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Polly Hill

Excerpt

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I

*The economic relationship
between city and countryside in 1900*

The economic relationship between Kano city and the countryside in '1900' (a date which implies 'immediately pre-colonial') will remain basically incomprehensible until intensive historical fieldwork has been undertaken in the countryside along the lines of that recently achieved in Katsina Emirate by Dr Yusufu Bala Usman (Usman, 1974). It is not merely that so little is known about the earlier development of settlement patterns, urban and village administration, the organisation of rural craftwork, trade and markets, the role of farm-slavery, land tenure and so forth, but also that such smattering of knowledge as we do possess lacks all coherence.

According to Usman the settlement pattern of Katsina in the late eighteenth century 'was made up of a series of *birane* [large towns] and *garuruwa* [smaller towns] surrounded by areas of permanent cultivation in which were located the *kauyuka* [villages] and *unguwoyi* [hamlets] dependent on these towns'. Beyond this belt of permanent settlement, where the main commercial, industrial and agricultural activities were carried on, were the less permanent and smaller settlements inhabited largely by hunters, woodcutters, pastoralists, miners (of iron ore) and by some farmers. Some of the larger towns developed sufficient hegemony over an area to become the centre of what Usman denotes 'regional clusters', within which 'close relations of economic and cultural interdependence were developed, which were often reflected at the political level'. Other towns maintained greater self-sufficiency or developed relations with more distant places.

In Katsina the pre-Jihad political system was based, according to Usman, on a hierarchy of chiefs ruling over the larger and smaller towns, who regulated the major forms of economic activity and who had other functions including organising the army. By the late eighteenth century hundreds of towns and immigrant groups of diverse origin were integrated into a political community under Sarkin Katsina. Even from an early period the principal bonds of the political community had been occupation,

location and religion, rather than kinship; and the basic and most cohesive entities were the permanent settlements. It was from the Sarkin Katsina that the town chiefs derived their authority; and there was a hierarchy of chiefs through whom authority was exercised. 'Although they represented an older form of political authority, older than the kingship', it was the chiefs of the ordinary smaller towns who came to form 'the local organs of administration'. As for the central administration, there were five divisions: one comprised the *sarakunan sana'a* (the heads of the various crafts and other economic activities) who were responsible for specialised economic activity and who went on tour; another was concerned with the supervision of the ordinary town heads (*masu gari*).

The Hausa word for a high official position to which a person is appointed is *sarauta*, and Usman terms the pre-Jihad politico-economic system 'the *sarauta* system'. In Katsina this type of rule was overthrown by the Jihad (and by events immediately preceding it) after which new systems of central and local administration evolved – systems which would be incomprehensible were knowledge of the pre-Jihad situation lacking. By the time of the reign of Emir Ibrahim (1871–83) 'the major responsibility of the central administration' was the supervision of the territorial rulers (the *hakimai* or *sarakunan kasa*) – the predecessors of those whose alternative title is now District Head. Each *hakimi* had several subordinate rulers under him (*masu gari* or *dagatai*) and, as it had been before the Jihad, each *mai gari* had his own officials and agents whom he appointed, the towns forming 'distinct administrative units'.

Very little is known about systems of local administration in Kano Emirate at the end of the nineteenth century. Dr Adamu Fika, in his important thesis relating to the political and economic re-orientation of Kano Emirate in 1882–1940 (Fika, 1973), is concerned largely with central administration and his discussion of pre-colonial local administration leans very heavily on a single source, namely the 1937 Assessment Report on Dawakin Kudu District by D. F. H. MacBride (see p. 47 below) which includes far more historical material on District and Village organisation than any other Kano Assessment Report available in the National Archives at Kaduna. On the basis of oral evidence Fika placed twelve Kano towns in rank order. He notes that the Fulani clan leaders in the city had some kinsmen in the Districts who held official positions as chiefs of major towns although members of the royal family relied almost entirely on agents (*jakadu*); and he draws attention to the chaos which resulted from the Kano civil war (Basasa) of 1893–4. From his interesting discussion of the functions of the territorial officials (*hakimai*), most of whom lived in Kano city, the impression is gained that pre-colonial local administration, outside a few large towns, was very weak;

The economic relationship between city and countryside 3

this impression hardens into a certainty when one considers the extraordinary difficulties which the colonial administration encountered in establishing any coherent system of village administration based on the old pattern (this being a matter which is discussed at length in Chapter 11 below), as well as the implications of the remarkable lack of populous towns. Usman's work is of relevance in suggesting that both the weakness of Kano local administration, and the poor economic linkage between city and countryside in the immediate pre-colonial period, should be understood in terms of a major upheaval in earlier times.

