratives contain precious information about the state of Bornu during the nineteenth century as they precisely describe its political and economic situation. Thus, their interest is threefold. Firstly, it is possible to grasp in these narratives, the explorers' conception of the Bornuese boundaries. Secondly, this conception, even if Eurocentric, reveals the Bornuese perception of their own boundaries. Finally, this conception of limits leads to the idea of a Bornuese territory.

The most important authors for the nineteenth century are Denham, Barth and Nachtigal. Indeed, these three explorers visited Bornu respectively in 1822-24, 1850-1855 and 1870-1871 as the kingdom was one of the main aims of their expedition. Wilhelm II, the Prussian king even sent Nachtigal to offer presents to the Sultan of Bornu. Thus, their observations cover a span of fifty years in the nineteenth century. Their own perception of the boundaries was that of a traveller. As they were journeying through these regions with caravans, they conceptualised the boundaries in terms of barriers and checkpoints:

*On the 10th we reached the komadugu; and after some lively negotiation with the governor or shitima, who resides in the town of Yo, I and my companion were allowed to cross the river the same afternoon; for it has become the custom with the rulers of Bornu to use the river as a sort of political quarantine, a proceeding which- of course they can only adopt as long as the river is full. During the greater part of the year everybody can pass at pleasure. Even after we had crossed, we were not allowed to continue our journey to the capital, before the messenger, who had been sent there to announce our arrival, had returned with the express permission that we might go on. (Barth, 1960, p.542)*

It is important to notice the fact that this "quarantine" barrier was not permanent throughout the year, which means that the boundary was totally porous when the streambed is dry. The river, whether it be dry or not, represents Bornuese authority, therefore Barth acknowledges the existence of boundaries-lines for Bornu and the need to "knock" on Bornu's door.

The European explorers made enquiries about their itineraries as to which would be the rapidest and safest way to reach their destination. Thus, their own knowledge was limited to their guides' experience but also to their predecessors' narratives. Indeed, Barth frequently referred to Denham's narrative, whereas Nachtigal referred to both Denham's and Barth's narratives. The empirical knowledge of the Bornuese territory and its limits is built by every explorer who provides in his narrative and map his own perception of the Bornuese territory.





**Figure 2: Africa (Arrowsmith,1834)**

Source: <http://www.davidrumsey.com/luna/servlet/detail/RUMSEY~8~1~33870~1170022:Africa,-by-J--Arrowsmith--London,-p?trs=65&mi=1&qvq=q%3Aafrica+1834%3B1c%3ARUMSEY%7E8%7E1>, David Rumsey maps, Creative Commons Licence (accessed 13 January 2010)

The main idea present in both maps is that the Bornuese territory is located between these two lines. However, this conception of the boundaries by Denham and Clapperton reveals his Eurocentric perception of the Lake Chad area. Looking for boundaries as lines, he mapped the kingdom of Bornu as any other European kingdom. Moreover, the cartographer, John Arrowsmith used different colours to emphasise this aspect in his map published in a world atlas. In addition, the passage from the explorers' map to the commercial map published in London illustrates how the geographical knowledge is transmitted from the field to the map in Europe. It only takes a few years to publish the result of their exploration. To what extent is it possible to say that such maps could influence the following explorers' representation of Borno?

Moreover, are these truncated boundaries a consequence of the travellers' ignorance? This question is relevant as Denham could not explore the whole region and therefore reveals his extrapolation of the Bornuese boundaries. The following explorers "filled" the map and were able to determine more precisely the localisation of different Bornuese boundaries. One of the main aims of the explorers was to establish ties with African rulers and to produce a geopolitical map of the visited territories. For example, Denham gathered geographical information about Bornu in his "Supplemental chapter about Bornou".

***“BORNOU, a kingdom of Central Africa, is comprehended, in its present state, between the 15th and 10th parallel northern latitude, and the 12th and 18th of east longitude. It is bounded on the north by part of Kanem and the desert; on the east by the Lake Tchad, which covers several thousand miles of country, and contains many inhabited islands ; on the south-east by the kingdom of Loggun and the river Shary, which divides Bornou from the kingdom of Begharmi, and loses itself in the waters of the Tchad ; on the south by Mandara, an independent kingdom, situated at the foot of an extensive range of primitive mountains; and on the west by Soudan”.***  
(Denham et al., 1828, p.155)

This description of Borno reveals the names of the neighbouring states. Thus, Denham provides his reader with a geographical description of an area in a style typical of the nineteenth century. Indeed, this geographic introduction to his chapter reveals as much about Borno as about Denham’s perception of this African territory. His vision of Africa divided into neatly bounded kingdoms reveals his European perception of the continent. Thus, as there are clear boundaries in Europe, there are clear boundaries in Africa. As there are kingdoms in Europe, there are kingdoms in Africa.

