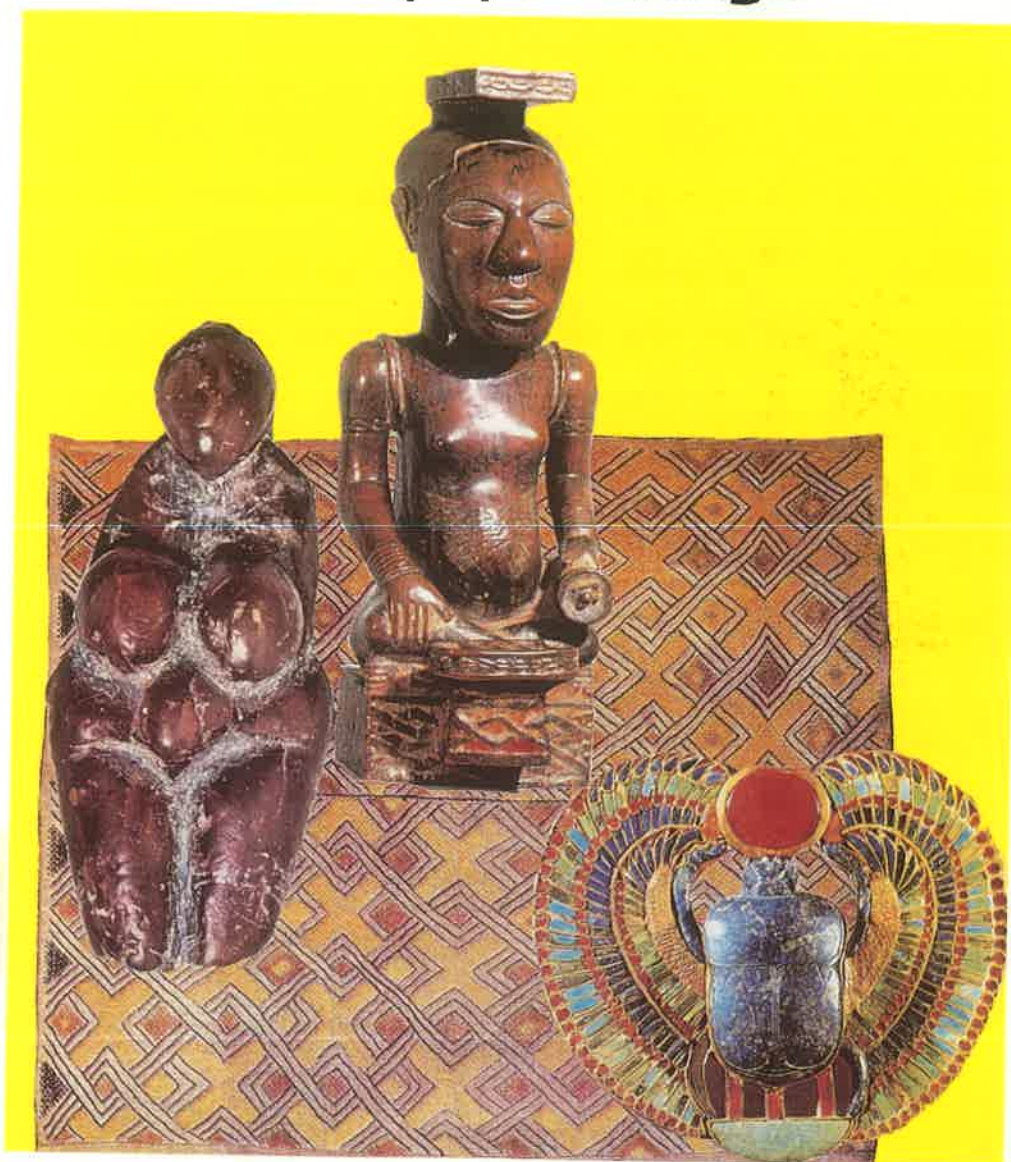


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Readings in OLONIAL CENTRAL AFRICA

Théophile Obenga



Texts & Documents

Internal and External Politics of Idris Alaoma (Barth, 1851)

The 16th century constitutes one of the most remarkable periods in the history of Borno. In effect, while in western Nigritia the great kingdom of Songhai was disintegrating before being subsequently conquered by Moulai (Moulay) Hamed, Emperor of Morocco,⁴ the kingdom of Borno, on the contrary was attaining the height of greatness and power under the leadership of a series of energetic kings...