There has recently been a general quickening of interest in politico-economic conditions in Hausaland in early colonial times, so that despite the lack of basic historical groundwork we are less ignorant than our forebears and may start clearing the air by critically examining some of the generally accepted ideas regarding the relationship between city and countryside which appear to obstruct our thought. I shall show that some of these fallacies derive directly from ideas disseminated by Lugard in his early days which have never received the critical examination that they deserved; and that others stem from various stereotyped notions about economic control in centralised states which are peculiarly inapposite in the case of Kano.

THE POPULATION OF KANO CITY

Because the ancient cities (*birane*) were so impressive, and attracted so many strangers who reported on them, their size has been unconsciously exaggerated, whereas the immensity of rural Hausaland, and of such huge Emirates as Kano and Katsina, has been little appreciated. If in 1900 the total population of Kano Emirate was of the order of three million – see Appendix 1(1) – and if the population of Kano city was then as high as 60 000 to 90 000 (against the first officially recorded figure of 39 000 in 1911), then no more than some 2% to 3% of the Kano population was resident in the metropolis.

Trading strangers composed a large part of the city population, their numbers ebbing and flowing seasonally; in 1851 the traveller Heinrich Barth (Barth, 1857), who had been deeply impressed by the splendid cosmopolitan city (the largest by far in the central Sudan), supposed that during the most populous season about half of the estimated population of 60 000 consisted of trading strangers, the chief elements of the commercial population having been Kanuri, Hausa, Fulani and Nupe people, together with some Arabs. As for the permanent population of the city, this was presumably composed, as it had been in ancient times, of 'many groups of diverse origins lacking kinship relations one with the other'

(H. F. C. Smith, 1971, p. 187 – see also, p. 65 below). Considering that the number of high-ranking officials was relatively very small, the city population basically consisted of (permanent) immigrants (who maintained themselves by trading, craftwork and farming) and (temporary) stranger-traders, together with many slaves. As an entrepôt it was encapsulated in the countryside, as will be seen.

The great proportion of all the farmland in the Emirate, with its area of some 13 000 square miles, was cultivated and effectively owned by local farmers. While some prominent city residents, both administrative officials and members of the commercial classes, owned farmland cultivated by slaves, their estates represented a trivial proportion of Kano lands. Then, as now, farm-renting and share-cropping systems involving absentee land-owners were unknown; and many Hausa city-dwellers must have retained few links with the countryside outside the city walls. Far from dominating the commercial activities and agriculture of the countryside, the top layers of the population in the city exerted little economic control and, as we shall see, most long-distance trade and industry was rurally based.

The most densely populated large area of dispersed settlement in the central Sudan was the so-called Kano Close Settled Zone around Kano city, where between one and two million farmers and pastoralists together with their dependants and slaves probably lived in 1900 – see Appendix 1 (1). I shall offer some speculations about the origins of this Zone, and its relationship to Kano city, in Chapter III.

TOWNS

It is commonly believed (see, for example, Hopkins, 1973, p. 19) that a high proportion of the population of Hausaland in 1900 lived in towns or villages. Perhaps this was true of certain sections of Hausaland, such as northern Zaria and parts of Sokoto, but there is no doubt that in many districts of Kano Emirate most people lived dispersedly either in homesteads entirely surrounded by farmland or in small house-clusters. In Kano Emirate most towns, whether walled or not, were small on any standard – judging from later demographic material (see Chapter III), it would seem that their modal population might have been of the order of 1000–1500; and there must have been very few places (if any) with populations exceeding, say, 5000 – they are unlikely to have numbered more than three in 1920. As in many other regions of the West African savannah where towns are anomalous, there were large tracts of inhabited countryside devoid of any compact settlement which might be regarded as even a minor central place.

The economic relationship between city and countryside 5

The Hausa terminology for residential settlements of different functions and sizes presents much difficulty. Nowadays *birni* (pl. *birane*) always denotes a capital city (which had formerly been walled) – the seat of an Emir; formerly, as Usman's usage makes clear, *birni* might have denoted any large walled town which was a central place. All other compact settlements of any size, whether walled or not, are denoted *gari* (pl. *garuruwa*); this word may also mean 'any collection of compounds with or without an enclosing wall' (Bargery's Dictionary) and some large *garuruwa*, for example Dutse in eastern Kano Emirate, lack all compactness, the habitations being dotted about over a large area which is essentially farmland – see Appendix 1(2). As *gari* applies both to important market-towns or trading centres – like Bebeji on the old Kano to Zaria road – and to insignificant settlements which might even have populations of less than 750, there is no linguistic means of distinguishing between compact settlements, other than *birane*, in terms of function or size. As for the word *kauye* (pl. *kauyuka*), which is usually (and misleadingly) rendered 'village', its meaning varies with context: it is seldom applied to a compact settlement of any size; it is often used in a negative way to indicate groups of isolated homesteads and small clusters of habitations which are situated outside a particular *birni* or *gari*; and townsmen are apt to employ it in a derogatory way to imply inhabited 'bush'. Finally, there is the word *unguwa* (pl. *unguwoyi*), which in the countryside is always rendered 'hamlet'; it is more meaningful than *kauye* for it more often represents a group of habitations with considerable sociological coherence – see Appendix 1(2).

