

Pattern of Recruitment Policy and Demobilization in the Warfare of Kanem Borno

By

Mahmud Dauda

Umar Amiru

Department of Military History and War Studies

Nigerian Defense Academy Kaduna

&

Rotimi Olajide Opeyeoluwa

Department of International Relations and Diplomacy

Afe Babalola University Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State

Abstract

Warfare in pre-colonial African societies led to the rise, fall and expansion of most kingdoms in African territories. To sustain war efforts, various kings, emperors and warlords in pre-colonial Africa evolved unique military complexes, strategies and tactics which they deployed during warfare. In pre-colonial Africa, the military might of any empire determines the strength of that particular empire. Kanem Borno was one of such strong empires which lasted for over 800 years. The empire imposed various policies and programs in the military which consisted of military recruitment. The policy allowed able-bodied men to participate in the execution of war. However, there were standing armies and emergency armies who were recruited temporarily in the case of expansion and territorial defense. But they were demobilized once the empire was not at war. This paper therefore analyzes the operational system of military recruitment as well as the demobilization of the military in the post-war Kanem Borno Empire. The paper uses historical sources in the collection and analysis of data. It concludes that, like some key empires in Africa, Kanem Borno has an effective military system that supports its wars of defense and territorial expansion.

Keywords: *Warfare, Pre-colonial, Recruitment policy, Demobilization.*

Introduction

Warfare in pre-colonial African societies was ubiquitous, most societies saw war as a means of territorial expansion and a source of power, while some saw it as a means of territorial defense from hostile neighbors. Warfare in pre-colonial Africa was of both external and internal dimensions, i.e., it could be between two kingdoms or within a kingdom as a result of internal uprisings or disagreement between the ruling elite or dynasties. Some scholars distinguished between great wars planned and organized by the central government which consisted of the hierarchical ordering of military commanders and the general army under the control of the king and the smaller raids and military operations carried out by individuals or bands of free looters who, although they had to obtain permission from the king, retained most of the booty. Against this background, the socio-political organization of traditional societies featured the organization of an army; and the earliest rulers in Africa.¹

In the development of war strategies, tactics and general military organization, the desire for territorial expansion and state preservation which made war inevitable in Africa, provided African rulers an avenue to consolidate their power and influence over large territories, and as well dominate their economic relations with their neighbors. Wars were fought to ensure

¹ Chidume C.G “Warfare in Pre-colonial Africa: An Examination of the Role of African Blacksmiths”, (U.K: University of Kent, 2021). p70.

survival or to expand and consolidate at the expense of others. This entailed mobilization of men and materials, continuous modification of weapons and the adoption of tactics and strategy through which decisions were reached based on situations which could not be predicted by the enemy and, therefore limited the enemy's will.²

Another significant feature of pre-colonial warfare in Africa was the interlocking of state power with military leadership. The degree of integration, however, between the military and politics varies from State to State. Most rulers in pre-colonial Africa also distinguished themselves as great warlords and strategists. Kings did not just sit in administration but also led and commanded the army in battles. It is within this context that some kingdoms in pre-colonial Africa reached their zenith in terms of political and economic power under influential rulers and military strategists. An example of such kingdoms in pre-colonial Africa was the Kanem Borno Empire more importantly from the reign of Mai Idris Aloma up to the period of its final decline and fall to the British during the conquest of Nigeria.³

Background to the Development of Kanem Borno Empire

Kanem-Borno was Renowned as one of the most powerful empires of Western Africa with Ghana, Mali, and Songhai. Kanem-Bornu (Kanem-Borno) is often cited as an archetypal example of an ancient African pre-colonial kingdom. The empire reached a certain degree of fame not only because it was mentioned in the narratives written by Arab geographers such as Al-Idrisi but also because its history has been one of the strongest empires in West Africa.⁴

