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978-0-521-10937-6 - Three Thousand Years in Africa: Man and his Environment in the Lake Chad Region of Nigeria

Graham Connah

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*NEW STUDIES IN ARCHAEOLOGY*

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## Three thousand years in Africa

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*GRAHAM CONNAH*

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# Three thousand years in Africa

Man and his environment in  
the Lake Chad region of Nigeria

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To  
Beryl Fletcher  
and  
M.V. *Accra*

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## FOREWORD

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The ancient Kingdom of Borno, centred around the Lake Chad Basin, has played a prominent role in the history of Africa. The Kingdom of Kanem–Borno became very powerful during the time of Mai Idris Aloma who reigned from AD 1571 to 1603. The Kingdom enjoyed an unbroken period of peace and prosperity. The power of the Kanem Kingdom then declined until a new line of rulers was founded in 1814 by Shehu Muhammed El-Amin El-Kanemi who is also known as Shehu Laminu. Shehu Laminu was a great scholar, statesman and philosopher. He built his headquarters 26 kilometres west of Lake Chad at Kukawa. The famous African explorers Denham and Clapperton visited Kukawa in 1823 and 1824.

In 1893 a deserter from Zubeir Pasha's army known as Rabeh conquered Borno during the reign of Shehu Hashim. Rabeh set up his headquarters at Dikwa after plundering and destroying Kukawa. In 1900 he was killed at Kusseri by a French expedition under Commander Lamy who restored the former El-Kanemi family to power at Dikwa. During Shehu Garbai's reign the partition of Africa by colonial powers reached Borno. Dikwa became a German colony while that part of Kanem–Borno presently known as the Borno Emirate became a British colony. Shehu Garbai crossed over to the British side while another great-grandson of El-Kanemi, Sanda Mondaramabe, was installed as the Shehu of Dikwa. Hence the Dikwa Emirate was created and this explains why there are two El-Kanemi rulers in the present Borno State.

There are other important emirates in the present Borno State, each with its own interesting history. The Biu Emirate, mostly inhabited by Babur and Bura, was founded by Yantar Wala who was said to have originated from Birnin Gazargamo. The Fika Emirate is mainly inhabited by Bolewa, Kare-Kare, Ngamawa and Ngizim. The Bolewas have a very long history and are said to have left Yemen 1000 years ago. Bade is another emirate and was founded by Lawan Babuje, son of Digur Alewiya. The Bade people are believed to have come originally from Kanem and they founded their headquarters at Gorgoram around about AD 1300.

The people of Borno are predominately Moslem though there are some Christians in the State. The State has a rich and diverse cultural heritage as a result of its long history. The State is famous for its skilled horsemen as well as its colourful traditional dress, music and dances.

The most important geographical feature in Borno State is Lake Chad which is situated in the extreme north-eastern corner of the State. The influence of the Lake on the history of the area is tremendous and planned research work should continue to provide a lot of significant new historical information. An outstanding feature of the landscape around the Lake Chad Basin is the mounds of sand of various sizes. Little scientific work has been done on the significance of the mounds even though there have been several traditional explanations of their existence. One explanation has it that citizens of some ancient towns in the area offended the gods and as a result their towns were overturned and buried in these mounds. Another explanation is that these mounds grew out of labour by offenders who were unable to pay fines. One other explanation is that, in some ancient time, giants called Sos arrived and saw that while the soil appeared fertile, the area was too flooded during the rainy season. These giants created these mounds by heaping soil into the flooded area and these resulted in solid grounds which were used for farming and fishing.

The work of Professor Graham Connah reported in this book provides a more scientific explanation of the existence of these mounds. The book, however, goes much further than mere explanation of the existence of mounds. It makes a tremendous contribution to the evolutionary history of the north-eastern part of Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin generally. It emphasizes the crucial role of archaeological work in getting the true history of Africa. It is interesting that the human history of this area extends to 3000 years back and I have little doubt that further archaeological work will extend this period further.

I hope that this book will provide incentive for African and non-African historians to devote more time and effort in more extensive research in Africa. There is now little doubt in the belief that much of African history will have to be rewritten from an African and not colonial perspective. Professor Connah has attempted to do this.

It gives me great pleasure to write a foreword to this book and I hope that it will be extremely valuable as a source of information and reference for further work in the Lake Chad Basin area and Africa generally.



