

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10142-4 - Warfare in the Sokoto Caliphate: Historical and Sociological Perspectives

Joseph P. Smaldone

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PART ONE

Historical Perspectives

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10142-4 - Warfare in the Sokoto Caliphate: Historical and Sociological Perspectives

Joseph P. Smaldone

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER 1

**Introduction: Sudanic Warfare and
Military Organization to c. 1800**

The Sudanic Environment

The West African Sudan refers to the broad expanse of savanna or tropical grassland lying south of the Sahara between the Atlantic Ocean and Lake Chad. This extensive geographical zone is essentially a great plain characterized by lightly wooded rolling terrain. Most of the savanna lies below 1500 feet above sea level, and exceeds 4000 feet only in the highlands of modern Guinea and Cameroon and in the central Nigerian Jos Plateau. In these highlands the headwaters of the major river systems of the Western Sudan are formed: the Gambia, Senegal, and Niger rise in the Guinea highlands; the Benue and its tributaries flow out of the Nigerian plateau and the Cameroon mountains.

The geography and history of the Western Sudan have been influenced to a considerable degree by its climate. The winds of the annual monsoon bring alternating dry and wet seasons to the savanna. Dust-laden north-east winds from the Sahara – the *harmattan* – prevail during the dry season between October and April, and the moist southwest monsoon from the Gulf of Guinea brings up to sixty inches of rainfall between May and September. The northern savanna experiences a longer dry season and receives less rainfall than the south; and the grassland gradually turns to dry steppe or *sahel* before yielding to the true desert. In the southern latitudes, where a longer wet season and heavier rainfall support denser vegetation, moist woodlands give way to tropical rain forest along the Guinea coast.

In historical times the pattern of human life in the Western Sudan has been governed by this alternation of seasons. During the wet season the sedentary population practiced agriculture for local consumption and commercial exchange. The dry season, on the other hand, provided the opportunity and conditions necessary for craft production, long-distance trade, slave raiding, and warfare. The alternating seasons also affected the nomadic habits of the pastoral population. The Fulani, the most numerous of the Sudanic pastoralists, to this day follow a regular pattern of seasonal movements known as “transhumance.” In the wet season they move north with their cattle into drier country to avoid the pestilential tsetse fly, and during the dry season they turn southward in search of watered pastureland for their stock. Over the years these orbital movements,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10142-4 - Warfare in the Sokoto Caliphate: Historical and Sociological Perspectives

Joseph P. Smaldone

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Historical perspectives*

which frequently exceed one hundred miles, have shifted in response to changing political, economic, and ecological conditions, and their cumulative effect has produced migratory drift and migration.¹

Historically the Western Sudan has been receptive to influences generated from both external and internal sources. The savanna's lack of natural frontiers and major geographical divides encouraged human intercourse and facilitated the transmission of ideas and techniques. The formidable Sahara desert to the north was more a filter than a barrier, channeling rather than obstructing communication. Indeed, one of the main themes of Sudanic history has been its interaction with the civilizations of the Mediterranean and the Middle East. The history of the Western Sudan has been characterized by continuous cultural adaptation and innovation, mediated principally through commerce, travel, migration, war, and conquest.

Sudanic Civilization and Warfare to c. 500 B.C.

During the late Stone Age of the first several millennia B.C. the foundations of human civilization were established in the Western Sudan.² Archaeological investigations indicate the widespread occurrence of hunting and fishing communities in the savanna after 5000 B.C. Three principal changes that occurred in this period were the development of a microlithic tool complex as the technological basis of society, the introduction of domesticated animals, and the "agricultural revolution." By the fifth millennium the technology of these denizens of the grassland had advanced beyond simple multipurpose tools to specialized and composite implements including the bow and arrow, throwing stick, club, spear and hand ax for hunting, and a variety of scraping, cutting, and pulverizing tools for the preparation of food and the making of clothing, shelter, weapons, and other instruments.

Although the origin of many domestic animals of Africa is still the subject of academic controversy, the recent publication of H. Epstein's monumental study has done much to resolve problems of evidence and interpretation.³ Epstein argues convincingly that many animals domesticated in southwestern Asia, including cattle, chickens, dogs, goats, pigs, and sheep, were introduced into the Sudan between the fifth and third millennia B.C. To this list can be added the ass, apparently domesticated in Egypt.

