

THE AL- KANIMIYYIN SHEHUS: A WORKING CHRONOLOGY

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It is one of the paradoxes of the history of the states of the Central Sudan that Borno, the state with the longest tradition of Islamic literacy should have such an ill-established chronology - especially for the nineteenth century - when compared with its neighbours. For that later period Sokoto, Zaria and Kano have lists accurate not only to the year, but to the month and to the day. In Borno we are often lucky to have agreement to the year! Another strange feature of the chronology of Borno is that no kinglist has been published, no list with regnal years, such as is known from other states. I know of no list in or translated from Arabic such as we have for the earlier Saifawa period. Most of the lists were published early in the colonial period. The authors all base their dating upon what they regarded as the fixed certain date for the death of Shehu Muhammad al-Amin al-Kanemi in 1835. They took this date from the traveller Henry Barth, however Barth was a careful man. He wrote 'Mohammed el Kanemi died in 1835', but he then made an important qualification 'The exact date I cannot find at present'. Most subsequent writers have taken 1835 as fact and have ignored the qualification. Again, as we shall see, the advent of Rabih is confidently advanced as 1893. This is indeed the date of his invasion of Borno, but many of the events took place early in 1894.

Our problems are compounded by the fact that every known list is presented in the Christian solar calendar and there is no way in which we can be certain that the original material has been correctly converted from the Muslim lunar calendar. In the paper that follows I have attempted to establish a chronology based primarily upon Arabic sources and upon the Muslim calendar. These sources include state seals which usually are engraved with the date of the year of accession; mahrams, charters, or grants of privilege, or rather renewal of such grants by newly appointed leaders. It was the practice for owners of such documents to have them renewed at the beginning of a new reign. When attempting to date events connected with the eclipse of the al-Kanimiyyin and the advent of Rabih I have also made use of evidence relating to the seasons and to various meteorological conditions.

The Fullata Wars and the Rise of al-Kanimi

This is not the place to go into a detailed account of Borno in the nineteenth century, suffice to remind readers that the jihad launched by Shehu Uthman dan Fodio in western Hausaland in 1804 had spread, as the Fullata war, to Borno by 1807. The Sultans, the Saifawa Mais, had been driven from their capital Birni Gazargamu, and much of metropolitan Borno had fallen into the hands of the Fulani jihadists or Fullata. The Mai's attention was drawn to a scholar of international experience, al-Hajj Muhammad al-Amin b. Muhammad Ninga al-Kanimi recently returned from the Holy Places.

Muhammad al-Amin, also known as al-Kanimi, Lamino or as the Shehu, was born in 1189/1775-6. His father took him to study in Birni Gazargamu where they stayed in the house of Imam Abd al-Qadir. The young Lamino accompanied his father on the Hajj in the early 1790's and he returned to the Tchad region c 1803 by way of Wadai. He settled in Ngala c 1805 where he was given a daughter by Mai Ngala. He was in correspondence with Iman Yusuf b. Abd al-Qadir in the Birni, and his child by his new wife was named for and given to the Iman to raise as Abba Yusuf. Undoubtedly, it was Yusuf who advised the Mai to call Lamino to aid him against the Fullata. Lamino came with a following raised by his students and from his own Kanembu kinsmen. The Fullata were driven away and the Mai restored. After the third restoration Lamino persuaded the Mai to settle in a new capital, Birni Kabela not far from his own new base of Angorno. He had been rewarded lavishly, and by then controlled the greater part of the metropolitan territories still held by the Saifawa. While the Bani Saif continued as nominal rulers of Borno until 1840, Lamino al-Kanimi dated his rule in Borno from Ramadan 1224/10 Oct-8 Nov 1809. He took the title Shaykh or Shehu c 1814, but surprisingly he only had a seal engraved - and dated - in 1237/1821-22. I say surprisingly as it was the practice to have a seal engraved and incorporating the date of the year of taking power. However, al-Kanimi's action even so late as 1237 was an innovation as it would appear that the Saifawa did not use seals as such.

The death of Shehu Muhammad al-Amin and the accession of his son Shehu Umar

As we observed earlier, for far too long we have blindly accepted 1835 as the year of the death of Muhammad al-Amin. Even after the late Abdullahi Smith published a note in 1962 pointing out that this was incorrect Hogben and Kirk-Greene and others continued to accept the earlier date. Even after Brenner, first in his thesis and then in his book, had provided further evidence to support 1837 as the year in question, we

still find 1835 appearing in published works and in the accounts of knowledgeable local historians.