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Emir of Dikwa, Borno State, Nigeria

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## *PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS*

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In this book I have attempted to examine both the archaeological and the historical evidence from the Lake Chad region of Nigeria, in the context of Man/environment relationships. In doing this I have drawn heavily on ethnographic observation both in the present and in the recent past. One of my objects in writing the book has been to present an area case-study in which the core of the data consisted of original information that was either unpublished or only partly published elsewhere. As a teacher of African prehistoric archaeology, I had in mind the need for texts particularly for second- and third-year university students that could be at once both detailed in content and yet generalized in discussion. I also had in mind the necessity to reach a far wider spectrum of the world's reading public than will usually be interested by a book on African prehistoric archaeology. The extent to which such apparently incompatible aims have been met must be decided by the reader.

The archaeological content of the book is based almost entirely on fieldwork of my own, in an area where virtually no other archaeological field research has yet been done. From 1961 to 1971 I worked as an archaeologist in Nigeria and at least some of the shortcomings of the book result from the fact that since 1971 I have been working on the other side of the world and have been able to return to Nigeria only once, for a period of three months in 1978. I think it is worth setting on record some of the details of the organization of the relevant fieldwork and, indeed, it is necessary to do so in order to acknowledge fully the assistance and co-operation of the many individuals and institutions without whose help the work could not have been carried out.

The research project which forms the basis of this book commenced in June–July 1963 with an archaeological reconnaissance, on behalf of the Nigerian Federal Department of Antiquities, by myself and two assistants: Peter Egom and Julius Tilleh. Although this tour permitted only two weeks in the study area because it was mounted from Benin City about 1400 km away in the south of Nigeria and although it had to be done at a time when the rains had already commenced, we were able to demonstrate the archaeological potential of the area. In the following year I was appointed to a research fellowship at the Institute of African Studies of the University of Ibadan and it was decided that my contribution to the joint Northern

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History Research Scheme, then being conducted by Ibadan University and Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, would be a detailed investigation of the archaeology of the Lake Chad region of Nigeria. This commenced in December 1964 and lasted till June 1966 except for two months leave in the wet season of 1965. It involved the setting up of a field headquarters in Maiduguri and during this time a continuous programme of fieldwork and excavation was undertaken. From late in 1966, the focus of attention was switched to the workroom examination of the literally tons of archaeological material which had been collected and excavated. It was most convenient to do this at the University of Ibadan itself, some 1600 km from the study area. It was a great tribute to the Nigerian Railways that at a time of civil unrest in the country they were able to transport all the research material, without damage, from one end of Nigeria to the other. A further period of two months' field survey was completed in early 1967, however, with some attention being given to neighbouring parts of the Republic of Cameroon and the Republic of Chad. Also a further month's excavation was carried out in February 1969. Most recently, in March 1978 another three weeks were spent in the area but this time the fieldwork was concentrated on ethnographic observation. This work was part of a three-month visit to Nigeria at the invitation of the Centre for Nigerian Cultural Studies at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, and the Nigerian Federal Department of Antiquities.

Throughout the greater part of this project my constant companions and assistants were Julius Tilleh, Umoru Gol, Haruna Shuwa and Hassan Misau but this team was often augmented by employing local guides and, during excavation, labour forces of anything from six to fifty men were employed from the immediate area in which we were working. Because of the difficulties and expense of travel, there were relatively few people who were able to visit the field project while it was in progress. Notable amongst those who did, however, were Ade Obayemi and Fred Anozie, then Nigerian students of archaeology but now amongst the leading professional archaeologists of their country. In addition there were Thurstan Shaw, Murray Last, Frank Speed and Nora M<sup>c</sup>Millan. Throughout the main part of the project my wife Beryl and my eldest son Alan were also with me.

It is not possible to complete a large piece of archaeological field research nor to write a book of the present sort without a great deal of help from other people and organizations. Some of the sources of this help will be obvious from the details already given but it is necessary to look more closely at this matter. My basic debt is to the three institutions for whom I have worked over the last eighteen years: the Nigerian Federal Department of Antiquities, the University of Ibadan and the University of New England. All three of them have at different times provided both research funds and the necessary organizational back-up. I have also had considerable help from Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, particularly from

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its Centre for Nigerian Cultural Studies. In addition, I was able to enjoy the academic hospitality of the University of Cambridge, during a period of study leave in 1978, where I would particularly acknowledge the kindness of Glyn Daniel, John Alexander, A. T. Grove, and the Master and Fellows of my own college of Selwyn.