The empire of Kanem-Bornu finds its roots between Lake Chad and the Bahr el-Ghazal in the region of Kanem. It was based on the state of Kanem created around the 8th century and was ruled by the Duguwa, an aristocracy who chose a king among themselves. Gathering together agriculturalists and pastoralists, this kingdom consisted of various ethnic groups able to use iron-working techniques and horsemanship. These different populations gave birth to the Kanembu ethnic group who spoke a Nilo-Saharan language. Located at the crossroads between northern Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, this region benefited from trade contacts with different parts of Africa.⁵

The early history of Kanem is not well known but it appears that Kanem sought to control trade routes towards Tripoli and Egypt and based its power on trans-Saharan trade. However, it would not be possible to envisage the creation of an empire before the expansion of Kanem towards the northern oases of Kavar during the 11th century. These conquests led to the creation of a trans-Saharan empire that survived until the 19th century. During the 11th century, the Duguwa were replaced by another dynasty, the Sayfawa who ruled the empire until the 19th century.⁶

However, the territorial extent of this 800-year-long hegemony greatly varied. At first based on Kanem, the center of the empire shifted to the west of Lake Chad during the 13th and 14th centuries as a result of deteriorating climatic conditions. Indeed, the continued progression of the Sahara was responsible for the migration of the Kanembu to the more fertile lands of

² Chidume C.G “Warfare in Pre-colonial: An Examination of the Role...p71

³ Chidume C.G “Warfare in Pre-colonial: An Examination of the Role

⁴ Tijani K. “The Dynamics OF Administrative Change in pre-Colonial Borno: A comparative study of the Sayfawa Period With That of Shaykh Muhammed al-Amin al-Kanemi” PhD Thesis 1980p 67

⁵ Tijani K. “The Dynamics OF Administrative Change in pre-Colonial Borno: A comparative study of the Sayfawa Period with That of Shaykh Muhammed al-Amin al-Kanemi” phd thesis 1980p 67

⁶ Vincent H. “The Kanuri of Borno: A Case Study in Cultural Anthropology”, King’s College London UK

Bornu. This region had already become the economic center of the empire in the 14th century although the Sayfawa still resided in Njimi the capital they had built in Kanem.⁷

Furthermore, in the second half of the 14th century after two centuries of civil war, Kanem was captured by the Bulala warrior aristocracy. Fleeing their enemies, the Sayfawa managed to re-establish their power in Borno. This second empire reconquered Kanem in the 16th century but Borno remained the economic and political center of the country, hence the name Kanem-Borno to designate the polity. This migration from Kanem to Borno was a slow and sometimes violent process integrating various populations known under the collective name of So (or Sao) to the Kanembu. This merging gave birth to a new ethnic group known as the Kanuri who became the main ethnic group in the empire. As a consequence, their Nilo-Saharan language, Kanuri, became the lingua franca of the empire.⁸

Kanem-Borno was also a major diplomatic power in the Sahara area and boasted embassies in both Morocco and the Ottoman Empire via Tripoli. Its links with the rest of the Muslim world. One of the most famous episodes of Bornoan history was the correspondence between Mai Idriss Aloomo and the Ottoman Sultan Murad III during the 1570s, as Mai Idriss desired to renew an alliance with the Ottomans. Their conquest of Tripoli in 1551 had already given the empire of Kanem-Borno access to Ottoman mercenaries who had migrated across the Sahara. Their firearms and tactical superiority resulted in victories which facilitated the conquest of territories located at the south and west of Borno.⁹

The introduction of gunpowder in sub-Saharan Africa was short-lived as by the end of the 17th century the Bornoan armies had ceased using such weapons. However, the contacts with Tripoli never totally ceased as embassies were exchanged until the 19th century. To understand how the empire of Kanem Borno dominated and invaded its neighbors, it is necessary to highlight the importance of its cavalry, infantry and military strategists. As the empire relied heavily on the strength of its horsemen for its conquests and slave raids. Divided between heavy and light cavalry and a large number of infantries, the Bornoan army could still count 10,000 horses when the German explorer Heinrich Barth visited Kanem-Borno in 1851. The Bornoan army was not a professional organization and could only be deployed every year during the dry season. However, the reorganization of the army by Mai Idriss Aloomo enabled the domination over a vast territory to obtain tributes from conquered regions. Nonetheless, facing Tuareg and Tubu incursions from the north during the 18th century the empire gradually lost its grip on territories in the desert and on the eastern side of Lake Chad.¹⁰

