

KABI KINGDOM AND HER NEIGHBORS' A HISTORY OF DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

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Abstract

The history of the Kabi kingdom featured an organized society with international connections. It reflects an African state with diplomatic ties with its neighbouring states. These diplomatic relations are occasionally cordial and sometimes the opposite, in the form of socio-political, economic and religious connections. The paper examined such diplomatic relations within the context of current global relations. It further confirmed the existence of a well-structured and organized political system in the African context before contact with the western world. Moreover, that relationship with the outside world (Western Europe) was established through such a structure before the gradual occupation of the kingdom and the caliphate. In essence, the paper argued that a careful study of African diplomatic relations will further complement existing political relations among the West African communities, notwithstanding their colonial historical background.

Keywords: Kabi kingdom, Diplomacy, Africa, Integration,

Introduction

The West Africa sub-region had witnessed the rise and fall of different kingdoms and empires, each with its peculiarities. From Ghana and Kanem-Bornu to Songhai Empire, each rose and collapsed and had its approach in its dealings with the neighboring states. In most cases, warfare has been at the forefront due to the quest for territorial expansion and acquisition. However, such acquired territories ended up contributing to the state's decline, allowing for a new one to emerge. This is usually reflected as a result of over expansion leading to inability of the empire or kingdom to control it versed areas as the case with Ghana and Oyo¹ Empires, or secession by a part of the empire or members of its military forces as the case with Songhai Empire. Sometimes a particular state or actor seizes the opportunity to secede against the state, thereby exercising its sovereignty against the mother state. This was the case of the Kabi kingdom, as widely suggested. The research explored the emergence of the Kabi kingdom and its diplomatic relations with the surrounding or existing states within the region. It reflects studies on diplomatic history in Western Sudan and; the relation between and among African states in the pre-colonial period. The aim is to showcase diplomatic relations between or among states that have defined their long-time relations. Though an Islamic state, unlike Mali and Songhai empires, the Kabi kingdom has shifted its focus on primary warfare considering the background of its establishment. As such,

¹ See Atanda J.A., The Fall of the Oyo Empire: A Reconsideration of its Cause, Journal o the Historical Society of Nigeria, vol. 5, no. 4, 1971, pp. 477, <http://www.jstore.org/stable/418569879>. accessed 09/03/2023

most of the years were spent on the defensive against Songhai Empire and as the ambition of bringing the Hausa states under a single leadership.

Despite the engagements in military warfare by the kingdom, such diplomatic relations further showcases cordial relations between the kingdom and her neighbors, especially the Hausa states. This occurred in different ways and manners, including socio-political, economic and religious relations. Therefore, the research explored such diplomatic ties between the kingdom and its neighbors. This will further illuminate our understanding of the pre-colonial history of Western Sudan, as noted by Bunza².

Historical background

The kingdom's formation was undoubtedly subjected to the political influence of migratory peoples, specifically, the arrival of Muhammad Kanta. Before the emergence of this remarkable figure, there were already in existence factors of the state formation process, notably social and political systems, as well as warfare as a means of territorial control and expansion operating in the region. The most significant example was the Leka area, whose political head was *magaji*³. In the Gazetteer of the Sokoto Province, Arnett compiled the list of five kings preceding the greatest Kanta⁴. What Kanta did when he emerged was to facilitate the completion of its state formation process and influence the changing pattern of socio-political institutions supporting it. This personality (Kanta) was significantly instrumental in building the political system and introducing matrilineal succession, with Kanta's title as the kingdom's political head. Before the fall of Surame in 1722, the ruling class in *KasarKabi* was known as 'The Lekawa'⁵.

In establishing Songhai's rule over Kabi, Muhammad Kanta was recruited as a lieutenant in the army of Askia and as his representative in Leka. He rose, conquered and politically united the communities to form the new state. Most important was that the establishment of the Songhai rule over Kabi had given the latter a golden chance to rise into a powerful state and assumed a new importance in Hausaland when it declared its independence in 1515. On one occasion, he participated along with other Songhai's war-commanders to fight against Ahir around 1515, in which the Askia's forces won. However, the issue of the dividing of war spoils rebelled against his Imperial Master and declared the independence of Kabi. Songhai did a lot to return Kabi as its tributary and deal with Kanta militarily but failed. According to Ifemesia, Kanta's defeat of the Songhai's forces was a military achievement which remains the most cherished tradition of the Kabawa⁶.