The ruler of a city or important town is known as *sarki*. Although this title is commonly used to denote the appointed head of numerous types of polity, group or organisation, however high or humble – thus Sarkin Kano (the Emir of Kano), Sarkin Bebeji (chief of Bebeji), Sarkin Makera (chief blacksmith), Sarkin Bariki (the man in charge of a Rest House) – it is significant that the 'chiefs' of smaller towns are not *sarakuna* (sing. *sarki*), but rather *masu gari* (sing. *mai gari*), meaning the town head or representative, metaphorically the 'owner' of the town, a position analogous to the head of a hamlet or household – *mai unguwa* or *mai gida*. (Significantly, there is no such title as *mai kauye*.) Nowadays, unless a town is the seat of a District Head (and there are only twenty-five Districts in Kano) its ruler, whether his title be *sarki* or *mai gari*, holds the office of Village Head, commonly, though not invariably, being known as a *dagaci* (pl. *dagatai*). In areas of dispersed settlement those 'village authorities' who are superior to *masu unguwoyi* are also known as *dagatai*.

In Kano in 1900 there were many *garuruwa* which were moderately important market or trade centres, but few (if any) of them were worthy

of being denoted metropolises or centres of regional clusters, such as existed in Katsina in the eighteenth century. Rano, Birnin Kudu, Dutse and Gaya were the 'capitals' of semi-autonomous Kano Districts (Paden, 1973, p. 242) with Fulani rulers of local origin who resided in them; but with the possible exception of Sarkin Gaya (see p. 45), there is no evidence that these rulers resembled those of certain large towns in Katsina in the eighteenth century in having had, like Maska for instance, their own hierarchy of *sarakuna* supervising the numerous *masu gari* which were subordinated to them. The towns were important in their own right but they were not properly constituted administrative apices: they were most certainly not the capitals of small city states whose rulers were capable of dominating the administration, or the commercial or agricultural activities, of their territories.

As will be related in Chapter 11, the early colonial administrators in Kano assumed that the ordinary small *gari* was surrounded by satellite or subordinate settlements: they were greatly disconcerted when they discovered that the control exerted by most *masu gari* did not extend into the countryside. Apart from the *masu unguwoyi*, who were 'natural' though unimportant representatives of localised groupings which tended to be strongly linked by ties of kinship, what political authorities existed in the countryside? With whom did the non-resident tax collectors deal when extracting tax from the rural population?

After a very prolonged struggle (see Chapter 11), the British imposed an hierarchical, though rickety, administrative structure (which had few functions apart from tax collection), with Hamlet Heads (*masu unguwoyi*) subordinate to Village Heads (*dagatai*) who were in turn subordinate to District Heads (*hakimai*). Their main difficulty involved the Village Heads, or rather those of them (and they were the majority) who were not heads of compact settlements but rural authorities in areas of dispersed settlement who have already been defined, in a negative way, as superior to Hamlet Heads. In Kano Emirate in 1900 there must have been many hundreds of rural *dagatai* – they were also apt to be known by numerous other titles of which the most common may have been *magaji* and Sarkin Fulani. Since the functions, degree of autonomy, efficiency and importance of these *dagatai* varied greatly, they did not constitute a governing stratum which conformed to any generalisations; moreover the various communities in Hausaland (Hausawa, Fulani, pagan Maguzawa) were apt to have different types of representative, many being prominent men who had achieved their leadership spontaneously or through local competition, some being lineage elders of Fulani or Maguzawa communities, and others having been chosen from outside the community. The British were baffled by these representatives and as most

The economic relationship between city and countryside 7

present-day *dagatai* are heads of Village Areas (or Units) which were arbitrarily created by the colonial administration, the traditional office has gone largely unstudied.

