

Rethinking Africa's Transcontinental Continuities

The Assyrian factor in West African history: The reshaping of ancient Near Eastern traditions in sub-Saharan Africa

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1 Introduction

For more than half a century African history has been a recognized academic field all over the world. Similar to its European forerunner, African historiography takes account of developments reaching far back into the past. In recent years, however, research has more and more been restricted to modern and contemporary history and has rarely dealt with topics of ancient and medieval history. Especially subjects like the emergence of states and empires, or the rise of social complexity which once fascinated African historians have been largely neglected in the past two or three decades. New standard works on African history, though still covering a large chronological spectrum, tend to rely on data derived from related disciplines such as archaeology and historical linguistics and on contemporary written sources.¹ Earlier historical research based on oral traditions and anthropological data is largely discredited on account of its overemphasis on extraneous factors.² Indeed, long-distance migrations and influences from Near Eastern societies are nowadays discarded as unfounded and are not appreciated as factors of historical change. More in conformity with African nation-building and nationalist historiography are assumptions of independent developments in state-building, urbanism and metal technologies. World historical perspectives are only taken into account - if ever

¹ Iliffe, *Africans*, 17-99; Collins/Burns, *History*, 40-95.

² Oliver/Fage, *Short History* (1962), 44-65; Fage, *History* (1978), 34-109; Ehret, *Civilizations*, 221-235.

- insofar as they concern trade relations and commercial incentives.³ Criticism voiced against earlier suggestions of transcontinental influences is usually epitomized in the ill-famed Hamitic hypothesis which reduces contacts, borrowings and influences to racial categories. However, under the smokescreen of anti-racialism postcolonial African historiography tends to disregard continental differences in technological developments and the historical reality of transcontinental continuities and cultural transfers.

The best explanation for the elaboration of one-sided models of social and technological advancement in Africa is the apparent dearth of reliable historical sources. While oral traditions were once considered valid substitutes for written records, these expectations have in recent years given way to widespread scepticism and *de facto* rejections.⁴ Such unfounded hypercriticism even affects internal written sources in Arabic which are often supposed to have been composed recently and thus also to be based oral traditions.⁵ The latter being now considered highly unreliable, ancient African history has become a field open to rich speculation, and closed to sound source critical research. In fact, if only contemporary written sources, archaeological and linguistic data are taken into account when attempting to reconstruct the formative developments in African history then guesswork in whatever disguise overrides evidence-based historical research.

By considering the Assyrian hypothesis, the present paper tries to show that neglected internal narrative sources allow us to throw new light on important formative developments in African history. Making use of oral and written traditions, it relies on text criticism, philology, onomastics and comparisons Near Eastern history. On the basis of the new evidence derived from legends of origin and dynastic traditions it attempts to describe a key epoch in African history characterized by the synchronism of important social and technological transformations which up till now escaped the attention of African historians.

³ Ehret, *Civilizations*, 159-237; Lange, *Kingdoms*, 215-305, 343-375.

⁴ Henige, *Historiography*, 80-105.

⁵ Holl, *Revisited*, 39-40, 130-1.

2 The Assyrian hypothesis

2.1 General features: Exodus after the fall of Assyria 605 BCE

The present research builds on the Assyrian hypothesis which has recently been put forward in some marginal publications.⁶ In order to facilitate the following explanations it may be useful to give a rough presentation of the hypothesis in connection with the Neo-Assyrian Empire and its fall at the end of the seventh century BCE. From Arab and African evidence it appears that the fall of the Assyrian Empire resulted in mass migrations from Syria-Palestine to various parts of sub-Saharan Africa of which mainly Central West Africa – also traditionally called the Central Sudan – is taken into consideration here. Those who participated in the exodus were various ancient Near Eastern communities deported during the last century of the Assyrian Empire. Having mostly been uprooted in the eastern parts of the Assyrian Empire, the deportees were settled in Syria-Palestine in exchange for people who had been deported to the areas they had come from. An estimated four million people were deported from the time of Tiglath-pileser III (744-727) to that of Assurbanipal (668-627). The deportees were well treated by the Assyrian authorities and they could reach important positions in the Assyrian administration and army. Nevertheless they lived in their own national communities and kept their own national traditions over several generations. In spite of their initial violent uprooting and mistreatment the deportees developed a certain degree of loyalty towards their Assyrian oppressors. They were not slaves but favored subjects of the Assyrian king with considerable opportunities for integration and advancement in the new society. In many ways the communities of deportees were in a more advantageous position with regard to the Assyrian overlords than the non-Assyrian nationals who were their neighbours. The major enemies of the deportees were their local neighbours whose land they occupied and by whom they were considered as henchmen of the Assyrian oppressors.⁷