In due course, Kanta and the Kabawa entered a period of significant military growth to become the most potent force in Hausaland for their total conquest and other territorial achievements. This was in line with the Kanta's ambition of establishing an empire similar to that of Songhai and Bornu. He changed the fortunes of the Kabawa into a warring people, empire builders and strong defenders of their territory during the 16th century. The great Kanta was able to succeed due to the military support he could get from his people who came to the Leka area. Those who cooperated with him also benefited from military activities politically and economically. The reputations Kanta and Kabi kingdoms acquired symbolized political power, war leadership, imperial building, and prosperity to have flourished in Hausaland between the 16th and 17th centuries. This nature of the kingdom explains why the jihadist experienced severe resistance in

² See Bunza M.U., Intellectual factor in African diplomatic history: Sokoto and Borno sultanates, 1786-1817, vol.2, no.3, 2018

³ Alkali, M. B. (1969) "A Hausa Community in Crisis: Kabi in the 19th c." M.A. History Dissertation, ABU Zaria, p. 48 also Augi, A.R. (1984) "The Gobir Factor in the Social and Political History of the Rima Basin, c. 1650-1808 AD" PhD History Thesis, ABU Zaria,

⁴ Arnett, E.J. (1920) Gazetteer of Sokoto Province, London, Waterlow & Sons Limited, p.14.

⁵ Muri, A. (2003) "The Defense Policy of the Sokoto Caliphate, 1804-1903" PhD History Thesis, Usmanu Danfodiyo University Sokoto, p. 19

⁶ Ifemesia, C.C. (1965) "States of Central Sudan; (i) Kanem-Borno, (ii) the Hausa States" in J.F.A. Ajayi and Espie, I, A Thousand Years of West African History, Ibadan, Ibadan University Press, p.101

the 19th century, despite their several attempts⁷. Muhammad Bello in *Infaq-al-Maisur* attesting to the greatness of the kingdom, Muhammad Bello noted "His kingdom was well established in Hausaland and no other kingdom in this land was greater than it in the past. Their kinds of monuments (that remain) have never been seen in this region whereas a hundred years have passed since the ruination of the kingdom⁸.

The Kabi kingdom lies east of Dendi, between the Zabarma and Hausa, and its people, according to tradition, are a mixture of the two; the people of Kabi descended from a Katsina mother and a Songhai father⁹. Before the emergence of the Sokoto Caliphate in the 19th century, most of the landmass was dominated by the powerful kingdom of Kabi, as affirmed by Anene & Brown¹⁰ and was carved out of the Songhai Empire by Kanta Muhammad, which includes the two confederations of Yauri and Zuru. Besides, the heartlands of Kabi, which lie to the west of Sokoto, fall between the lands bordering the Niger, inhabited by the Songhai-speaking Dendawa (Dendi) and the Hausa-speaking territories of Zamfara and Katsina. Muhammad Bello presents the Kabawa as a mixed Hausa-Songhai people¹¹, and to this day, the *taubashi* or tribal "cousinship" between them and the Katsinawa is maintained¹².

According to Muhammad Bello, the people of Kabi descended from a Katsina mother and a Songhai father. In the time of Sunni 'Ali (1464), there were, in this area that had fallen under Songhai control, clan chiefs (magaji) whom an immigrant soon eclipsed from Katsina-Muhammadu Kanta¹³. He was a great military leader who became the master of this province of the Songhai Empire, whose army he joined. On his return from the campaign against the Sultan of Agades, discontented with his share of the spoils, he broke away and encouraged resistance to Songhai by building a series of fortifications culminating in the fortress of Birnin Kabi; he founded the nation-state of Kabi.

He seized Air (Agades) from Songhai control. According to Muhammad Bello, he conquered the whole of Hausaland and parts of Bornu and invaded southwards as far as Nupe. All these exploits did not result in a centralized empire but a network of tributary territories. In the sixteenth century, Kabi was a great power counterbalancing Songhai in the west and Bornu in the east. Bornu was crushed when it attempted to subdue Kabi, but Kanta died on his return from a victorious campaign as a result of a wound sustained in another combat at Dugul in Kastina territory¹⁴. The Hausa states then shook off the yoke and helped Agades to free itself. Kabi reverted to its previous status of a local kingdom.

Furthermore, the kingdom's influence extends to Daura, the borders of Zaria, Yawuri, Nupe, Nguru in Bornu, Oyo, Ibadan, Arewa, Ahir, Gobir and Zamfara, all incorporated into the Kingdom¹⁵. This was achieved considering the able leadership Kabi kingdom enjoyed during Kanta himself¹⁶. In fact the beginning of the 16th century, Kanta Mohammad built an army and succeeded in

⁷Smith, Michael Garfield. Government in Kano 1350–1950. Routledge, 2021, p.3

⁸Yusuf, S. (2013) A History of Islam, Scholarship and Revivalism in Western Sudan; Being an Annotated Translation with Introduction of Infaq al-Maisur Fi Tarikh Bilad al-Tekrur of Sultan Muhammad Bello bin Fodio, Zaria, Tamaza, pp. 81-82

⁹ See Trimingham, J. S., A History of Islam in West Africa, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1962.