In many regions of the world the relative dearth, in relation to the size of the population, of significant administrative centres might be thought to imply the economic isolation of the countryside. But this was not so in Kano where, on the contrary, most commercial activity, including the long-distance caravan trade, was rurally-based. I shall be presenting the idea (see Chapter III) that in the nineteenth century the very high population density was positively advantageous to the people of the Kano Close Settled Zone and of similar, though smaller, areas – that the Zone was a special category of rural area where agriculture, stock rearing, industrial production (notably weaving and dyeing) and medium- and long-distance trading flourished integratedly within the matrix of the countryside where most people lived dispersedly in houses surrounded by farmland. Owing to the existence of a detailed nexus of paths, cattle routes and minor and major trade routes, dispersal there did not imply isolation. As pointed out by Usman, trade routes ‘did not simply spread out over an open terrain, as is widely assumed about routes in the savannah areas of West Africa’: it was rather that the creation of vast areas of permanent cultivation (*karakara*), through the activity of man and livestock, was a pre-condition for the establishment of these regular routes. Bargery defines *karakara* (or *karakara*) as ‘land, near a city, which is covered with hamlets and farms’; but in Katsina and Kano Emirates a large proportion of all the farmland in densely populated areas has long been *karakara*, being manured and cultivated every year, whether it is near to a city or not (see *R. H.*, pp. 303–6).

ECONOMIC FEUDALISM?

In Kano, as in Katsina, the territorial rulers – the *hakimai* – were empowered to organise the collection of tax, on behalf of the Emir, in the territories assigned to them. It is doubtful whether they had any other economic functions, and the non-resident *hakimai* certainly had no judicial functions. Whereas in Katsina in the nineteenth century each *hakimi* lived mainly in his own District capital (though most of them also kept houses in Katsina city), most of the Kano *hakimai* (as we know) resided solely in Kano city. According to Adamu Fika (1973), members of the Sullubawa, the Yolawa, the Dambazawa and Jobawa clans filled the major state offices open to free men and their titled leaders (including members of the royal family) had a ‘multiplicity of fiefs’ which could be located anywhere in the Emirate, according to which Fulani clan had conquered which

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8

Population, prosperity and poverty

general area; in 1882 there were also ten major slave *hakimai*. On the basis of oral evidence, Fika put the total number of 'fiefs' at more than 400. Some of these territories constituted solid blocks of land; others comprised numerous non-contiguous areas, which might have been widely scattered. Lugard denoted the territories as fiefs, the officials as fief-holders – feudal terminology which has been uncritically adopted by most subsequent writers.

After the eighteenth century, 'feudalism' 'came to denote, through abuse of language, such social realities as the political predominance of a landholding aristocracy and the exploitation of the small and weak by the powerful' (*International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*). However, the term can scarcely be stretched to cover the Kano case. The *hakimai* did not constitute a 'landholding aristocracy' – while as for the exploitation of the small and weak by the powerful, this is a universal principle in many societies which are never classified as feudal. I insist that from the angle of the economic organisation of rural life, it is entirely misleading to employ terms derived, without modification or redefinition, from European feudalism, and that the use of such jargon (it is nothing better) obscures the inherent vitality and autonomy of pre-colonial economic enterprise in the Kano countryside. I shall now summarise some of my main justifications for an assertion which is still curiously provocative despite the widespread influence of the general views expressed on African feudalism by J. R. Goody (1971) and the lack of a 'feudal technology'.

First, there was no sense in which a *hakimi* owned (or even thought he owned) the land in his territory, which, for convenience, I shall henceforth term his 'District'. While the British were anxious to foster the idea that ultimate rights in land resided 'in the Fulani dynasty as conquerors' (Lugard's expression), for they would then have been conveniently transferable to the British Crown, the nature of these rights was not such as would have enabled *hakimai* (or, indeed, Emirs) to have demanded labour-services of farmers in return for the right to cultivate certain portions of land. The fact is (as will be seen in Chapter XIII) that local land tenure systems were incomprehensible to the British who did not realise that portions of land were never formally allocated to individual farmers by any authority; that resident farmers were always free to clear and cultivate unoccupied land (provided that no communal rights, such as grazing, were exercised there); and that the rights thus established so nearly approximated to outright ownership that farmers were free to sell their farmland for cash – a right which they often exercised in pre-colonial times (see *R. H.*).