The Assyrian decline began after the death of Assurbanipal in 627 BCE when succession struggles within the ruling class weakened the Assyrian leadership. The Assyrian protagonists of these conflicts sought the support of subjugated nations such as

⁶ Lange, "Immigration", 86-94; *id.*, "Afrika", 103-7; *id.*, "Successor state", 376-380.

⁷ Oded, *Deportations*, 18-115.

Chaldeans in Babylonia or Medes in Iran. When the succession conflict was resolved in 623 by the elimination of one party, the Chaldeans and the Medes continued to fight and the succession conflict turned into a combat for national liberation. In 616 Egypt intervened in Syria-Palestine in order to assist the Assyrians in their struggle for survival against their powerful enemies. After concluding an alliance in 614, the Babylonians and Medes began to attack the main cities in the Assyrian heartlands of northern Mesopotamia. In 612, the allies conquered Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, and killed the last Metropolitan Assyrian king. The crown prince, Assur-uballit II, fled westward to Harran where, under Egyptian protection, he was installed as the Assyrian king – in fact he was to be the last representative of an illustrious line of rulers. After some minor victories the Assyrian-Egyptian alliance was decisively defeated by the Babylonian forces in Syria in the great battle of Carchemish in 605. Immediately after his victory the Babylonian conqueror Nebuchadnezzar had to rush back to Babylon in order to secure his own succession to the throne, public order broke down in Syria.⁸ The remaining Egyptian and Assyrian troops fled to Egypt followed by the resettled deportees who tried to escape from the attacks of their local neighbours. In view of the four million deported during the Neo-Assyrian Empire, it is possible that up to one million deportees coming mainly from Syrian Palestine but also from the Assyrian mainlands fled first to the west and then to the south to Egypt and further on to sub-Saharan Africa.⁹

2.2 Written evidence from Arab historians: Migration from Babylon to sub-Saharan Africa

The evidence for the mass migration to sub-Saharan Africa is mainly provided by oral and dynastic traditions in the Central Sudan. It is supported by data derived from ancient Near Eastern written sources. Among the latter we note the Assyrian royal inscriptions which provide the number of deportees, their country of origin and their place of resettlement; the Babylonian Chronicle which indicates the main stages of the Assyrian downfall and the biblical Book of Kings which notes the ethnic troubles in Judah during the final years of the seventh century.¹⁰ Written accounts mentioning that refugees from the ancient Near East reached sub-Saharan Africa are only provided by Arab historians.

⁸ Roux, *Iraq*, 305-378; Oates, "Assyria", 166-184.

⁹ Lange, "Afrika", 104-7; id., *Founding*, 3-38.

¹⁰ Oded, *Deportations*, 18-40, 115-135; Glassner, *Chronicles*, 218-229; 2 Kgs 24:2.

Formerly disregarded on account of references to the legendary figures of Noah and Ham, these narratives should be given serious attention owing to the combination of legendary and factual data common in African traditions on which these accounts seem to be based.

Quoting an account from the beginning of the eighth century, Ibn Qutayba wrote in 880 in Baghdad that Ham left Mesopotamia with his children to the south where he settled on the shore of the sea. Ham's descendants are said to have multiplied and to have become the Nuba, the Zanj, the Fezzan and the Zaghawa.¹¹