It also reveals the progress of geography as a science in the nineteenth century (Surun, 1998). Denham as an educated officer tries to introduce the results of his discoveries in a suitable scientific way. Thus, Borno is presented as any other European kingdom would be portrayed. Although the boundaries are described in a European manner, Denham unveils geographical data unknown in Europe until then. Richardson also added:

***“I have obtained a list of the names of the principal sultans in this part of Africa:  
Bornou—The Sheikh Omer, the son of the sheikh who reigned in the time of the first expedition. He has now reigned fourteen years. He has a good character.  
Sakkatou—Sultan of the Fellatahs, Ali. He is not so great as his father Bello, celebrated in the time of the first expedition.  
Asben, or Aheer—Abd-el-Kader.  
Maradee—Binono.  
Gouber—Aliou (Ali)... (Richardson, 1853, p.189)”***

This is the reason for which they wanted to discover the different routes possible for their journey. For example, Richardson in his diary took notes of the route from Kuka, then capital of Bornu to Mandara.

### **“TERRITORY OF BORNOU.**

***From Kuka, south-east, to***

- ***Gornu, half a-day; a walled town, larger than Zinder.***
- ***Gulum, three hours; small village. Here is a river.***

- *Yaidi, four hours; large walled town.*
- *Martai, four hours; large walled town.*
- *Ala, three hours; large walled town.*
- *Diwa, eight hours; large walled town, and residence of a sultan. Here is a river.*
- *Abagai, two hours; small village.*
- *Kuddaigai, one hour; small village.*
- *Sokoma, one hour; a large walled town.*
- *Millehai, two hours; a small place.*
- *Magarta, three hours; a large walled town.*
- *Dellehai, half a day; a large place.*

### TERRITORY OF MANDARA.

- *Muddebai, a long day; a large walled town.*
- *Dulo, eight hours; a large walled town.*
- *Mandara, three hours; a city about the size of Mourzuk.*

*A day's journey from Mandara is sufficient to make a razzia of slaves. Muzgu, a great Kerdi country, is three days' journey from Mandara* (Richardson, 1853, p.342).”

According to Richardson, the town of Dellehai is situated on the Bornuese side of the border within the kingdom of Mandara. Richardson certainly asked about this route to an unknown informant who had a clear idea of the journey and who was familiar with both territories of Borno and Mandara. The border here clearly lies between the two cities of Dellehai and Muddebai but this description fails to be more precise. However, this route reveals the conception of the territory as a network of cities and roads but also as a territory where the time of travel is as important as space, an aspect that Ivor Wilks (1992) already noticed for the Asante kingdom in the nineteenth century. However, is it possible to apply this theory to Borno?

In the nineteenth century, the aim of the expeditions was to open trade routes and establish diplomatic ties with African rulers. This is the reason for which, Heinrich Barth signed a treaty with the Shehu of Bornu in 1851. This treaty which was studied by Kirk-Greene (1959) and underlined the importance of establishing links between European powers and African kingdoms. The bilingual 1852 treaty states:

*"The Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, being desirous of forming amicable relations with the Chiefs of the Interior of Africa, for the purpose of interchanging reciprocally the merchandise of Africa with that of Europe, has empowered Doctor Henry Barth to make Treaties in her name, and on her behalf, for the purpose above expressed; and the Sovereign of the Kingdom of Bornoo being also desirous of co-operating with Her Majesty the Queen of England, with the view of establishing and effecting what is proposed; Her Majesty has, therefore, named the said Doctor Henry Barth, as her Agent, to conclude the following Treaty, on behalf of Her Majesty, her heirs and successors”* (FO 97/13/2, National Archives, Kew Gardens, United Kingdom)

The third article of the treaty states clearly:



***“The communications between the country of Bornoo and other places shall be safe, so that English merchants may, without obstacle, import their merchandise of lawful commerce, of whatever kind, and bring them for sale in Bornoo and elsewhere; and it shall be equally free for them to export from Bornoo such merchandise of lawful commerce”*** (FO 97/13/2, National Archives, Kew Gardens, United Kingdom)

Thus, commercial interests between the United Kingdom and Borno were in the centre of the travellers’ interests as both treaties were signed between “sovereign” rulers of their own kingdom. The 1851 Borno treaty underlines the fact that Bornu is an “empire”, a “country”, a “State” which possesses its own “territory”. Would it be possible to understand Borno as a clearly bounded territory according to this document? *Au contraire*, the translator only over-translated the same Arabic word *bilâd* for “empire”, “country”, “State” and “territory”. Thus, European conceptions of statehood were applied to Borno even though most explorers were aware of its political situation.