The "agricultural revolution," that is, the domestication and cultivation of indigenous food plants, seems to have occurred in the Western Sudan in the third or second millennium B.C. It is uncertain whether the practice of agriculture in West Africa is to be attributed to independent invention or to diffusion from an original center of plant domestication in the Middle East. Most authorities, however, accept the diffusion thesis as being more

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10142-4 - Warfare in the Sokoto Caliphate: Historical and Sociological Perspectives

Joseph P. Smaldone

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Sudanic warfare and military organization to c. 1800*

compatible with existing botanical evidence and with the known spread of domestic animals from southwestern Asia. The cumulative effect of these technological and economic developments in the Sudan was to encourage the growth, concentration, and settlement of population, and to intensify the dual processes of social differentiation and stratification.

Violent forms of intercommunity conflict in this period probably resembled what anthropologists commonly call “primitive warfare.”⁴ Lacking specialized military technology, army organization, and command structure, these neolithic communities necessarily employed the techniques and weapons of the hunt in their “wars.” All able-bodied males participated in combat under the informal leadership of individuals skilled in hunting and fighting. Warriors were self-equipped with weapons available to all: the bow and arrow (perhaps poisoned⁵), spear, throwing stick, and hand ax. Regular tactics were nonexistent, and individual fighting rather than organized unit combat prevailed. The tactical principles of mass and maneuver were unknown. There were no sieges or wars of attrition. Raids and ambushes – resembling the hunt in their emphasis on mobility, surprise, and stealth – were the common modes of attack. Little if any protective armor was worn, as this was incompatible with the prevailing conception and methods of combat. The rudimentary nature of Sudanic “warfare” in this period reflected the relatively low levels of social differentiation and organizational complexity of these communities. As Herbert Spencer noted of primitive societies, “the army is the mobilized community, and the community is the army at rest.”⁶

The Formation of States, c. 500 B.C.–A.D. 1000

The 1,500 years between 500 B.C. and A.D. 1000 may be appropriately called the formative period in the evolution of Sudanic civilization. During this era there occurred three distinct but related developments that together constituted the prerequisites for the emergence of the prototype of Sudanic state organization: (1) the beginning of regular and extensive commercial contacts with North Africa, (2) the introduction of ironworking technology, and (3) the introduction of camels and horses, the former for transport and the latter for war.

The first indirect evidence of regular trans-Saharan contacts is found on the famous Saharan rock paintings depicting two-wheeled horse-drawn chariots. These pictures date from the late second millennium B.C. and are distributed along two well-defined “routes” that converge across the western and central Sahara on the Niger bend. Although the possibility of a trade in slaves after the middle of the first millennium B.C. is suggested by the presence of black slaves in Carthage, the development of extensive trans-Saharan commerce in slaves, gold, and ivory did not occur until the Roman period in North Africa.⁷

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10142-4 - Warfare in the Sokoto Caliphate: Historical and Sociological Perspectives

Joseph P. Smaldone

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Historical perspectives*

On the other hand, the introduction of ironworking techniques into Africa dates from Hittite invasion of Egypt in the seventh century B.C.⁸ By the sixth century iron technology had reached Napata and Meroe, but the use of iron did not become general (i.e., replacing bronze) until the third century B.C. In the Western Sudan the earliest evidence of ironworking occurs in the central Nigerian Nok culture between the fifth and third centuries B.C., and within the next several centuries the Sudan entered the Iron Age. It is uncertain whether this knowledge of ironworking was introduced into the Western Sudan from Egypt (via Meroe) or from Phoenician North Africa. These possibilities are not mutually exclusive, and further research may confirm both Egypt-Meroe and Carthage as centers for the diffusion of iron technology to sub-Saharan Africa.

Whatever its origin, this superior technology made possible more efficient means of food production, exploitation of natural resources, hunting, and warfare. In other words, the spread of this new technology was accompanied by the increasing ability of its possessors to control their natural environment and to conquer, absorb, or displace neolithic societies. Archaeological excavations have disclosed the widespread occupation of defensively organized habitation sites located in terrain that also afforded protection and camouflage. This technological change is also recorded on the Saharan rock paintings, which depict large iron spears, round shields, and wrist daggers replacing the bow and arrow as the predominant weapon complex.

Like ironworking, the domestication and use of horses and camels did not originate in Africa, but rather were introduced into the Sudan via North Africa and Egypt.⁹ Horses were first domesticated in the Ukraine of southwestern Russia early in the third millennium B.C. In the early second millennium horses were hitched to chariots, and by the late second millennium riding had developed as a distinctive equestrian technique. However, the use of cavalry did not become general in the Middle East until the ninth century B.C.