My debt to such 'old coasters' as Bernard Fagg and Thurstan Shaw is too great to detail, although I would particularly acknowledge the help of the latter in reading the typescript of this book at a late stage and making many useful suggestions. Peter Shinnie of the University of Calgary also helped in this way, as did one of my oldest friends, Nora McMillan of the Merseyside Museums, Liverpool. I would, in addition, particularly like to acknowledge the sympathetic support, over many years, of Ekpo Eyo, Director of the Nigerian Federal Department of Antiquities.

The people of Borno must come high in my list of acknowledgements. I am indebted to His Excellency the Military Governor of Borno State for permission to continue my work in 1978. I wish to thank also His Highness the Shehu of Borno and His Highness the Emir of Dikwa. My debt to the latter will be obvious from the Foreword that he kindly wrote for this book. I have long regarded him as an old friend, who, at an extremely hot time of the year in 1966, went out of his way to visit the Daima excavation and to bring with him his Emirate Council so that they also could gaze through the archaeological window into their own past. In addition there are many others in Borno to whom I am indebted: Alhaji Abba Mohammed Habib, the Waziri of Dikwa, who not only first drew my attention to the Daima mound but also on several occasions allowed me to use his private house at Jarawa out on the firki; the Waziri of Borno who was so helpful in 1978; Zanna Yawudima of the Dikwa Emirate Council whose friendliness during my 1978 fieldwork was so much appreciated; Alhaji Yerima Muktar, the District Head of Kukawa, who was so interested in my 1978 work; Shettima Tijani, the Village Head of Yau, and his father the former Village Head; Alhaji Yirima Ibrahim, who was District Head of Mongonu in the 1960s; Lawan Mohammad Suntal, the Village Head of Daima; the villagers of Daima who laboured so hard in the excavation, including the late Aba Daima who, night after night, sat spear-in-hand outside my hut door whilst I slept with the excavation wages under the bed; the Zanna Sangayama of Sangaya who answered so many questions during my 1978 visit; the good-humoured Malilima Abba Kaka who on several occasions in the 1960s toured with me as a representative of the Shehu of Borno; Malam Walad of Maiduguri who also toured with me in the 1960s; Mala Tijani who acted as one of my guides and interpreters in 1978; Modu Rawa of Sangaya, a young schoolteacher, who in 1978 was particularly helpful as a guide and interpreter in the firki area; Alhaji Baba Malam, Abba Bashir and Abba Kura, all busy high-ranking officers of the Borno State who helped to make my 1978 visit a success; and Nan and Bob Wedderburn

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of Maiduguri whose love of Nigeria has been expressed in their help for so many passing researchers, including myself. To all these people of Borno, and to others whom either my memory or my field records fail to recall, I owe a very great deal. They made the fieldwork possible.

There were others in Nigeria, however, whose help was essential in the organization of the fieldwork. In the 1960s Sir Kashim Ibrahim, formerly Governor of Northern Nigeria, took a personal interest in the project. Mahdi Adamu, Director of the Centre for Nigerian Cultural Studies, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, made my 1978 visit possible. I am indebted also to a number of the staff of that Centre: Lawan Sambo Mohammed, the Secretary; Ibrahim Abdullahi, the Assistant Secretary; C. D. Bala, head of the archaeological section; Ado Jos; Wilhelm Seidensticker and his wife, both of whom were helpful and hospitable during my 1978 visit; Johanna Kadzai who was such good company during my 1978 Borno tour; and Ahmadu Adamu, whose skill as a driver was so well demonstrated in 1978, particularly when he managed to dig the Land-Rover out of a sand-dune with the aid of only an enamelled plate. Other people in the University at Zaria helped in various ways: Mike Mortimore of the Department of Geography; Francis Surraweeri of the Department of Mathematics; and Ade Obayemi (already mentioned in a different context) of the Archaeological Section of the Department of History. Elsewhere in Nigeria were still others from whose help and advice I have benefited: Abdullahi Smith, formerly Director of the Northern History Research Scheme; John Lavers, Department of History, Bayero University College, Kano; and Nicholas David, formerly Professor of Archaeology at the Department of Archaeology, University of Ibadan.