Furthermore, the boundary can also be considered as a buffer zone as in the case of the Bedites, an ethnic group living on the borderland between Kano and Bornu. When the ruler of Sokoto, Bello and the ruler of Bornu, El Kanemi signed a peace treaty in 1820, they recognised this territory as being an open source of slaves, and money. Bello writes in one of his letters

***“We profess the same religion, and it is not fitting that our subjects should make war on each other. Between our kingdoms are the pagan Bedde tribes, on whom it is permissible to levy contribution: let us respect this limit: what lies to the east of their country shall be ours: what lies to the west shall be yours. As for Muniyo, Damagaram and Daura, they will continue to be vassals of the Sultan of Bornu, who in return will surrender to you all his claims to Gobir and Katsina”*** (Palmer, 1936, p.269)

A few years later, Denham describes this area:

***“As before observed, the Bedites have never received the doctrines of Mahomet; and, although speaking the language of Bornou, and acknowledging a kind of nominal sovereignty of the Bornouese sultan, they are everywhere regarded as a race of outlaws, whom it is incumbent on every good Mussulman, Bornouese, or Felatah, to enslave or murder [...] Their country is of small extent, defended by impenetrable morasses and forests, by which alone they preserve a precarious and dangerous independence. (Denham et al., 1828, pp.229-230)”***

Thus, this natural region constitutes, according to Clapperton, the borderland between Kano and Bornu. For him, even nature separates it from the Hausa/Fulani and the Kanuri. It is possible to recognise the theory of the natural boundaries supposed to neatly enclose the Bedites’ territory. In addition, the image of the wild and barbarian Bedites is omnipresent in every traveller’s description. Sokoto’s or Bornu’s influence in their vision must be preponderant. Indeed, according to the different explorers, the Bedites’ territory is Bornu’s “wild west”. This case corresponds to the boundaries of Asante described by Wilks (1992). Indeed, the further from the





became on this map the Bornuese western boundary. The perception of the limits between these territories is typically European as these limits are only lines drawn around the towns belonging to the Bedites. As Clapperton and Oudney travel to Kano, they have to cross this territory and determine which town belongs to Bornu. Thus, the map is a simple topographic map trying to represent the different political powers. However, without totally dismissing the representation of the boundaries, Clapperton tries to give an account of the regional political stage.

For example, Barth describes the northern border of Bornu as being dangerous because of the Tuareg incursions. Therefore, he estimates he can advise the “vizier” of Bornu:

*I pressed upon the vizier the necessity of defending the northern frontier of Bornu against the Tuarek by more effectual measures than had been then adopted, and thus retrieving, for cultivation and the peaceable abode of his fellow-subjects, the fine borders of the komadugu, and restoring security to the road to Fezzan. Just about this time the Tuarek had made another expedition into the border-districts on a large scale, so that Kashella Belal, the first of the war chiefs, was obliged to march against them “.* (Barth, 1960, p.403)

The case of the northern boundary as perceived by Barth is emblematic. The Europeans defined the boundaries as lines which can be closed if needed. They apply their own vision of the boundaries to the kingdom of Bornu. Barth by this comment revealed his own pre-conception of the boundaries but also patronised the “vizier” of Bornu who, according to Barth, cannot properly manage the northern boundary. Nachtigal, himself a few years later judges the African boundaries as such:

*Where there is no sharply defined natural frontier, such as the Chad and Shari, these boundaries are indeterminate, as towards the desert, or arbitrary and fluctuating, as in the regions of Pagan and semi-Pagan tribes who have not been brought completely under control. Where the Muhammadan inhabitants of two such comparatively well-ordered states as Bornu and the Hausa country are adjacent, the boundary can be fixed fairly exactly, though encroachments on either side and boundary disputes are not lacking. Where, however, between the two lie more or less independent regions, as along a great part of the western and southern frontier of Bornu, the contours of the empire fluctuate according to the measure of military success against tribes which are kept in subjection only by force- This is the situation especially with the regions of the Bedde, Ngizzem, Kerrikerri, Babir and Musgo, while the position in the Margin country, where the proximity of Adamawa to the south has a decisive influence, is somewhat more stable. Because of their more solid state organisation, Mandara and Logon are also in a more regular relationship of dependence upon Bornu.* (Nachtigal, 1980, p.123)

This extensive comment about the boundaries of Bornu uncovers different aspects of Nachtigal’s perception of Bornu. Firstly, Nachtigal, as Rohlf’s (1873, p.36) before him, subscribes to the idea of the natural boundaries being determinate whereas the remaining boundaries are indeterminate.

The theory of the natural boundaries which emerged mainly in France at the end of the seventeenth century was widely spread throughout the nineteenth century:

***The limits of empires are controlled by two causes: the physical geography of the soil and the power of man. The first is durable; the last is variable and thus in examining history we find that the first produces the most permanent effect*** (Finch, 1844, p.2)

The explorers are eager to find which boundaries are natural, in other words “durable”. The others only depend on the “power of man”. This is the reason for which Nachtigal underlines the fluctuation of the other boundaries which are not permanent. As a German from Saxony, he may have been aware of the efforts of Emperor Wilhelm II to expand the Prussian boundaries in the 1860s and 1870s. The boundaries made by the “power of man” are more recent and have a less permanent effect according to him. However, Nachtigal neglects the fact that the so-called “natural boundaries” are only the result of a choice by the different political powers. For example, in the case of the kingdom of Bornu, the Chari river boundary is the result of the competition between Bornu and its neighbour Berghami. Far from being only natural, the boundary is as much the result of man’s actions. This deterministic view of the boundaries prevents Nachtigal and the other explorers from giving a detailed account of the Bornuese boundaries.