Smith drew his information from an elegy (Ibadan Arabic Mss 82/66) written soon after the death of al-Kanimi by his boyhood friend and later advisor Imam Yusuf b. Abd al-Qadir, a descendent of the proselytiser of Kanim Muhammad b. Mani. The elegy or poem survived in several versions some giving the year of death in the form of a chronogram, others giving only the month and the day. The Ibadan version gave SH-N-J-R which is the equivalent of 1237. The further information is that the death occurred in the month of the Prophet's birthday, mawlid al-nabi, which is Rabi al-awwal. The Ms that I was able to make use of provides the information that the death occurred soon after the last evening prayer on the 4th of that month, that is Thursday, 8th June, 1837. If this were not enough, similar information is to be found in a note on the death, of al-Kanimi, prepared by Iman Abd al Rahman b. Muhammad for Shehu Abubakr Garbai, early in the present century. There is also extant a letter from Shehu Umar to his Aunt Ruggayya condoling her on the death of her brother dated 1253/1837. Finally Shehu Umar's seal is dated 1253/1837. The evidence I think, is irrefutable.

Shehu Umar faced some challenge both from among his father's associates and from the puppet Saifawa, but neither group posed a serious threat and he quickly took power.

The coup of Shehu Abd al-Rahman b. Muhammad al-Amin

Abd al Raman seized power from his brother Umar in a *coup d'état* 'in the winter of 1853' according to Henry Barth. Now of course, there is no winter in the European sense in Borno. Barth., in his *Central African Vocabularies*, refers only to three seasons of the year. Nachtigal entitles a chapter 'Winter in Kukawa', but it would appear that 'winter' is used here in the European sense. When he discusses the climate of Borno, he speaks only of the three seasons: 'the rainy season, *ningeli*, which comprises June, July, August and September; the cool season, *binem*, with October, November, December and January; and the dry warm season, *be*, to which belong the other months. The matter is complicated even more by Vogel, who heard of the coup as he made his way from Fezzan to Borno. He reported in a note that the coup occurred in the season of the rains, adding surprisingly, that this was in November and that as a consequence the Wazir al-Hajj Bashir's flight to the east was blocked by floods. The evidence is confusing, but I suggest it does indicate a date at the beginning of the cold season but one early enough for the aftermath of the rains to hinder communication. This would most probably be October 1853. The beginning of the year 1270 of the Hijira that is 1st Muharram fell on 4th October.

The counter-coup which brought down Abd al-Rahman and restored Umar occurred on the *Id al-Kabir*, that is 10th Dhu'l-Hajj, 1270/3rd September, 1854. Abd al-Rahman was executed 'in the first days of December'. Barth says 'early in the month'. According to the Islamic calendar the month of Rabi began on 22nd November 1854, 1st December on 10th Rabi I. The execution probably took place in the second or third week of that month, 1271.

The death of Shehu Umar and the succession of his son Abubakr

The date for the end of the reign of Shehu Umar varies in the sources, some give a date as early as 1879, others give 1880, the real date is 1881. The variations must have come about by European writers attempting to accommodate the dates having accepted the wrong date for the accession of Umar. We can fix Umar's death from material relating to the accession of his son Shehu Abubakr.

Abubakr, Shehu Bukar, must have been born about 1830. Henry Barth mentions he went on his first campaign while he was in Kukawa. The palace slaves would not allow him to see his father in his final illness, but otherwise he does not seem to have faced any opposition. The first document of relevance is a *mahram* (Armybook, No.5: 115) which is dated Sunday 19 Muharram 1299/11 Dec 1881. The second is a letter from Shehu Bukar to the Ottoman Governor of Tripoli announcing his appointment in succession to his father; this is dated Monday 20th Muharram 1299/12 Dec 1881. The letter is sealed, and the seal is dated 1299. It would seem conclusive that Shehu Abubakr succeeded in Muharram 1299 which year began on 23 November 1881. However, we must note that one *mahram* exists (Armybook No.5: 257-58) dated 'late Shawwal 1298/ late 1881'. This earlier date must be taken into account, because we should ask whether the seal was engraved in Borno or was it necessary to send for a new one from Fazzan. Having noted this I think we can accept the Muharram/December date until other evidence is available.