Writing in 873 in eastern Iran, al-Ya'qubi claims that the descendants of Noah by Ham dispersed from Babylon by marching first westwards and then southwards to the *bilad al-Sudan* where they created the kingdoms of Kanem, Hausa, Kawkaw or Gao and Ghana, among others. Relying on his illustrious predecessor, al-Mas'udi adds a few details on people and places.¹² Al-Ya'qubi is one of the most important Arab historians and scholars consider him to be very reliable. He also describes other people of the world, rarely connecting them to the sons of Noah, and when he does so he never provides any detailed story of migration. In spite of his adoption of the biblical classification of mankind by the sons of Noah, there is no reason to suppose that he himself or anybody else invented a story of migration without any evidence in order to bolster the biblical classification. Since traditions tracing people's origin to Noah, without necessarily referring to Ham, it would rather appear that a learned Arab trader who had travelled to the region of Lake Chad – to which most of the African information refers – transmitted to the author what he had heard at one of the Central Sudanic royal courts. Similar traditions of origin are still common in the region nowadays, but usually they have an updated geography, indicating Baghdad instead of Babylon as the point of departure of the great migration.¹³

From contemporary Arab sources of the early Islamic period it appears that the kingdoms of the Sahelian belt were fully developed. Observers noted their specific features such as the great influence of the Queen Mother, the seclusion of the king and

¹¹ Levtzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 15.

¹² Levtzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 21, 31.

¹³ For instance the Kisha/Kishera traditions collected by Frobenius, the Bayajidda legend in Daura, Kano Chronicle and the Aisa legends in Bornu (*Und Afrika*, 535-7, 607-616; Palmer, *Memoirs*, II, 51; 133).

human sacrifices at the burial of the ruler. Some kingdoms such as Kanem, Kawkaw/Songhay and Ghana seem to have been large empires controlling most of the countries between the Atlantic Ocean in the west and Darfur in the east.¹⁴ On account of the dysfunctionality of some of the traits and the great size of the polities, it is hardly conceivable that these developments - as is often supposed - were solely the result of the increased volume of the trans-Saharan trade in consequence of the Arab conquest of North Africa in the second half of the seventh century.¹⁵

2.3 Archaeological and linguistic evidence: Urbanization around 500 BCE

Recent archaeological research in the region of Lake Chad has substantially contributed to improving our knowledge concerning the rise of urbanization in Africa. On the western and southern fringes of the clay plains of Lake Chad, German archaeologists discovered proto-urban settlements dating from about 500 BCE. The ongoing excavations revealed a number of significant features, indicating a sudden increase in social complexity. The size of the settlements was between 12 (Zilum, Maibe) and 30 hectares (Malankari); the population of the individual sites being estimated between three and six thousand inhabitants; the use of fortifications protecting the proto-urban sites is apparent from trenches up to one km long and several metres deep and from remnants of ramparts; new crops were introduced including in particular cow peas; the increase in agricultural production is evident from the use of storage pits and large thick-walled pots later called Sao pots; craft specialization is attested by remnants of craft work shops and tanning pits; even the emergence of iron technology seems to have been part of the same cultural complex. It is quite remarkable that the different innovations discovered by archaeologists are precisely dated to the period of the supposed mass migrations from the collapsed Assyrian Empire.¹⁶

The linguistic situation in the Lake Chad region is characterized by the juxtaposition of Afroasiatic and Nilosahara languages, the former having ramifications in the Near East and the latter being confined to sub-Saharan Africa. It cannot be excluded that the spread of Chadic, which is a subfamily of Afroasiatic, or at least of its most

¹⁴ Levtzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 21, 80-81; 171.

¹⁵ Iliffe, *Africans*, 50-53; Collins/Burns, *History*, 78-89.

¹⁶ Breunig, "Glanz", 257-268; Lange, *Founding*, 23-27.

recent layer is connected to the innovative thrust of the middle of the first millennium BCE revealed by archaeology.

Considering words as historical artefacts we note independently of the spread of Chadic as a whole the occurrence of a number of historically significant loan words in various languages of the Central Sudan. With respect to urbanism there are some Afroasiatic roots which deserve special attention: **b3r-* meaning “fortress, citadel” (Akk., Hbr., Aram.) occurs in various Central Sudanic languages in the form *birni* designating a “walled town”; **ger-* meaning “town” in Hebrew is found in different forms within the same semantic field in Chadic languages, in Tuareg and in Kanuri; *1lu* meaning “town” in Akkadian is found in Yoruba as *ile* designating the same phenomenon. In view of the remarkable Hausa and Yoruba city cultures and the traditions of provenance indicating origins in the Near East (see below) such cognates are of course quite suggestive.¹⁷