In addition, Nachtigal stresses the fact that the boundaries between Muslim states can be “fixed fairly exactly”. For every explorer, the Muslim states are “comparatively well-ordered states” whereas pagan states are disorganised. Most of them subscribe to the theory of the Nilo-Hamitic origin of the State in Africa. In other words, concepts of “State” and “boundaries” do not origin from sub-Saharan Africa but from Northern Africa (Lange, 1984). Black countries can be “well-ordered” only if they adopt Islam.

This is the reason for which an area can be considered a buffer zone. The example of the northern boundary of Bornu is:

***“Our encampment was near a little village of twenty huts, called Daazzenai, placed under a rock of red stone. The country of Damerghou, in this direction, is separated from Bornou by about eleven hours of forest, or some thirty miles English—a sufficient distance to divide two countries, especially in Africa.”*** (Richardson, 1853, pp.175-176)

Thus the author recognises the forest as being the boundary between “Damerghou” and “Bornou”. His comments about the distance separating the two countries reveal his conception of African territories divided by uninhabited areas. The image of Western Africa as an underpopulated area was frequent in the nineteenth century. (van Beusekom, 1999)

Moreover, the author underlines the length – eleven hours – to travel thirty miles. The boundary is based on an uninhabited area and communication is harder through the thick of the forest. Therefore, the networked territory is interrupted by this empty forest which consequently constitutes the boundary. Far from being a natural boundary, the forest is only the limit of the powers of “Damerghou” and “Bornou”. Indeed, their rulers control populations not territories.

As the populations of Damerghou are not submitted to the Shehu of Bornu, the boundary lies in the space before the first cities of Damerghou.

Thus, the power of Borno does not seem to fade around its borderland with Damerghou. Wilks' theory (1992) does not apply to this part of the Bornuese boundary. Rohlfs evokes the same buffer boundaries in Southern Borno:

*Between Bama and the Wandala boundary, man has to go through a forest, in which pagan Gamergu often rob the passers-by, and take revenge for the razzias lead against them by their enemies, the Mohammedan Bornuese. Under the same conditions, furthermore, insecurity is wide-spread in all the frontier zones in black countries, which explains why they are hardly or not inhabited.* (Rohlfs, 1834, p.35)

Hence, the assumption that Borno only exercised power over populations and not its territory is merely hypothetical. The Bornuese territory seems to be bounded by buffer areas defined by treaties or by a *status quo*. Is it possible to evoke a strong Bornuese authority over its territory as in pre-colonial Buganda? (Reid, 2002). Thus, the European travellers' narratives take partially into account the fact that boundaries were known to the local people. However, as soon as 1798 Hornemann (1802, p.116) mentioned:

*As to what the inhabitants themselves call Haussa, I had, as I think, very certain information. One of them, a Marabut, gave me a drawing of the situation of the different regions bordering on each other, which I here give as I received it. The land within the strong line is Haussa; my black friend had omitted Asben.*

*These regions are governed by Sultans, of whom those of Kashna and Kano are the most powerful; but they all, (either by constraint or policy) pay tribute to Burnu' except Kabi or Nyffé, their districts being at too great a distance. Guber pays, moreover, a tribute to Asben' Zamfara is united with Guber; the Sultan of the latter having taken possession of it, killed the Sultan, and sold all the prisoners he could take.*