The death of Shehu Bukar and the seizure of power by Ibrahim b. Umar

Shehu Bukar's reign was short. His death took every one by surprise and found his son Muhammad al-Amin, known as Kiyari, unprepared. The kingmakers chose Abba Masta or Mustafa b. Muhammad al-Amin, but the slave gunmen backed Abba Ibrahim b. Umar. His reign was even

shorter than his brother's. It is normally given as one year - but was it a little less or a little more than twelve months? No example of his seal survives in any of the archives or collections, so we cannot state the accepted year of succession. The earliest *mahram* from his reign is dated Jummada I 1302/16 Feb-17 March 1885 (Armybook, No.5: 144). Shehu Bukar's reign is often said to have been either three or four years; this, if we accept the Muharram 1299 for his accession three years, brings us to the period Muharram 1302 to Jummada I for his death and the accession of Ibrahim in November 1884 - February, March 1885.

The death of Shehu Ibrahim and the appointment of Shehu Hashim b. Umar

As we have noted, Ibrahim's reign was short. He was certainly in power by February or March 1885. He issued one *mahram* in 1303 (Armybook, No.5: 116). The 1st Muharram was on 10 October 1885. His successor Shehu Hashim issued two *mahrams* in Jummada I 1303/5 February-6 March (Armybook, No.5: 27 and 117). Therefore we can say that Ibrahim died and Hashim succeeded between 1st Muharram and Jumada I 1303/10 Oct 1885-February 1886. Hashim's seal is dated 1303.

The eclipse of the al-Kanimiyyin

Shehu Hashim seems to have ruled for eight years. Eight years would bring us to 1311 which began on 15 July 1893, and ended 4th July 1894. It does appear that the key events in the overthrow of the heirs of al-Kanimi and the seizure of power by Rabih took place in 1311.

Amir Rabih b. Fadl Allah

The first action of Rabih that concerns us in this study is his occupation of Karnak Logone, the capital of the small sultanate of this name on the borders of metropolitan Borno. This is said to have occurred as a result of a *coup de main* on the *Id*. But which *Id*? *Id al-Fitr* fell on 1st Shawal 1310/18th April 1893 while *Id al-Kabir*, 10th Dhu'l-Hijj fell on 25th June 1893. Both dates can be made to "fit", but I feel that the former is the more probable. The latter is well into the wet season, while the events that followed the fall of Logone suggest that they occurred at the onset of the rains. In my view, therefore, Rabih's first advance into Borno territory is to be dated after I Shawwal 1310.

After ejecting the population and establishing the strongly walled Karnak Logone as a base, Rabih advanced to Amja on the frontier of Borno proper. Here he awaited the response of Kukawa. From here he could move against Mandara, his declared target. From here his hungry army could exploit the corn rich Kara Balge region, his practical target. A Borno army under Momman Tahr advanced against him. Rabih's forces were on a raised piece of ground, a fossil dune fronted by the sticky clay (after rain) called *firki*. A large proportion of the Borno cavalry were quickly stuck in the clay and shot down. The rest fled. Momman Tahr was an experienced general, many of his men would have been familiar with the area. It is unlikely to have made a frontal attack through what some sources have claimed to be a semi-permanent swamp nor through ground saturated following the onset of the rains. Some sources speak of a storm the night previous to the battle. If, as I suspect, this was among the first storms of the 1893 wet season it would have taken the Borno forces by surprise. It would also have given an advantage to Rabih's men who had trained in the far wetter conditions of the Nile-Congo-Tchad watershed. I suggest a likely date for this encounter at the end of May/middle of Dhu'l Qada 1310.

The next major confrontation took place at Lekarawa, just west of Ngala. Shehu Hashim was present and the Borno army was commanded by Muhammad al-Amin b. Abubakr (Kiyari). This engagement occurred well after the beginning of the rains, probably in August. The defeated army or part of it together with Shehu Hashim retreated to and then abandoned Kukawa. The fugitives were pursued to Lumburam on the Komadugu Yobe. Hashim and only 18 followers escaped across the river. The implication is that the annual flood, which usually arrives in September, had made its appearance. That would be the second month of the year 1311. Rabih spent some time in Kukawa but was finally persuaded to settle in Dikwa which had better water supplies, was healthier and had better communications. A poem written by Alkali Ali b. Ruggayya c 1920 tells us that Rabih entered Dikwa on Sunday 10th Jummada I/19 November 1893. He also states that Rabih ruled Borno for 6 years 9 months which, if we work back from the date of his death at the hands of the French at the battle of Lakhta 21 April 1900, yields a date approximately Rabi I 1311/12 September-11 October 1893. This might refer to the period of his occupation of the capital of Borno.

While Rabih was establishing himself at Dikwa, the greater part of metropolitan Borno remained under the al-Kanimiyyin. Shehu Hashim with a few followers was north-east of Geidam. A larger number of the ruling family were in Ngalagati region. Muhammad al-Amin b. Abubakr, known as Kiyari, had the greatest number of followers. Meanwhile a peasant rising led by enthusiastic mallams, in particular a Mallam Gantur, threatened Rabih and defeated one of his commanders notwithstanding the fact that they were armed only with corn stalks. We can suggest

therefore that these events occurred after the harvest and after the heads had been cut from the stalks.