One of the largest threats came in 1808 when the jihad proclaimed by Osman dan Fodio tried to conquer Borno to integrate it within the Sokoto Caliphate. This largely Fulani invasion followed an 18th-century demographic expansion on the western marches of Borno. After a defeat and the destruction of the capital, Birni Gazagarmo, Mohammed El Kanemi, a learned man from Kanem, organized the defense of the empire and won a military, diplomatic, and religious battle against Osman dan Fodio. Indeed, in his correspondence with the Sultan of Sokoto, El Kanemi proved that there was no reason to pursue jihad in Borno since its inhabitants practiced a pure form of Islam. El Kanemi, who was subsequently called Shehu of Borno, managed to establish his power and founded a new capital in Kukawa in 1814.

⁷ Tijani K. "The Dynamics OF Administrative Change in pre-Colonial Borno: A comparative study of the Sayfawa Period with That of Shaykh Muhammed al-Amin al-Kanemi" phd thesis 1980p 68

⁸: A comparative study of the Sayfawa Period with That of Shaykh Muhammed al-Amin al-Kanemi" PhD thesis 1980p 70

⁹ Tijani K. "The Dynamics OF Administrative Change in pre-Colonial Borno

¹⁰ Vincent H. "Kanem-Bornu" kings College London p.7

However, the nature of his power seems uncertain as the Sayfawas were not supplanted before 1846-1996. The dynasty which took power in the 11th century was then ended by Umar, the son of Mohammed El Kanemi, in 1846. These events are relatively well known because of narratives written by European travelers in the 19th century such as Dixon Denham, Hugh Clapperton, Heinrich Barth, and Gustav Nachtigal.¹¹

Military Organization and Recruitment of Kanem Borno

The Kaigama was the commander in chief of the Borno army and he was responsible for the general organization and command of the troops (askerwa). The origin of the title is not clear but almost certainly it was in existence before the establishment of the second Sefawa Dynasty. Prior to the restoration of peace and order under Mai Ali Gaji, the Kaigama had extremely wide power and seemed to be in a position to depose Mai himself. However, it seems that there had been a tremendous limitation to the Kaigama's powers as a result of the administrative reform of Mai Ali Gaji. First many traditional accounts maintain that the office of the Kaigama was first given to a person of slave origin so that the Mai could secure his absolute loyalty. Secondly, all members of the army recognized Mai as the supreme head of the army and the Kaigama only served as an intermediary between them and the Mai. The subordinate status of Kaigama was shown when he paid his allegiance to the Mai in the presence of all soldiers in a great ceremony (tawur) before leaving for the battlefield.¹²

The Kaigama in his task of organization of the army was closely assisted by the Zarmas who were responsible for the organization of various regiments. Traditions refer to the "twelve flag bearers" (alamgu megu indin) or as Koelle noted (alam megu nduri Maibe) who were the regimental commanders but it seems that all the Zannas had their military function to perform and it is therefore possible that there could have been more than twelve regimental commanders. Among the members of the Mai Council, the Mainin Kenandii and the waziri are accompanied army. But the Talba according to tradition remained in the capital and acted on behalf of the Mai. Many of the princes were also expected to join the army.¹³

There were fief holders who dealt with administration in Borno and the military recruitment. The most important function of the fief holders was to raise troops for the state army at the request of the central government. Most of the able-bodied men were recruited into the army in cases of emergency. In carrying out these functions successfully there was an intense co-ordination of effort and delegation of authority.¹⁴