I would also like to acknowledge the specialized work that has been done by a number of people on some of my Borno material. I am particularly grateful to them for permission to make use of their findings in this book. In this way I have made use of the classificatory data from Steve Daniels' work on the Borno pottery, prior to the completion of his statistical analysis. He has pointed out that his analysis, when complete, will produce more sophisticated results, more complex patterns which may *in detail* be at variance with the interpretation here made of the figures. Steve Daniels was formerly at the Archaeological Statistical Unit, Centre for Nigerian Cultural Studies, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. In addition, I am grateful to Sam Freeth, Department of Geology, University College of Swansea, for permission to use information from his petrological examination of the stones from Daima, prior to our joint publication of it. In the same way, I have to thank Brian Fagan of the Department of Anthropology, University of California, Santa Barbara, for permission to make use of information drawn from his study of the animal bones from Daima and some of the other Borno excavations. I similarly acknowledge the work of Gordon Howes of the Department of Zoology at the British

Museum (Natural History) who has allowed me to use information from his analysis of the fish bones from Daima and some of the other excavations. I have also made use of information from the work of Jane Hopson, who examined the fish bones from the excavation at Yau. In addition, I have included the results of the chemical analyses of metal objects from Daima and several other sites that were done by S. A. Adelaye and D. R. Goddard of the Department of Chemistry, University of Ibadan. Furthermore, Iain Davidson of the Department of Prehistory and Archaeology, University of New England, very kindly calculated the regression curves for Fig. 6.10. There are other cases where I have made use of specialized data provided by people who are acknowledged in the text. Only the limitation of space prevents me from giving all the details here.

I would like to acknowledge a number of institutions in Britain to whom I am much indebted. I have drawn heavily on the publications concerning the north-east of Nigeria produced by the Land Resources Division of the Overseas Development Administration of the British Government. My appreciation of the environment of the study area would have been very much poorer if these excellent studies had not existed. I would also acknowledge the great benefit I derived from many weeks of work in the Cambridge University Library, and in addition the assistance I obtained from the library of the Society of Antiquaries and the library of the Royal Anthropological Institute, both in London. Rhodes House in Oxford made the Lethem Papers available to me and both the British Museum and the Horniman Museum in London searched their store-rooms to find Borno material donated to them long ago.

The illustrations are of mixed origin. All field photographs are my own and the originals of all field drawings were done by me. I am also responsible for the photography of Figs. 4.3 and 4.9 and the drawing of Fig. 4.10. All the other studio photographs were done by Robert Osoba of the Department of Archaeology, University of Ibadan, with some assistance from Doig Simmonds at that time of the same department. In addition Fig. 10.2 was prepared by Doig Simmonds by rephotographing two Nigerian Government survey photographs. The field drawings were redrawn for publication by J. Abiki Williams of the Department of Archaeology, University of Ibadan, who also did the pottery drawings, and by Douglas Hobbs of the Department of Prehistory and Archaeology, University of New England. Douglas Hobbs also drew Figs. 5.1, 6.10, 6.13, 6.26 and 7.1 and produced the basic designs for the maps, Figs. 2.1, 3.1–3.3, 3.5 and 4.1, which were drawn in their final form by Cambridge University Press. In fact, the organization, editing and presentation of the illustrations owes a great deal to the skills of Douglas Hobbs. Particular thanks are also due to Rudiger Boskovic and Michael Roach, cartographers in the Department of Geography, University of New England, who photographed all the drawings and helped with many technical problems. Skilled



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Finally, there are two more things I have to add. I would stress again my debt to the people of Borno, of whom in these acknowledgements I have been able to mention only a few. Their friendliness, to someone of a different colour and culture, made a lasting impression on me. In the searing heat of the Borno plains, in the constant company of these people, I learnt more than the archaeology of the area, they taught me about human life and its real values. And my second closing remark? This must inevitably be addressed to Nigeria's archaeologists, now more numerous than they ever were. There is no end to the writing of books about Africa's past but as yet hardly a beginning to the field research that is the only real means of advancing our understanding. To those who are in a position to do this field research I issue an appeal: get out in the field and go and do it . . . but make sure that you know what you are trying to do before you start and make sure you publish your results very much more quickly than I have been able to do.

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