¹⁰ Anene, J. C., & Brown, G. (1966). African in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, Cambridge University Press, London

¹¹Hogben, Sidney John, and Anthony Hamilton Millard Kirk-Greene. The Emirates of Northern Nigeria: A preliminary survey of their historical traditions. London (England): Oxford University Press, 1966.

¹² Adeleye, R.A. (1973) "Hausaland and Borno 1600-1800" in J.F.A. Ajayi and M. Crowder, (eds.) History of West Africa, Volume One Second Edition, London, Longman

¹³Niane, Djibril Tamsir, and Joseph Ki-Zerbo, eds. UNESCO General History of Africa, Vol. IV, Abridged Edition: Africa from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Century. Vol. 4. Univ. of California Press, 1998, p. 109

¹⁴ Harris, P. G., Sokoto Provincial Gazetteer, 1966

¹⁵ Olagunju, A., International Fishing and Cultural Festival, Art Heritage, London, 2010 Ltd, in Mamoudou, S., Economic and Political Factor of Songhay Empire the Emergence of Kabi

Kingdom Nigeria, c.1500s. Open Journal of Social Sciences, 2021, 9, 332-345, <https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2021.94026>

¹⁶ Arnett, E.J., Gazetteer of Sokoto Province, London, Waterlow & Sons Limited, 1920.

overrunning many western Hausa States and rendering them tributary. This could mean to be an effort to a Hausa empire by the Kanta which was halted by his sudden death.

Kanta's reputation as a ruler equals his fame as a war leader made him a prolific city builder. He used tributary labor to build imposing centers like Surame, Gungu and Leka, the ruins of which still exist. Surame which served the earlier capital of the kingdom, was almost impregnable, being surrounded by a mortal and seven concentric mud and stone walls; Gungu on the other hand, was a garrison town from which a large section of the enormous army he has could easily control invaders and secure the state; and Leka, served a royal territory for holidays. Kanta, therefore, played an active role in the governance of the state and is said to have possessed a copper sheathed powered by fifty paddlers, enabling him to tour Kabi during the rainy season.

Diplomatic Relations

Diplomacy is the art of obtaining agreement between countries that need to cooperate to produce results in which each has an interest. Conventionally equated with negotiation to resolve conflict, Diplomacy is widely regarded as an alternative to war—and war as a failure of Diplomacy¹⁷. Furthermore, Diplomacy can be defined as the conduct of international relations by negotiation and dialog or by any other means to promote peaceful relations among states. More comprehensively, Diplomacy is also a set of practices, institutions, and discourses crucial for the basic understanding of the historical evolution of the international system and its evolving functional and normative needs¹⁸. This implies that diplomatic relations are aimed at establishing cordial relations between different states to have a lasting effect on their relations. In the case of the Kabi kingdom, though it featured warfare as the driving force behind its establishment and defining most of its relations with her neighboring states. There is evidence of such diplomatic ties of relation with the surrounding states of the Hausaland and, by extension, the Songhai and Kanem Bornu empires.

Furthermore, it is a reflection of the practice of Diplomacy in the political terrain of western Sudan, not only warfare but also many reasons to live or relate peacefully. Importantly is to note the critical role the Kingdom played in the region, safeguarding the Hausa states in the western axis against the Songhai Empire's aggressions and the east against the Bornu Empire. This was further confirmed by a source on the division of responsibility among the Hausa states.

Having seceded from the Songhai Empire, Kanta consolidated his powers in the region and had a formidable army to stand by him, knowing fully that Songhai would attempt to win back such territory. It occurred, but Kanta resisted all attempts to attack or defeat his army. Gradually, diplomatic relations were established between Songhai and the states established by Kanta. Thus Hunwick noted that "in 1553, a dispute between Askia Dawud and the Kanta, but this was settled peacefully (*istalaha*) in the following year"¹⁹. This implies that after this, cordial relations were maintained between the two states to the extent that Kabi assisted Songhai with military forces against the Moroccan forces. Hunwick further suggested this in consideration of the head of Pasha Mahmud, which was sent to Kanta²⁰. Furthermore, by the 1550s Kabi kingdom remained influential, and its relations with the Songhai Empire remained peaceful.

In the case the neighboring Yauri, the Kanta was said to have had some sort of agreements with her to have safe passage (trade route) to Nupeland²¹. This was said to have been achieved as

¹⁷ S. Brown, Diplomacy, in International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences, 2021, pp. 3695-3697

¹⁸ Noé Cornago, *Structural Dimensions*, in *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace, & Conflict*, vol.3, 2022, pp. 562-568

¹⁹ Hunwick, J. O. (1971). A LITTLE-KNOWN DIPLOMATIC EPISODE IN THE HISTORY OF KABI (c.1594). *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 5(4), p.575. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41856885>

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.577

²¹ Adamu, M., "The Hausa Government in Decline: Yauri in the Nineteenth century", M.A. Dissertation, Zaria, Ahmadu Bello University, 1968, P. 60.