Highly significant with regard to the rise of complex society are terms designating rulers of kingdoms. Turning our attention once more to Chadic we note that there are four roots for “king” attested in more than one branch of the language family which have Semitic cognates. With respect to **mai* the donor language could be Hebrew which has *m1y7h* the “anointed”; with respect to **mlb* it is possibly the Semitic root *ml(k)* (with an additional *ba#l3* – “the king, my lord”); with respect to **mkm* one may think of the Canaanite and Phoenician term *m3qim* (*‘el3m*) “resurrector of a deity” designating a major magistrate of the Phoenician city-state; with respect to **srk* the original form may have been the Assyrian title *yarr kiyyati* (or *KIY*) designating the “ruler of the totality” (or the ruler of Kish).¹⁸ These examples could be multiplied and extended to culturally important terms such as “horse”, “camel” and “iron”.

In tracing cultural loanwords to ancient Near Eastern languages we have to confront the important problem of the badly documented Aramaic language. Contrary to Sumerian and Akkadian, Aramaic was not written on clay tablets but on perishable materials and therefore has not been preserved. But since Aramaic became not only the spoken but also the written language in the Assyrian administration in the seventh century BCE, the main archives for that period written on papyrus and leather have

¹⁷ Jungrauthmayr/Ibrizimow, *Roots*, I, 34; II, 72-3; Lange, *Founding*, 19-20.

¹⁸ Orel/Stolbova, *Dictionary*, n° 359, 1012; Lange, *Founding*, 18-20.

completely disappeared.¹⁹ The cognate languages of Akkadian, Hebrew and Arabic provide very insufficient substitutes for the vanished Aramaic documentation.

Moreover, the bewildering multitude of Semitic roots for the same meaning observable in Chadic and other Central Sudanic societies does not necessarily indicate widely differing influences. They might reflect a single wave of migration comprising different Semitic and other people such as the one resulting from the fall of the Assyrian Empire.

3 Traditions of origin: Exodus from Arabia

Traditions of origin are nowadays rarely taken into account for the reconstruction of ancient African history. Owing to the influence of written material on their content, they are considered to be unreliable. While it is correct to distinguish between the original form of a tradition and its later distortion by elements of feedback, it would be mistaken to discard a whole tradition on account of certain modifications owing to input from Arabic and other sources. In fact, it is more appropriate to analyse such traditions in terms of an *interpretatio Arabica* which considers Arabic influences as being mainly interpretative – and not constitutive, manipulatory and fraudulent. This approach seeks to uncover a previous more authentic form of the tradition beneath the Arab-Islamic reinterpretation. It further contends that, in spite of their widely different forms and names of their heroes, major West African traditions of origin reflect the mass migration precipitated by the fall of the Assyrian Empire at the end of the seventh century BCE.

3.1 Yemenite legends: Arabized origin from the Near East

The spread of Islam in the societies of the Sahelian belt south of the Sahara changed progressively important aspects of the previous cultures. With respect to the traditions of origin, learned Arab traders compared them with what they knew about pre-Islamic Arab history from their own historians. They quickly found out that these traditions claiming Near Eastern origins were similar to the legends of their own people centred on the ancient history of Yemen. Indeed, according to Arab historians, Yemenite kings dominated not only Yemen but also Arabia and even Mesopotamia. After the biblical patriarchs, the Yemenite kings are presented together with the Persian rulers as if they had achieved something like world domination. In certain ways, the Yemenite kings

¹⁹ Joannès, *Empires*, 20.

assumed the role of the great Semitic rulers of the Akkadian, Babylonian and Assyrian Empires, of whom Arab historians had received some information by Arab traditions and biblical records without knowing that the subject matter was the same.²⁰

Taking a simplified and Arabized idea of ancient Near Eastern history as a yardstick in their approach to African traditions, learned Arab and Berber traders may have drawn the attention of African traditionists to certain parallels. In order to update their own national legends of origin and in order to ensure their comprehensibility, the traditionists modified the original content in conformity with Arab ideas concerning ancient Near Eastern history. As a consequence, they reinterpreted former indications of precise but unknown places in the Fertile Crescent in terms of Yemenite origins. Yemenite traditions are notable in various Muslim kingdoms of the Central Sudan. From al-Yaḥyāʿī we know that before Islamization these kingdoms were believed to have been founded by migrants from Babylon.