The Kaigama on behalf of the Mai of Borno delegated some authorities (Cima Kura, Cima Gana, Zanna and Zarma) in different parts of the empire to recruit able-bodied men into the army. There seems to have a standing army in the capital comprising the military officers mentioned and their followers- the waladi- and other bodyguards who had no title but they were members of the Koguna group. The officers themselves had a large number of followers who while recognizing the nearest authorities of their masters also gave their absolute loyalty to the Mai.¹⁵

However, in the case of emergency, the general mobilization was carried out both in the capital and of course other parts of the state at the direction of the Mai at any time. But the frequency of wars particularly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries during which Borno

¹¹ Vincent H. "Kanem-Bornu" kings College London p.7

¹² Usman B \$ Alkali N."Studies In the History of Pre-colonial Borno" Northern Nigerian Publishing Company 1983 p.118

¹³ Usman B \$ Alkali N."Studies In The History of Pre-colonial Borno"

¹⁴ Usman B \$ Alkali N."Studies In The History of Pre-colonial Borno" Northern Nigerian Publishing Company 1983 p.116

¹⁵ Usman B \$ Alkali N."Studies In The History of Pre-colonial Borno"p.120

was an expansionist power must have made the task of recruitment a continuous exercise. The task of recruitment outside the capital as mentioned earlier, was the responsibility of the Cima Gana who received the order from his senior lord- the Cima Kura. Tradition does not regard the task of recruitment because there were always willing volunteers who were prepared to serve the army. There were several factors which made the task of recruitment much easier. first was that the local inhabitant area within the state could receive the necessary aid from the main army against their raiding neighbors therefore the spirit of collective action and voluntary service was very high among a majority of people throughout the kingdom. The other important factor in attracting more people to the army as might be expected was the desire for booty and materials gained in the battlefield. Thus, when the signal drum (tumbal) was beaten repeatedly in the Cima's residence hundreds of able-bodied people converged in the village where the first preparations were to begin. After the recruitment exercise the various leaders of the territorial unit converged on the capital followed by their recruits in procession. The only exceptional group were those recruited along the route through which the army was to pass. Those were to join the army as they passed along.¹⁶

In the capital, there seem to have been several activities which were equivalent to the training programs. The most important of these was the Barga a kind of dance in which all the soldiers participated. A special kind of dance which was only limited to the military officers- the Kaigama, the Zarmas and the Zannas- was known as the Asker both the Barga and the asker had several purposes the most important of which was to raise the morale of the army and make them acquainted with each other. War songs were sung, and praises made to the Mai and the great soldiers of the past. It gave the soldiers more courage and it also gave them a common identity.¹⁷

It is not known whether this training extended to the use of war weapons such as arrows (kenyige) battle axe (chonge) curved-edged shaped edged weapons (ngaliyar) shields (ngwaa). What seems clear is that most of those weapons were carried by the footmen. The horsemen were normally said to have carried spears (kazaa); a kind of harpoon (bellam), sword (kahagar) and shield. They must have trained themselves on how to handle these weapons.¹⁸

Throughout these training programs, the Mai hardly seems to have taken any part. The progress of the training and the recruitment were notified to him from time to time. Before the troops left the capital a great rehearsal of the army was arranged in a ceremony known as Bata and Tawur. It was at this stage that the Mai had the time to the organization and the strength of his army. The Kaigama assisted by the Zarma and other military officers arranged horsemen in line. Most traditional accounts maintain that the footmen who carried bows and arrows led the front line so that they could clear the way for the horsemen by attacking the first line of the enemy. Each of the lines was under the command of a military officer. It is not known whether the Zannas commanded a single line each but there is more ground to believe that there could be several lines under the command of the Zannas.¹⁹

It was after the organization of the army into their respective lines that the Kaigama came to swear his oath of allegiance to the Mai. Thus, he dismounted his horse with a bare head he

¹⁶ Usman B \$ Alkali N."Studies In The History of Pre-colonial Borno" Northern Nigerian Publishing Company 1983 p.120

¹⁷ Usman B \$ Alkali N."Studies In The History of Pre-colonial Borno" 121

¹⁸ Usman B \$ Alkali N."Studies In The History of Pre-colonial Borno"