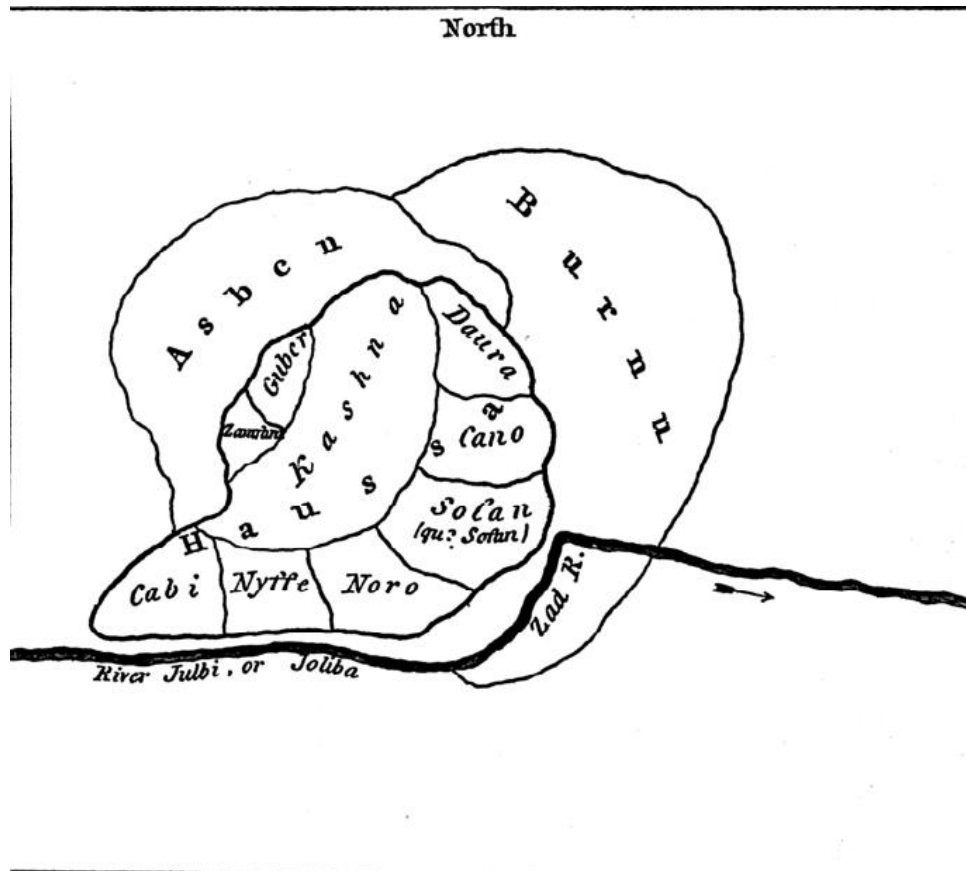


Figure 4: Map drawn by a “Hausa marabut” for Hornemann (Hornemann, 1802, p.112)

This sketch map is clearly a Hausa representation of space as it is centred on the Hausa cities. However, the kingdom of Bornu is clearly depicted as a dominating eastern power encompassing within its grasp the different territories on the map. On the one hand, this sketch map does not reveal the precise location of boundaries or rivers, but on the other hand, the marabout conceptualised the boundaries and territory of Bornu. Far from showing any geographical reality, this map reveals the geopolitical situation of this part of Africa. Notions of “space” and “limits” are therefore present in Bornu and Hausaland as much as in Europe in the nineteenth century. Thus, even if the explorers had a Eurocentric vision of the African continent, the Bornuese boundaries could have been very much similar to some European ones. Indeed, the whole kingdom of Bornu was a territory imagined not only by its inhabitants but also by the European travellers. Nachtigal (1980, p.124) mentioned:

*The approximate boundaries indicated give the Bornu empire an area of around 150,000 square kilometers (about 58,000 square miles).*

As mentioned earlier, the kingdom of Bornu inherited a millenary statist tradition from its predecessor the kingdom of Kanem-Bornu. Even its size shrunk at the start of the nineteenth century, the Shehus of Bornu adopted but also reformed some of its older institutions. (Brenner, 1973) The explorers depicted the landscape of Bornu with its different historical layers.

*But at present all this district, the finest land of Bornu in the proper sense of the word, which once resounded with the voices and bustle of hundreds of towns and villages, has become one impenetrable jungle, the domain of the elephant and the lion, and with no human inhabitants except a few scattered herdsmen or cattle-breeders, who are exposed every moment to the predatory inroads of the Tuarek.* (Barth, 1960, p.345)

This nostalgic tone reminds the readers the splendour of ancient Bornu which is comparable, in this era of literary romanticism, to the splendour of classical European civilisations. Indeed, most explorers tried to give a historical perspective to their “discoveries”. Thus, Barth himself brought back to Europe the *Girgam*, a list of kings who reigned in Kanem-Bornu from the eleventh century on. The nineteenth century territory of Bornu is perceived as a historical space. Therefore, it is possible to speak of an existence of a Bornuese territory at this time. For example, Barth and Nachtigal refer to the tombs of the ancient kings that they have visited. In a sense, these explorers consider Bornu as a nation under construction. The core province of the kingdom known as “Bornu proper” reinforces this idea.

*I had now entered Bornu proper, the nucleus of that great Central African empire in its second stage, after Kanem had been given up. It is bordered towards the east by the great sea-like komadugu the Tsad or Tsade, and towards the west and north-west by the little komadugu which by the members of the last expedition had been called Yeou, from the town of that name, or rather Yo, near which they first made its acquaintance on their way from Fezzan. I had now left behind me those loosely attached principalities which still preserve some sort of independence, and henceforth had only to do with Bornu officers.* (Barth, 1960, p.360)

Thus, Borno proper would be the heart of this “empire”. This last statement shows the conception of Borno as a territory and not as a collection of different ethnic groups. The territory itself is compared to medieval European kingdoms which would have vassals (Chrétien, 1980 quoted by Lefebvre, 2008, p.131). Principalities had therefore to pay tribute to the Sultan of Bornu. The question of tributes is an important question as it may be misleading. Some regions had to pay a tribute because Bornu dominated them economically or militarily, such as Zinder. Some other regions paid tribute to obtain a certain kind of autonomy from Bornu such as the Hausa cities at the start of the nineteenth century (Hornemann, 1802).