The kingdom of Gao is said to have been founded by two brothers who came from Yemen in a pitiful condition. In view of the Islamization of the Songhay kings of Gao towards the end of the tenth century, deep-rooted notions of Yemenite origins are not surprising.²¹

Different oral traditions in Kanem-Bornu trace the dynastic origins to the country of Yemen, to the ancient *Tubbaʿ al-awwal* rulers of Yemen or to the ruling Himyarites in Yemen.²² The royal Chronicle, known as the *D3w1n*, offers a variant of the Yemenite legends by identifying the dynastic founder Sef with the Yemenite prince Sayf b. Dh3 Yazan in the second half of the sixth century CE. This interpretation based on homonymy can be shown to be erroneous because Sef is described as “the king of the world in its four quarters”, while Sayf b. Dh3 Yazan was a minor Yemenite prince in the second half of the sixth century CE. In addition, he is claimed to have been the son of the king of Baghdad, a description which localizes him in Mesopotamia and not in Yemen. Other written traditions likewise trace the dynastic origins of Kanem-Bornu to Baghdad and Syria and sometimes even to Babylon.²³

²⁰ al-Tabarī, *History*, III, 28-29; IV, 78-80; al-Yaḥyāʿī, *Taʾrīkh*, I, 5-208,

²¹ Lange, *Kingdoms*, 505-6.

²² Palmer, *Memoirs*, II, 84, 112, 116; III, 20.

²³ Lange, *D3w1n*, 65; Smith, “Legends”, 44-49.

Less well known are the Yemenite traditions of the Nubian kingdom on the Middle Nile, the Barma kingdom of Bagirmi, the Wandala kingdom of Mandara, the Bolewa kingdom of Fika, and the Soninke Empire of Wagadu/Ghana. In all these cases the claims of Near Eastern origins are supported by tales concerning the migration and by onomastic elements in the dynastic traditions.²⁴

3.2 Bayajidda legend: The hero's immigration from Baghdad

The Bayajidda legend is the sole tradition of origin in the kingdom of Daura, the traditional centre of Hausaland. It is also widely known in most of the other Seven Hausa states but it is rivaled there by independent traditions of migration which likewise point to origins in the Near East. In addition to its nature as a tradition of origin, the Bayajidda legend provides mythological explanations of the New Year festival and it is a constitutional charter limiting the power of the king. Its institutional embedding in high offices and topographical features of the town bears witness to the parallel existence of the Bayajidda legend and the Daura state and hence to the probability that the legend and the state emerged at the same period.

The Bayajidda legend testifies to two different migrations, the first originating from Canaan and concerning the bulk of the people under the leadership of the Queen Mother, Magajiya, and the second originating from Baghdad and concerning the dynastic founder and dragon-slayer, Bayajidda. It can be shown that the distinction between the two different waves of migration corresponds to two components of the immigrant state founders sharply distinguished from each other. The first group of people consisted of the deportees from various nations who were partly resettled by the Assyrians in Syria-Palestine from where they had to flee after the defeat of the Assyrian-Egyptian alliance in 605 BCE. The second group consisted originally of the Assyrian troops which were able to retreat from Nineveh after the conquest of the town by the Babylonians in 612 BCE. These troops were subsequently wiped out in the wars against the Babylonians so that in the end the hero, i.e. the Assyrian king, came alone with his horse to Daura. Here he is said to have killed the dragon in the well, to have married the Queen Mother and to have fathered the progenitor of the Seven Banza states with the slave-maid of the Queen

²⁴ Nachtigal, *Sahara*, II, 694; Lange, "Abwanderung", 209, 223; Dieterlen/Sylla, *Ghana*, 6, 11.

Mother and later the progenitor of the Seven Hausa states with the Queen Mother herself.²⁵

It appears that the killing of the dragon represents the Assyrian principle of legitimate rule, the marriage of the Queen Mother as put in practice in the *hieros gamos* corresponds to an ancient Near Eastern element of deification and the fathering of the founders of two different sets of states with the Queen Mother and her slave maid to the Israelite scheme of descent involving Abraham, Sarah and Hagar on the level of the parents and Ishmael and Isaac on the level of the offspring.²⁶ Such a combination of elements from different sources in an innovative way is precisely what can be expected from an immigrant community composed of various ancient Near Eastern groups, including Israelites, Babylonians and Assyrians.