¹⁹ Usman B \$ Alkali N."Studies In The History of Pre-colonial Borno" Northern Nigerian Publishing Company 1983 p.122

led his horse in front of the entire army. This last ceremony in which the Kaigama paid his allegiance to the Mai was known as the tawur and had two main purposes first was to emphasize the position of the Kaigama as a subordinate to the Mai before the audience of his troops, and for the Mai to confirm this fact. Secondly, by leading the procession he could demonstrate to the Mai the strength of his army and that the preparation of war had been completed.²⁰

The performance of a soldier the battlefield also determined one's appointment to a higher office in the Mai's administration. In short, a military expedition was an important factor in changes which might be introduced into the main administrative structure. This was also considering the likelihood of some officeholders losing their lives on the battlefield. Military organization was a part and parcel of the Borno political system and it was an important means by which the Mai's territory could be expanded. Therefore, the spirit of courage and determination always accompanied the ambitious soldier, which in turn added more force to the spirit of collective action for Mai's victory and the security of the empire.²¹

Demobilization of Kanem Bornu Army

Demobilization is the process of standing down the empire's soldiers from combat-ready status this may be as a result of a victory in war defeat or because a crisis has been peacefully resolved and military force will not be necessary.²²

As mentioned earlier the Kaigama was the chief of armed forces in Kanem Borno therefore, the Mai in conjunction with the Kaigama and his military assistance Zarma determines the size of the soldiers required for the country's security needs and consequently the number of the combatants to be demobilized and informed the Cimas (Cima Kura and Cima Gana). It is important to note that, the Kanem Borno had a standard army who were on standby on the battlefield all the time, and those soldiers were not touched. On the other hand, the soldiers that were recruited by the Cima Kura and Cima Gana were demobilized to return to their various districts after the war they were given some shares of booty gained from the battle for them to be productive citizens in their respective places.²³

Conclusion

In light of the foregoing, it has been established that the Kanem-Bornu Empire was one of the largest and strongest empires that existed in Africa and lasted for nearly 800 years, between the 11th and 19th centuries. The Empire became powerful by conquering its neighbors in war, this conquest was carried out using strong military force that consisted of cavalry and foot soldiers otherwise known as infantry. In buildings such as the heavily organized military power Kanem-Bornu Empire which was known for practicing an elaborate recruitment policy and system. This recruitment system was conducted through Kaigama who was the chief of the army. The Kaigama was assisted by Cima-Kura and Cima-Gana Who were the districts' officers. The Cima (cima kura and cima gana) were responsible for the local recruitment while the Kaigama was in charge of the general recruitment in the empire. During the recruitment, the Kaigama on behalf of the Mai made the general announcement for the recruitment. This allowed all able-bodied men to participate in the screening. After the screening, the qualified soldiers were moved to the city where they performed their final

²⁰ Usman B \$ Alkali N. "Studies In The History of Pre-colonial Borno"

²¹ Usman B \$ Alkali N. "Studies In The History of Pre-colonial Borno" Northern Nigerian Publishing Company 1983 p.122

²² The Dynamics of Administrative Change in Pre-colonial Borno 612

²³ The Dynamics of Administrative Change in Pre-colonial Borno 612

training before the Kaigama and the other military officers. This training exercise was called Barga. After the compilation of the training, the Kaigama took his oath of allegiance to the Mai and moved the army to the battlefield. However, after the war ended, the armies were demobilized after sharing some parts of the booties. The soldiers who were demobilized returned to their various villages with pride and honor for defending and expanding their empire and they were ready to be called if the need arose.

It is however critical that contemporarily given the insurgency in the area of study under research, the Nigerian security forces, especially the army can learn a thing or two about how pattern of recruitment policy and demobilization process in pre-colonial Borno empire can help in understanding the magnitude of the security challenges the army is grappling with and how essential lessons can be drawn to confront it. The entire North-Eastern region has been facing security challenges which varied manifestation which can be tackled expectedly with lessons gained from this empire.

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