This last point leads to the reflection of the meaning of tributary states. Little is known about the true nature of the relationship between different buffer-states and Borno. It seems that the states situated at the periphery of Borno could be divided into two different categories: the satellite-states only orbiting around “Borno proper” and the other states oscillating between Borno and its powerful neighbours. The first category of satellite-states depending only on Borno could include Logone or Manga whereas the second category could include Matsina or Baghirmi. Indeed, depending on the geopolitical situation, the presence of states as Wadai or Sokoto would prevent Borno from exerting its influence over its tributaries. Therefore, the notion of “tributary” can be considered as double-edged because it could entail a concept of dependence but also of autonomy according to the evolving political situation. Without more precise documentation on a certain buffer-state, no generalisation would be feasible in the nineteenth century. Cohen

illustrates this last point while describing the fate of Matsina in the nineteenth century. Formerly a Borno tributary state, Matsina came under the influence of Sokoto because of internal rivalries while eventually reverting to Borno. (Cohen, 1970, p.158)

Indeed, according to Barth, a constellation of states orbits around Borno. Therefore, it is possible to suggest that the buffer-states were coherently organised by Borno. On the one hand, they would furnish tribute and taxes; on the other hand, they would be a military frontier. This constitutes only a generalisation of the status of the buffer-states as Baghirmi and Logone differently depended on Borno. For instance, the map quotes “Marghi (claimed both by Bornu and Adamaua)”, “Loggene (tributary to Bornu)”, Daura across the border with Katsina (“Katshna”) “consisting of about 1000 towns & villages, 400 of which belong to the Fulahs and 600 to Bornu”.

Moreover, *galadimas* (literally “gate-keepers”) were in charge of the territories on the fringe of the Bornu kingdom (Bala and Alkali, 1983). These officers administered these provinces from the capital, Kuka, and were responsible for levying taxes and for ensuring that the border province would stay loyal to the Shehu. Their presence in the capital was the guarantee that they would not develop a form of autonomy whilst in charge. These *galadimas* are the proof of the importance of these border provinces to the central power. In addition, *kachellas*, military leaders of servile origin, were posted along the boundaries to assure the security of Borno. For instance, in 1835, El-Kanemi posted three *kachellas* to the western provinces to Gujba, Biriri and Borsari (Brenner, 1973, p.72). Hence, the Shehu of Borno managed his boundaries through *galadimas* and *kachellas* from the capital.

Thus, the capital played a very important role in the rather centralised kingdom of Bornu. Kuka or Kukawa was the place where the Shehu was living and where the *galadimas* were working. The state of Borno was exerting power from Kuka. Taxes were levied in different provinces under modalities defined by the Shari’a. In addition, Rohlfs mentions import taxes levied upon goods when he crosses the boundary between Borno and Gongola:

***“At the same time, a small caravan under our armed protection had crossed the boundary because they needed to sell salt and cattle. They were staying close to us so that people could believe they belonged to my followers in order not to pay import taxes for their goods. Usually imported Bornuese products were taxed, 20 cowries for a horse or a piece of cattle, 10 cowries for a sheep or a goat, a certain amount of salt for each sold measure”***  
(Rohlfs, 1874, p.126)

These import taxes were highly regulated as the precise figures given by Rohlfs reveal. Even if they were not decided by Borno but by Gongola, the import taxes reveal the conception of a recognised commercial Borno territory by the borderland dwellers. If Borno exports goods, it means that it is possible to conceive the existence of a Bornuese territory. In consequence, this article argues that Bornuese administration exerted its power over a territory as much as people. Indeed, the explorers revealed the importance of the Bornuese space during the nineteenth century. Borno was territorially organised in the nineteenth century and boundaries were recognised at a local level but also by the Ottoman Empire, the Sokoto Caliphate and other states of the Chad basin (Barkindo, 1999). This last point differs from the traditional viewpoint of

African polities being ill-defined and being only constructed on personal relations. In the case of Borno, Urvoy (1949), Cohen (1967), Brenner (1973) have underlined the importance of the personal relations in the territorial organisation of the kingdom. According to Brenner (1973, p.19), territory was only

***“one basis for administrative relationship; very often ethnic and personal relationships were more important.”***

The different sources allege the fact that ethnic and personal relationships were fundamental. However, were they more important than the Bornuese territory? Palmer, a former Borno resident, even if criticised for his Eurocentric perception of Borno, already evoked the division of Borno in quadrants at the cardinal points. (Brenner, 1973, p.10) This article argues that the Bornuese territory played a very important role in the organisation of the kingdom. Indeed as mentioned above, the representation of a Bornuese space, especially in the inter-statist relations, was largely influenced by Islam as Nachtigal put it. Furthermore, Borno in the nineteenth century inherited from the kingdom of Kanem-Borno a strong administrative and territorial organisation which recognised a Bornuese territory and acknowledged the existence of Bornuese boundaries. Thus, far from being vague, Borno’s boundaries were known to its inhabitants with all their fluctuations during the nineteenth century.

