there is no evidence presented that she questioned the morality of the trading of humans, only that she insisted on her right, as queen, to control it. The most cynical interpretation of her life is that her famed resistance was only to the assault on her absolute authority over her own people. Heywood makes no such interpretations, presenting her subject’s well-documented complexity in full view, without hagiography or judgement.

Heather Jordan, Independent Researcher


For nearly a millennium, Borno and its eastern extension called Kanem was the economic and political center of an empire built on the control of the trans-Saharan commercial networks that linked the Sahel to the Mediterranean. Conquered in the 19th century, Borno has since then become a remote periphery, most famously known for hosting one of the bloodiest insurgencies of the world. A History of Borno draws out this paradox to trace the evolution of this pre-colonial state, from the Fulani jihad in 1804 until the year 2010.

The chapter that covers the 19th century is by far the most stimulating of the book but also the most problematic. The author challenges Jeffrey Herbst’s thesis according to which African pre-colonial states adopted a non-territorial model of power because the cost of expanding power from the capital combined with military weakness and the absence of a decentralized political apparatus made the control over territory impossible. For the author of A History of Borno, by contrast, the case of Borno shows that some pre-colonial states exercised territorial control over their hinterland and maintained well-defined boundaries, in a similar way to Westphalian states. “Borno was a bounded territory with a codified relationship with its vassal states,” the author argues (p. 14).

Hiribarren provides a number of historical arguments that makes this thesis difficult to defend, recognizing himself that “we still do not know what extent [19th century Borno leader] El-Kanemi actually dominated the whole territory of Borno after the Fulani jihad” (p. 24). Far from mastering its borders, Borno maintained ill-defined peripheries where the empire could episodically raid slaves if the population was pagan, as in many other peripheral regions in Western Africa, such as the Bandiagara Cliff and Hombori Mountains in today’s Mali. Far from ensuring territorial control over its hinterland, Borno also relied on a person-based system to control its population, a property that Muhammad El-Kanemi did not call into question when he supplanted the Sufaywa dynasty that had ruled over Borno since 1380. Similar strategies were developed by pre-colonial states in other parts of Western Africa, where so small a population was scattered over so vast an area. Finally, unlike the European nation-states Borno did not define itself as an ethnic nation but as a Muslim community, which caused many embarrassments to the Jihadist Fulani of Sokoto when they attacked Borno at the beginning of the 19th century. This can be said of many political entities for which the European-inspired concept of nation was not relevant until the 20th century. In sum, Borno may be understudied but no different from many pre-colonial states that, from the Senegal River valley to Kanem, have flourished in the Sahel-Sahara.
The intention of the following chapters is to propose a detailed analysis of the historical circumstances that led to the delineation of the borders between the colonies of the United Kingdom, France, and Germany around Lake Chad. As in the Hausa country, Borno reminds us that West African borders of colonial origin were not always arbitrarily drawn from London, Paris, or Berlin. A History of Borno provides a very interesting account of the manner in which the colonial powers seized Borno and shows in detail how the European treaties had to confront the reality of an immense region and negotiated borderlines locally. The book also provides a detailed analysis of how Borno progressively became a provincial state within colonial Nigeria. The author highlights the durability of the historical boundaries of Borno, as well as the steps leading to the division between Nigeria and Cameroon during the late 1950s.

The book deals only very marginally with Boko Haram, a perfectly justified choice insofar as Boko Haram has been the subject of many other specialized works in recent years. More surprising, however, is the fact that the trans-Saharan dimension of Borno is largely absent from the book, despite its subtitle Trans-Saharan African Empire. The author argues that Borno’s wealth came from taxes levied on its territory, without explaining that Borno owed its longevity to its unique control of the central road that connected both shores of the Sahara through the Fezzan. In the one hundred pages of notes and bibliography, the reader will find several references to the work of historians of African pre-colonial space, such as Paul Nugent and Allen Howard, but no reference to the geographers inspired by Jean Gallais, whose “mobile” approach of the Sahelian space originated from a region very close to Borno, the Nigerien Koutous.

In conclusion, the book is a valuable addition to the understudied Borno that will appeal to historians, geographers and political scientists working on the territorial nature of power in Africa. Those studying relational forms of power as well as social and trade networks across the region will be left wanting.

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Much ink has been spilled on Timbuktu’s collections of rare Arabic manuscripts. The celebration of the historic Malian city in the popular imagination might have led to sheer fascination about the materiality of its so-called “magic scrolls.” In Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa, Ousmane Kane takes the symbolism of the historic city as his point of departure as he charts the transformations of the Arabic-Islamic tradition of learning in the region and its enduring, multifaceted role today. Timbuktu’s libraries have often been seen as the unique hard evidence of a long ignored pre-colonial African literary past. In fact, Kane argues, it was but one of a network of centers of Islamic learning that flourished in pre-colonial Africa before and indeed well after the old city’s intellectual decline in the second half of the seventeenth century.

Beyond Timbuktu is as much a careful overview of the contribution of African Muslims to the Islamic library as it is an exploration of the role of Islam in African societies, past and present. Drawing on a dense bibliography, it synthesizes rather creatively decades of