The equines of the Western Sudan are descendants of two major types of horses, the Oriental (or "Arab") and the Barb-Dongola group.¹⁰ Horses of the Oriental type, found today in their purest form among North African Berbers and Tuaregs of the *sahel*, were introduced into Egypt by the Hyksos conquerors in the seventeenth century B.C. From Egypt the Oriental spread south and west, reaching Libya in the twelfth century and the Maghreb during the next few centuries. As noted above, horses at this time were used for drawing chariots rather than as cavalry mounts. Oriental horses never became abundant south of the Sahara; their influx into North Africa dates only from the Arab invasions of the eleventh century A.D.

It was the Barb-Dongola group of horses that became significant in

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10142-4 - Warfare in the Sokoto Caliphate: Historical and Sociological Perspectives

Joseph P. Smaldone

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Sudanic warfare and military organization to c. 1800*

Sudanic history. The Barb and Dongola were introduced into North Africa from Iberia about the eleventh century B.C. Rock paintings dated to the early first millennium B.C. attest to the spread of the Barb southward across the western Sahara to the *sahel* and savanna during Carthaginian times. The present-day distribution of the Barb lies between Senegambia and the Niger bend. It is probable that the development of cavalry occurred among the chariot users; this technique appeared in the Sahara about the sixth century B.C., and was later adopted in the Sudan.

The present distribution and physical characteristics of the Dongola suggest that this subtype spread eastward across the Maghreb, interbred with Orientals in Libya and Egypt, and arrived at Dongola on the Upper Nile during the Roman period. Dongola became the principal breeding enclave of this horse, and during the next several centuries it spread southwestward across the savanna as far as the Niger bend, where it intermixed with the Barb. The Dongola has survived in its purest state in the environs of Sokoto and Bornu.¹¹

The camel seems to have been domesticated in the Arabian peninsula during the fourth millennium B.C. Camel nomadism developed in the Syrian desert about the twelfth century B.C., and the use of camels for transport several centuries later. Although there are sporadic indications of camels in Egypt since the end of the fourth millennium, it is generally agreed that the Romans introduced camels into North Africa on a large scale sometime between the first and fourth centuries A.D. The adaptability of the camel to the desert soon resulted in its employment as the principal means of transport in the trans-Saharan trade and as cavalry for the desert tribes. Again, the Saharan rock paintings, in which camels supplant the equine groups, testify to the prevalence of these changes by the seventh century.

Thus the introduction of camels and the use of horse cavalry in the Sudan coincided broadly with both the development of commercial contacts with Carthaginian and Roman North Africa and with the introduction of ironworking technology. The mutually reinforcing effects of these innovations converged during the first millennium A.D. and provided the stimulus and means to generate a state organization. State formation in the Sudan may be seen as a response to an economic stimulus that encouraged the elaboration of complex political structures capable of mobilizing human energy for the extraction of marketable commodities such as slaves, gold, and ivory. The introduction of horses and Iron Age technology, both of which could be monopolized by privileged minorities who controlled access to them, made possible the raiding and enslavement of those not so privileged.

By the middle of the first millennium A.D., therefore, iron, horses, and the camel-borne trans-Saharan trade had begun to transform the charac-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10142-4 - Warfare in the Sokoto Caliphate: Historical and Sociological Perspectives

Joseph P. Smaldone

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Historical perspectives*

ter of Sudanic civilization. It is no mere coincidence that the emergence of the original Sudanic states – Tekrur, Ghana, Mali, Songhai (Gao), the Hausa states, and Kanem – can be traced to the period between the fourth and eighth centuries.¹² In each case a military aristocracy using iron technology and cavalry dominated the state and maintained its ascendancy by the control of strategic trade routes. In the next section we will examine the nature of these new forms of political and military organization.

The Sudanic State System, c. 1000–1800

The second millennium, which may be called the “golden age” of Sudanic civilization, was ushered in by the introduction of Islam. The first penetration of Islamic influence in the Sudan may have occurred in the seventh century as a consequence of the Arab invasion of North Africa. During the next few centuries it is difficult to trace the spread of Islam; however, the eleventh century appears to have been a “turning point” in the history of the Western Sudan, for by this time the ruling house of every important Sudanic state had adopted Islam.¹³