The most remarkable king during this period is Edriss Amsami or Alaoma as he is commonly referred to after the place he was buried, Alao (1571-1603), or 979-1011 of the Hegira). This king was quite lucky to have as his *imam*⁵ Ahmed Ben Fourtoua, or Ben Sofia, a competent and reliable historian whose chronicles have survived the Saifoua dynasty. Unfortunately, these chronicles embrace only the first twelve years of his reign, such that we know nothing of the twenty-one years that followed which could not have been less eventful. Imam Ahmed probably composed a part of his chronicles in the year 990 or 991 of the Hegira, in the capital Ghasr Eggomo. The rest, dealing with expeditions in Kanem carried out in the course of the same twelve years, was written later.

Edriss Alaoma appears to have mounted the throne after a brief regency by his mother, the famous Aaischa, nicknamed Kel Eghrarmaran. Ordinarily, the queen-mother (*magera*, *magira*) had a great influence in Borno, but Aaischa, more than all others, was considered among the Kanori (Kanuri) as the ideal of the perfect woman. This is why they refer to her also as *mai kamobe* or the queen of women.

One of the first acts of Edriss Alaoma's government was to send an emissary to Tripoli with the aim of ensuring the freedom of Borno's commercial relations with that city, a vital issue for Borno kingdom... It

was also around this period that a large caravan of Arab horses arrived from the North.

With respect to the internal affairs in Borno, Edriss Alaoma's major objective appears to have been to overthrow and even to destroy the heterogenous elements that together formed the kingdom's population. He is seen pursuing this policy with firmness and unrelenting logic. First of all, he turned against the So or Soi (Sao) who owned vast stretches of land and numerous settlements very near the major colonies of the Kanori (Kanuri), and intended to maintain to a large extent their national independence. Their strongholds were sacked, the inhabitants were executed or taken captive and what was left was dispersed. After making his power felt by the pagan populations of the east, he faced the opposite side, towards the province of Kano. A number of strongholds, recently built by the Kanaoua, were sacked and the rock Dala, the primeval core of the city of Kano, was the only thing that resisted the aggression. After the humiliation of the Kanaoua, came that of the Tuareg (Imoscharh) or Berbers, who lived in the north-west of the country. In three military expeditions, Edriss broke the entire force of these diverse tribes as well as that of the Berbers of Air, and took it upon himself to consolidate the independence of the Teda or Tebu, whose territory was of great importance to him as the link between Borno and the mediterranean coast. It is noteworthy that on this occasion, he spent a long time in Bilma, the important centre of export for the salt trade.

From the north and north-west, Edriss once again turned his victorious army against the pagan populations living in the east and south of the kingdom. The king of the Marghi was obliged to go to the capital of the victorious king to cover his head with ash as a sign of humility. The king of the Mandara or Wandala, whom they had hunted down, was brought back by force of arms, and the bellicose tribe of Tetala or Telala, who lived in the environs of Lake Chad and its islands (apparently today's Yedina or Buduma), was attacked on its own

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terrain with a fleet and was pushed back to the marshes of Lake Chad. Many other tribes experienced the powerful hand of this energetic king who, in the middle of all these wars, had only one year of rest which he used for a pilgrimage to Mecca.

In spite of all these wars and distant exploits, the Kanori (Kanuri) hero increased, in the words of the chronicle, "the prosperity of the kingdom and wealth of the cities". Thus he embellished his Ghasr Eggomo palace by introducing a more solid architectural style there; and from all indications, the use of baked bricks, whose interesting debris are found in Birni as well as in Ghambarru, should be attributed to him.

From all that we know about him, Edriss Alaoma appears to have embodied all the qualities that make a king remarkable. We find in him military strength going with humaneness and a deep sense of judgement, personal courage married to foresight and patience, force going with piety.

H. Barth, *Voyages et découvertes dans l'Afrique septentrionale et centrale*, Paris, 1860, Vol.II, pp. 103-108.