Second, most of the *hakimai* were not landed gentry living on their estates in their Districts, but city aristocrats (including high-ranking

The economic relationship between city and countryside 9

slaves) who resided in the capital. Being non-resident, often unfamiliar with their territories and reluctant to travel, most of the *hakimai* delegated the task of tax collection directly to their agents, who were usually known as *jakadu* (sing. *jakada*), who descended on the territories in shoals, for they too were non-resident. As executive or political officers (for the Emir as well as the *hakimai*) these *jakadu* – who were often misleadingly termed ‘messengers’ by the British – must have dealt with many matters besides tax collection; but as an unstructured group of individuals they were scarcely capable of exercising much constructive authority on behalf of their overlords who were ignorant of local conditions and in this connection they must have been gravely inconvenienced (see Chapter 11) by the powerlessness and insignificance of many of the rural authorities (*dagatai*) with whom they were obliged to deal. Such a political system contrasts very markedly with that in the small border Emirate of Katagum where *resident* chieftaincies were allocated to members of the royal family and their descendants; although each of these chiefs was accountable to a court official, known as an *uban daki*, it is significant and appropriate that V. Low (Low, 1972, pp. 126–31) should refer to the chiefs, not the *uban daki*, as having been the fief-holders, even though the latter derived most of their income from the territories ‘in shares of taxes, fines, and indemnities levied, and in portions of the estates of deceased men of wealth’ (*ibid.*, p. 129).

Third, while individual *hakimai* commonly owned farmland on which basic crops were cultivated, their estates were usually diminutive in size relative to that of their District; were sometimes situated outside the District (for instance near the capital city); did not necessarily pertain to their offices – unless they belonged to the small class of resident *hakimai*; and were farmed, like the Emir’s estates, by slaves, not by free farmers.

Fourth, not only were ordinary farmers of free-descent not bound by conditions of servitude, but they themselves owned most of the farm-slaves (see Chapter XIII); even in Dorayi, which is very close to Kano city, most farm-slaves were owned by private farmers.

Fifth, many of the territorial portions which made up the non-conglomerate Districts were apt to be small, interlaced with other Districts, and devoid of economic coherence. There was a sense in which ‘Districts’ were not territorial units at all, but arbitrarily demarcated groups of householders from whom the *hakimi* was entitled to extract tax on behalf of the Emir. When he came to revise his *Political Memoranda* in 1906 (see p. 201, below) Lugard had seen this clearly:

The lands... arbitrarily assigned to the rapacious rule of the Emir’s nominees were frequently not homologous. A district which happened to be available

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10

Population, prosperity and poverty

owing to the death or removal of its feudal Chief would be granted to a favourite, irrespective of whether it lay near his territory or not. . . It came about that a territorial Chief might hold jurisdiction over and claim taxes from, a number of detached areas situated like islands in the heart of another jurisdiction. (*Political Memoranda*, 1919 in Kirk-Greene, 1970, p. 181.)

Sixth, as tax-collectors the *hakimai* had limited powers, for it seems that, at the end of the nineteenth century, the sophisticated and elaborate Kano taxation system tended to involve uniform tax rates – see Appendix 11(1). Lugard held the view that ‘extortion by local Chiefs and embezzlement of tribute exacted seems to have been a more marked feature than extortion by the Jakada. . .’ (*Memorandum on the Taxation of Natives*, 1906). However that may have been in Kano, there would have been many besides the *hakimai* who appropriated shares of the revenue before it reached the Emir – who, in any case, employed his own *jakadu* for direct tax collection in the Districts.

Seventh, the non-resident *hakimai* lacked judicial powers. Information about the number of district courts headed by Muslim judges (*alkalai*) in 1900 is remarkably scanty – and it may be that most cases of importance that came before them were referred upwards to Kano.

MARKET-PLACES

Most of the Kano *hakimai* were not, therefore, in the usual sense of the word ‘rulers’; nor did the Emir delegate many functions directly to them for he (unlike the British) tended to pursue a policy of *direct* rule (see Chapter 11). The weakness of the hierarchical structure of authority – or the existence, if I may put it this way, of an ‘apex’ with no proper sub-structure – was associated with the lack of an hierarchical ordering of settlements and market-places. In an important article on rural periodic markets in pre-1949 China, G. W. Skinner concluded (Skinner, 1964) that the hierarchy of higher administrative centres in that country corresponded with the hierarchy of markets and that the economic function of a settlement ‘was consistently associated with its position in marketing systems which are themselves arranged in a regular hierarchy’ (*ibid.*, p. 5) – i.e. goods tended to pass upwards and downwards through a chain of markets, more and more bulked wares being handled the higher the position of the market in the chain. His conclusion that an hierarchical structure of market-places was ‘characteristic of the whole class of civilisations known as “peasant” or “traditional agrarian” societies’ (*ibid.*) has to be called in question in the light of the Kano case.

Little is known of the history of rural periodic market-places in Hausaland, which presumably existed many centuries ago, especially in some