Islamic influences reinforced the Sudanic state organization and contributed toward its further development. Islam was closely associated with the trans-Saharan trade and the commercial penetration of the forest regions to the south, for the principal agents in this economic enterprise were Muslim merchants. In addition to its alleged religious and moral superiority, the adoption of Islam by the rulers of Sudanic states admitted them to the league of Muslim North African states whose friendship could be exploited for diplomatic, commercial, and military advantages. Internally, Islamic law, custom, and literacy in Arabic offered means and standards for administrative efficiency. Islam also had a considerable impact on Sudanic warfare, army organization, and military technology by providing an ideological justification for conquest and enslavement, and access to horses, weapons, and armor from North Africa. Islamic law and practices were also applied to the conduct of war, including battle formations, tactics, logistics, military recruitment, the seizure and distribution of booty, the disposition of captives, and frontier defense.¹⁴

Despite differences among them, the classical Sudanic states exhibited salient common structural characteristics. These Sudanic states did not evolve from local communities by a process of internal growth and accretion, but rather expanded as systems of control, imposed by conquest and maintained by military superiority and the exaction of tribute. In essence the classical Sudanic state was a political structure composed of two virtually discrete layers: (1) a ruling lineage and its administrative apparatus monopolizing special ritual, political, and military functions, which was superimposed on (2) a conglomeration of local village organizations.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10142-4 - Warfare in the Sokoto Caliphate: Historical and Sociological Perspectives

Joseph P. Smaldone

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Sudanic warfare and military organization to c. 1800*

As Fage concluded, the Sudanic state can be characterized as a “parasitic growth” that affixed itself to the economic base of sedentary agricultural societies, to which it contributed new ideas and techniques of political organization, commerce, religion, metallurgy, and methods of warfare.¹⁵

This dual character of the Sudanic state was the source of both its strength and weakness. Local villages were linked by few integrating mechanisms, for ethnic, cultural, and linguistic heterogeneity inhibited the formation of enduring translocal identities and organizational linkages. This lack of institutionalized horizontal linkages between the diverse elements of the Sudanic population increased their vulnerability to conquest by more unified groups possessing superior military organization and technology. The openness of the savanna permitted mobile armies of mounted warriors to extend their dominion over the relatively defenseless sedentary agricultural population with ease and effectiveness. Terrain and technology provided conditions favorable to the creation, expansion, and administration of empires.

On the other hand, there were inherent structural weaknesses in Sudanic state organization. Conquered groups had little in common with each other or with the ruling class. The ruling aristocracy made few attempts to integrate these diverse social elements into a unified state structure. Local laws, customs, cults, and social organization were only marginally affected by imperial rule. The range of relationships between the political center and the peripheral subject population was confined principally to the exaction of taxes and tribute, and the levying of conscripts for conquest or imperial defense. There was no integrating ideology or national identity to compete with or supplant parochial loyalties. Even Islam, which would have fulfilled the function of a unifying ideology, was more an exclusive imperial cult to be held in awe by the subject population rather than shared with it. Prior to the Muslim holy wars (*A. jihads*) of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, only a few Sudanic rulers like Askiya Muhammad I of Songhai (1493–1528) attempted to establish Islam as a state religion and unifying force. Conditions for the creation and maintenance of enduring multiethnic political entities were lacking in the Western Sudan. Vertical linkages in Sudanic state organization were as weak as the horizontal.

Structural instability and malintegration were salient characteristics of the classical Sudanic state system. Territorial aggrandizement was achieved by mobile armies, and imperial rule was established by the installation of provincial governors or the reduction of native chiefs to vassalage, and the levying of tribute on the conquered population. Communication between the rulers and their governors and vassals was slow, and control correspondingly difficult to maintain. Centrifugal tendencies were built into the system. Lacking adequate means of vertical and horizontal integration, Sudanic states were susceptible to sudden collapse.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10142-4 - Warfare in the Sokoto Caliphate: Historical and Sociological Perspectives

Joseph P. Smaldone

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Historical perspectives*

Fission in the ruling superstructure was as much a threat as a breakdown in the layered administration. Imperial superstructures came and went, but local community organization remained relatively undisturbed. Palace revolutions, coups, dynastic changes, and political turmoil at the top did not affect the mass of the population. Even the heralded reforms of Askiya Muhammad I were short-lived, and Songhai disintegrated in the wake of the Moroccan invasion of 1591.

The fortunes of Sudanic states were dependent largely on military considerations. An active, efficient, and mobile army was the principal instrument of territorial expansion, security for strategic trade routes, and political control of far-flung but loosely knit empires. Continuous campaigning was necessary for conquest and reconquest, imperial defense, and internal control. Annual expeditions were dispatched to stabilize frontier regions, suppress revolts, and overawe ambitious viceroys and vassals.