Muhammad al-Amin was appointed Shehu at Gumsa, and Hashim went to pay homage, but it was soon learnt that he was corresponding with Rabih and he was executed. The new Shehu prepared his forces for an advance on Dikwa, but Rabih made a pre-emptive move and met the Borno forces on the banks of the Yobe at Dimurwa near Gashagar. There was a storm with thunder and strong winds but no rain. The Shehu was captured and executed. His brother Umar Sanda Wuduroma made his way to southern Borno where he was proclaimed Shehu but was soon captured in his turn and taken to Rabih at Gashagar where he was executed. For the next six years Rabih was undisputed master of Borno.

The dating for these later events must be speculative, but I suggest that too much happened to be contained within 1893. Indeed the storm suggest the 'little rains' that so often occur late in February. I suggest that Hashim was removed from office in November or December/c Jummada I 1311 and Kiyari appointed, and the execution of Umar Sanda Wuduroma would have occurred in the same month. This is speculation, but I suggest, we must accept that a longer time frame is essential. Dates for the rulers of the restoration period are to be found in the summary list that follows.

Summary List of Appointments and Deaths of the Al-Kanimiyyin Shehus and Rabih b. Fadlallah

| | accession | death |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|
| Muhammad al-Amin b. Ninqa | Ramadan 1224/ Oct.-Nov. 1809 | 4 Rabi I 1253 8 June 1837 |
| Umar b. Muhammad al-Amin | Rabi I 1253/ 4 June 1837 | Muharram 1299/ Dec. 1881 |
| Abd al-Rahman b. Muhammad al Amin | Muharram 1270/ Oct. 1853 | Deposed 10 Dhu'l-Hajj 1270/ 3 Sep. 1854 |
| Abubakr b. Umar | Muharram 1299/ Dec. 1881 | Muharram-Jumada I 1302/ Nov. 1884 - Feb. or Mar. 1885 |
| Ibrahim b. Umar | Muharra-Jumada I 1302/ Nov. 1884- Feb. or Mar. 1885 | Muharra-Jumada I 1303/ Oct. 1885 - Feb 1886 |

cont....

| | accession | death |
|---|--|-------------------------------------|
| Hashim b. Umar | Muharram-Jumada I 1303 Oct. 1885-Feb. 1886 | c Jumada I 1311/ Nov.-Dec. 1893 |
| Abubakr (Kiyari) | Nov.-Dec. 1893 | Feb.-Mar. 1894 |
| Umar Sanda b. Abubakr (Wuduroma) | c Shaban 1311/ Feb.-Mar. 1894 | same |
| Rabih b. Fadlallah occupation of Kukawa | c 21 Rabi I 1311/ 2 Oct. 1893 (approx.) | 21 Dhu'l-Hajj 1317/ 22 Apr. 1900 |
| Fadlallah b. Rabih (appt. Sultan British Borno July 1901) | 21 Dhu'l-Hajj 1317/ 22 Apr. 1900 | 8 Jumada I 1319/ 23 Aug. 1901 |

The al-Kanimiyyin restoration

| | accession | death |
|--|---|---|
| Umar Sanda b. Ibrahim (Kore-the short) | 12 Ramadan 1317/ 14 Jan. 1900 | deposed by French Jul.-Aug. 1900 ? |
| Abubakr b. Ibrahim (Garbai) | Jul.-Aug. 1900 ? | Sep. 1922 ? |
| Umar b. Abubakr (Dikwa) (Sanda Mandarama) | Dhu'l-Qada-Hajj 1319/Mar. 1902 Restored Rabi I-II 1324/ May 1906 | Flees to Borno Dec. 1905/ Shawwal 1323 1335-6/ 1917 |
| Ibrahim b. Abubakr (Dikwa) | Shawwal 1323/ Dec. 1905 | Removed by Germans Rabi I-II 1324/ May 1906 |
| Muhammad al-Mustafa b. Umar, Manta Kura, Masta Gumsumi 2 mths when Garbai fled Borno after defeat by Fadlallah | Shaban 1318/ early Dec. 1900 | Removed by French. c 3rd week Shawwal 1318/2nd week Feb. 1901 |
| Abba Muhammad as-Sanusi b. Ibrahim, initially self appointed | Feb. 1900 Recognised by French 1905 | deposed by British 1905 |