However, there was no reported case of waging wars between the two states even during Kanta's time but in return, Kanta agreed not to attack Yauri²². On the other hand, accounts from Yauri were said to have led an expedition to Kabi and succeeded in entering the capital after defeating Kabi army at a certain battle fought outside the town. The Yauri army grabbed one of the doors of the city gates as evidence of their war victory over Kabi, yet the later traditions' remained silent on this development.²³ The relations continued with Yauri becoming more stronger that in the 18th century, the king gave asylum to one of the Kabi Kings Muhammadu Dangiwa (1700-1717). Furthermore, from the 19th century, there was influx of *Sarkawa* tribe into the tribe into Yauri kingdom who were felt to fishermen from the Argungu emirate. These cordial relations continued to be maintained between both kingdoms. They were not prevented from living in various parts of Yauriland. The vast majority of them have even succeeded in establishing their strongholds in Ngaski District, where they founded their own villages and towns like Tungan Haladu, Tungan Mairuwa, Bakari, Wawu and others, in the middle of the 20th century²⁴.

The influence of the Kabi kingdom stretched to many parts of Hausaland up to Zaria; the records of some states have not featured Kanta in their chronicles. This signifies that cordial relations were established or their military has denied him easy access to those states. For instance, Kano and Katsina chronicle. Furthermore, the principal channel for the influences of Bornu was Kano, while Kabi under Kanta took the lead in the Hausa counter-attack, even liberating some Hausa city-states from Bornu's tutelage²⁵. This indicates the diplomatic ties the kingdom has with the Hausa states, even though receiving tributaries from some of them. However, the kingdom provided security backup against external threats, which at the moment was the Born Empire that concurrently raided parts of the Hausaland. This was the case with its relations with many Hausa and non-Hausa states during its years of flourishing until the 19th century when its powers weakened, though the jihadist could not defeat the people of Kabi. To further ensure peaceful coexistence with most state under its influence, Kabi kingdom allowed for self rule just like the norm with many Sudan empires; the Zarma and Hausa chiefs were left in control of their people with the exception of part of Zamfara, Adar, and Wangara which were absorbed into his personal State and domain²⁶.

The geographical and strategical location of the Kabi kingdom provided it with the opportunity for economic development and prosperity. This further influenced its development of strong military hold of the kingdom and expansionist policies. For instance, it is noted that the economy of the powerful state had prospered to a large extent especially during the period of Muhammadu Kanta. This was as a result of the huge tributes brought to the Kingdom. Such tributes further permitted for military prowess to the control of trade routes from many directions and had warranted territorial expansions. The economic prosperity similarly, created an increase in the volume of trade around Niger, Gulbin Kabi and Gulbin Rima. The rise of the kingdom into a military power had provided security to the Kabawa who in turn increased their economic activities, especially farming and fishing²⁷.

Conclusion

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ A.I. Yandaki, M.U. Bunza and Mansur Abubakar Wara, Yauri and Her Neighbours, in A.I. Yandaki, H.M. Maishanu and M.U. Bunza (eds), Hausa Presence in the Waters of the Niger; A History of Yauri Kingdom From 1411 up to its Emirate Status – 2014, p.100

²⁵ Niane, Djibril Tamsir, and Joseph Ki-Zerbo, eds. UNESCO General History of Africa, Vol. IV..., p. 110

²⁶ Mamoudou, S., Economic and Political Factor of Songhay Empire the Emergence of Kabi..., p.344

²⁷ NuraAliyu and Jamilu Shehu, A Re-assessment of Warfare System in *KasarKabi* (Kabi) since 1515, A paper presented at the 2nd National Conference organized by Faculty of Arts and Islamic Studies (FAIS) Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto on the theme: *History, People, Religion and Culture of Kabi (Kabi) Kingdom since 1515* held between 10th and 12th July, 2017

Western Sudan witnessed the rise and fall of many kingdoms and empires, from Ghana and Kanem Bornu to Songhai Empire. Each seizes the slightest opportunity to assert its freedom and even rise to prominence, thereby establishing its dominance against the weaker states around it. This was the case with the Kabi kingdom; the efforts of Muhammadu Kanta and his military might through the Songhai Empire has played an important role in the kingdom's emergence. This military might and motive shaped the empire's future in its pursuit of expansion and consolidation within the sub-region. However, with this in mind, the kingdom established a cordial diplomatic relationship with the Hausa states and the Songhai Empire. The study concludes that diplomacy was very important in defining the relationship between Kabi kingdom and its neighbors. This further implies that the present state of affairs among the West African countries can quickly be resolved or achieved, thereby enhancing the socio-political and economic ties among the region. And that war or military might is not necessarily the first point of interstates relationships.

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