During the second millennium Sudanic military organization and warfare also achieved their classic expression. In contrast to the “primitive” military practices of Sudanic communities prior to the introduction of iron, cavalry, commerce, and Islam, the classical Sudanic mode of warfare was characterized by a complex army organization, larger military forces, a specialized panoply of weapons and equipment, and tactics of mass and maneuver. Many elements associated with this military complex resembled the feudal institutions of contemporaneous medieval Europe, including the presence of vassalage, fiefs, the fusion of military and political functions in the ruling superstructure, and similar military technology.

In the Sudanic “feudal” system there were no standing armies, and military forces were mobilized by the rulers through the agency of their fief holders, vassals, and provincial governors only as required for specific campaigns.¹⁶ These dry-season expeditions were of short duration, usually lasting a few weeks to a few months, after which the forces disbanded. Unlike the simply armed and undisciplined war parties of earlier primitive societies, the armies of Sudanic states consisted of tactically organized infantry and cavalry forces. The foot soldiers were the most numerous and were formed into specialized units of archers, spearmen, and swordsmen, each unit being outfitted with weapons and defensive accouterments appropriate to its tactical function. Mounted warriors generally carried javelins, swords, and shields, and some wore chain mail and quilted armor as well.

It is difficult to estimate the size of such “feudal” armies; in fact, military recruitment varied with such factors as the nature and importance of campaigns, the territorial extent of empires, and the loyalty and military assets of individual warlords. In the eleventh century al-Bakri reported that the army of Ghana numbered 200,000, including 40,000 archers; the number of cavalry was not indicated, but the horses were very small.¹⁷ The Almoravids, whose army sacked Ghana in 1076, used both horse

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10142-4 - Warfare in the Sokoto Caliphate: Historical and Sociological Perspectives

Joseph P. Smaldone

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Sudanic warfare and military organization to c. 1800*

cavalry and camels, but it was their fearsome infantry, organized into several ranks with pikemen in the vanguard and javelin hurlers behind, that bore the brunt of the fighting.¹⁸ Mali was reported by al-Umari to have 100,000 warriors, 10,000 of whom were mounted. Its horses were half-breeds, and camels were used for transport rather than as cavalry mounts.¹⁹ Such numbers as 200,000 and 100,000 are undoubtedly exaggerated, and probably represent conventional figures intended to convey greatness.²⁰ On the other hand, the reported strength of Songhai armies is more plausible. Apparently, the largest army assembled on a single occasion was that of Askiya Ishaq II (1588–91) at the fateful battle of Tondibi: the *Tarikh el-Fattach* records 18,000 cavalry and 9,700 infantry,²¹ while the *Tarikh es-Soudan* estimates 12,500 cavalry and 30,000 infantry.²² Although inconsistent, both sets of figures are within the limits of credibility. In addition, Tuareg allies often augmented Sudanic armies with large contingents of camel cavalry.²³

Among the greatest conquerors and rulers in Sudanic history were those who realized the inherent weakness of such “feudal” levies and attempted to replace them with permanent armies. Both Sundiata, the famous empire builder of Mali, and Askiya Muhammad I, who ruled Songhai at its zenith, created standing armies to provide regular military forces and reduce their dependence on irregular “feudal” levies. However, these standing armies were essentially personal creations and did not become institutionalized features of Sudanic military organization. Although the significance of such innovations for the reigns of Sundiata and Muhammad must be recognized, they were but transient variations from the persistent “feudal” mode of Sudanic military organization. In a sense, though, these innovations established a precedent for the increasing use of standing armies that characterized nineteenth-century Sudanic states.

The armies of successive Sudanic empires seem to have relied increasingly upon cavalry. Cavalry mounts may be regarded as part of the technology of war, for horses were *par excellence* “delivery systems” that increased the range, speed, accuracy, and destructive capability of warriors’ weapons. The development of this new military technology as the principal “means of destruction” had a profound effect upon patterns of economic, political, and military organization in the Sudan.²⁴ Unlike the “democratic” weapon complex characteristic of primitive warfare, cavalry was an “aristocratic” weapon system which could be controlled by a privileged minority. Horses were expensive to import and maintain. Moreover, the physical degeneration and high mortality among horses in the Sudan meant that continuous importation of Barbs and Dongolas from the north was necessary to ennoble and enlarge the available reserve of war-horses.

This dependence upon a continuous supply of horses was apparent among all Sudanic states. It has been noted already that the horses of