In addition, the British, French and Ottomans were interested in the political situation in Central Sudan and were gathering reports from travellers and pilgrims in order to assess the geopolitical status of the region. These reports obtained through Bornuese travellers are invaluable sources for the history of the boundaries of Borno from 1890 to 1900. In 1997, Kanya-Forstner and Lovejoy published French intelligence reports which dealt with Sokoto and Borno (Kanya-Forstner and Lovejoy, 1997). Indeed, in 1892, the French interrogated in Tunis, Adem Mahanna a Bornuese travelling back to Kukawa after his pilgrimage to Mecca. On his way to Mecca, he had already been interrogated by the British in Suakin. His interrogation in Tunis lasted twelve hours and revealed two conceptions of Borno in the nineteenth century. Firstly, according to Adem Mahamma, Borno proper is the core province of the kingdom “immediately to the west of the lake”.

***“The name of Borno was extended to the whole Empire of the Dunama which consisted for the rest, in separated states, governed by vassal dynasties; the vassality link becoming looser when these states were situated far from the centre of the Empire.”*** (Kanya-Forstner and Lovejoy, 1997, p.102)

Thus, it is possible to argue that the Bornuese, such as Adem Mahanna, had a territorial conception of Borno as a province and as an Empire. In addition, the Bornuese pilgrim evokes the boundary of Borno with the Mahdist state founded by Hayatu ibn Sa’id in Adamawa (Kanya-Forstner and Lovejoy, 1997, p.111 and Warburg, 2003). Thus, Adem Mahamma may have had a concept of a neat boundary between Borno and its neighbours.

However, Adem Mahamma’s report was translated from Arabic and written down by a French officer, Major Francis Rebillet. His own perception of Borno is deeply influenced by his own education. For example, Major Rebillet constantly uses European medieval concepts to refer to

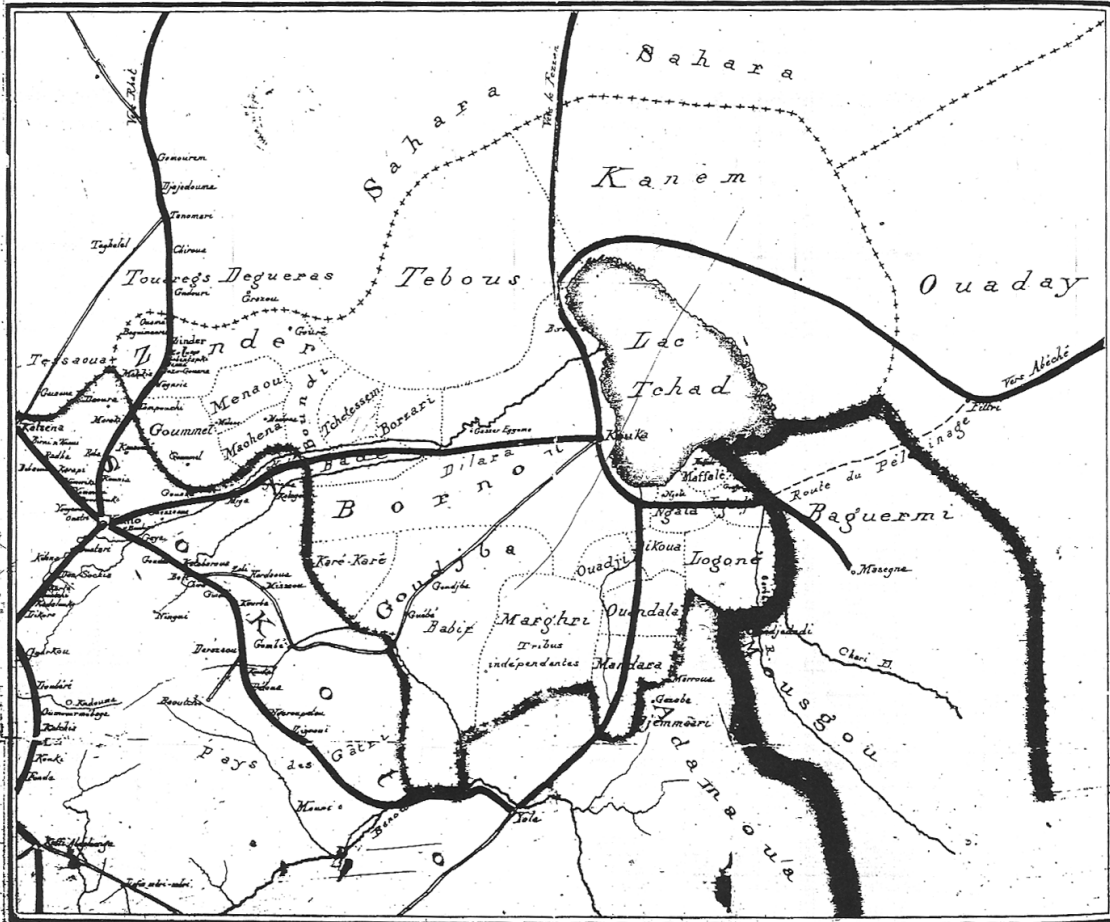


Borno. Borno is the core-province which gave its name to the whole “Empire of Borno”. The same phenomenon happened in France as the region around Paris was called France because it constituted the personal domains of the Frankish king. Subsequently, the name France was extended to the whole kingdom. Major Rebillet mentioned as well Borno vassals and its suzerainty over them and compared the last kings of the Sayfawa dynasty to the last kings of the Merovingian dynasty. Indeed, Major Rebillet evoked their role as “do-nothing kings” a phrase used by nineteenth and early twentieth century French historians to describe the late Merovingian kings (Kanya-Forstner and Lovejoy, 1997, p.102). He even compares the Kanemi dynasty to the Carolingian dynasty when he qualifies El-Kanemi as “mayor of the palace”. Thus, Major Rebillet’s historical reminiscences give a European biased account of the boundaries and territory of Borno and it can be argued that Adem Mahamma’s account of Borno is perceived along European concepts.

This illustrates the French perception of Borno as being in a medieval stage of development. The description of Borno provided by Adem Mahamma through Major Rebillet is a blatant example of social Darwinism applied to Borno. Triaud (2000) showed how this perception was common among French colonial agents when considering Muslim societies in the nineteenth century. Chrétien (1980) stressed the same perception of colonial Eastern Africa as medieval Europe as well. Thus, how to apprehend Borno’s relationship with its satellite-states? Were they vassals or simple tributaries? To what extent does this tribute mean that the tributary state is autonomous or even independent? The French authorities had a map traced according to the different testimonies in order to obtain a better understanding of the geopolitical status of the region.

# EMPIRE DU BORNOU

et pays environnants . CARTE au  $\frac{1}{4,000,000}$



Nota: Cette carte a été dressée sur la publication de l'expédition de l'Empire du Bornou par le Capitaine Régnauld de Lannoy de Bissy. Les indications de cette dernière carte que n'ont été fournies de nous par les explorateurs ont été respectées. Celles qui n'ont pu être vérifiées ont été modifiées quand cela a été nécessaire pour la mettre en concordance avec les renseignements fournis par El Hadj Adoum.

G.P. 23 Janvier El. F. Bati

“L’empire du Bornou” (Kanya-Forstner and Lovejoy, 1997, p.180)

As the maps were created by the previous nineteenth century explorers, it is mainly a localisation map. The caption provides an explanation of its creation as a mix between Captain Régnauld de Lannoy’s map and the information brought by the explorers and intelligence reports by Adem Mahamma. The boundaries of Borno are stressed by the “+++” used by the cartographer who gave the maximum extent of the “empire of Borno” in the nineteenth century. However, this extent is only nominal as the provinces of “Kanem” and “Tebous” around Lake Chad were not part of the empire of Borno anymore.

Does this exaggeration come from the image of Borno conveyed by the European explorers? Or does it come from the information provided by Adem Mahamma? The boundaries of Borno traced on this map are an idealised image of Borno in the nineteenth century. This representation is the result of the cartographic representation of Borno in the nineteenth century and does not take into account the evolution of the boundaries after the Fulani jihad. Adem Mahamma, coming from Borno himself, furnishes a biased image of his own country and shows its supposed strength to his interrogators. Thus, this cartographic representation of the boundaries of Borno is the melange of two biased representations of Central Sudan. However, the most striking elements of the maps are the bold lines representing the communication axis between the different cities of Borno and Kano, the *entrepot* of Central Sudan and through the Sahara. In addition, the route to Mecca at the east of Lake Chad shows the importance of the east-west axis. This emphasis on the travelling conditions of the region is understandable as the sources for this map are the explorers and travellers whether they be Europeans or Bornuese

### **Conclusion**

This representation of space and territoriality in nineteenth century Bornu is a hypothesis. Indeed, this article argued that conceptions of boundaries existed in the travellers' narratives as well as in the Bornuese mentalities. Admittedly, the different travellers had a Eurocentric perception of Bornu and conceived Bornuese boundaries as a mixture between lines and undefined zones; however, the Bornuese seem to have conceived their own territory clearly and had a sense of belonging to a specific territory demarcated by boundaries. The territorial organisation of Borno proper and its satellites states on the one hand, and the management of the borders through agents as the *galadimas* and the *kachellas* on the other hand, clearly indicate that Borno can be defined as a territory. Ronald Cohen himself described nineteenth century Borno as "not only a sovereign state, but an imperial expansionist one as well". (Cohen, 1970, p.154)

Thus, in the nineteenth century, is it possible to argue that the European conception of boundaries is not far from the Bornuese conception? This last argument leads to the debate between time and distance in pre-colonial Africa. Did Africans have a representation of their own political space according to time as in Wilks's Asante (1992) or according to their territory as in Reid's Buganda (2002)? As an ancient state, Borno seems to be highly structured and could be seen as a model of State in central and western Africa. However, in the absence of more Bornuese sources, Borno as a territory entirely defined by boundaries remains a hypothesis.

\* I would like to thank Dr. Shane Doyle, Dr. Chris Prior and Prof. Ian Wood for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper. I also want to thank Robin Seignobos for the piece of information on *Bilâd* which is difficult to translate into English for it has different meanings.

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