3.3 Kanta legend: Immigration from Madayana beyond Mecca

The Kanta legend is the sole legend of origin in the Kebbi state which is traditionally classified among the Seven Banza states of the Hausa tradition. It is also known north of Kebbi in the Hausa region of Ader and it appears residually in Songhay popular traditions. In Kebbi, the Kanta legend is transmitted in various forms in different sections of society: at the royal court, among the royal clans competing for power and among the professional clans such as the fishermen and cattle-herding Fulani. An important element of the legend is re-enacted during the enthronement ceremony, when the new king becomes the reincarnation of his illustrious predecessor.

The written versions of the Kebbi tradition of origin claim that the people of Kebbi originated from a town situated beyond Mecca and called Madayana. It is tempting to see in this name the Aramaic term for town, *madînāh*, and to suppose that it designates the Assyrian capital Nineveh parallel to the biblical term “great city” (*ha-šîr ha-gedôl*).²⁷ Some of the oral versions of the Kanta legend confirm the origin of the Kebbi people from Madayana, others indicate Mecca, Medina and Egypt as the places of provenance.

Kanta himself is supposed to have been born locally and to have risen miraculously from an orphan to the ruler of the world. The name of the hero and the story of his

²⁵ Palmer, *Memoirs*, III, 132-4; Lange, *Kingdoms*, 289-295.

²⁶ Frankfort, *Kingship*, 227-8, 295-9; Gen 16-49.

²⁷ Jon 4:11, Jth 1:1.

stupendous founding of an empire can be compared to the Sargon legend which describes the rise of the builder of the Akkadian Empire, who began as an orphan abandoned by his mother, and was rescued and brought up by a gardener, eventually to become the ruler of a kingdom and the founder of an empire.²⁸ Sargon of Akkad ruled in the second half of the third millennium but his legend was subsequently kept alive by various rulers of Mesopotamia. It was particularly cherished by the Neo-Assyrian king Sargon II who adopted the name of the illustrious king and who increased his forerunner's fame by having the texts of his legends copied and spread. From that time until the end of the Assyrian Empire a hundred years later the Sargon legend was an important component of the royal ideology in Assyria. Its great influence on the society of Kebbi including on the royal ritual is best explained by the assumption that its formative elements were introduced by immigrants from the collapsed Assyrian Empire. Since Sargon of Akkad had his capital built in the centre of Mesopotamia and since his rule extended over Babylonia as well as over northern Mesopotamia, his legend was part of the legacy not only of the Assyrians but of all Mesopotamians. As such it was particularly attractive for people from Babylonia who - as we will see - were the leading state builders of Kebbi.²⁹

Other people cherishing extensive and well-structured legends tracing their origin to particular places in the Near East should be mentioned: the Tunjur in the eastern Sudan to Arabia, the Kotoko south of Lake Chad to the "black river near the Red Sea", the Gobirawa from Gobir to Surukal "east of Mecca", the Achifawa to Dima/Damascus "beyond Egypt", the Borgawa to Birnin Kisa/Kishera in Arabia, the Ede from Benin to Egypt, the Zarma to Arabia and the Soninke of Ghana to the "direction of Mecca". In each of these cases the details of the legends of origin and the dynastic traditions unaffected by Islamic feedback confirm these allegations. Sometimes it is possible to relate the geographical locations to more or less precise historical circumstances in connection with the fall of the Assyrian Empire.³⁰

²⁸ Harris, *Gazetteer*, 26-29; Lange, *Kingdoms*, 323-330.

²⁹ Harris, *Gazetteer*, 230-241; Lange, "Successor state", 261-267.

³⁰ Lebeuf/Masson Detourbet, *Civilisation*, 29; Stewart, *Borgu*, 398; Lange, "Abwanderung", 211-224; Mounkaila, *Mythe*, 166; Dieterlen/Sylla, *Ghana*, 6.

4 Dynastic traditions: Exodus from Assyria as a consequence of the Babylonian conquest

Dynastic traditions consist mostly of king lists but there are also examples of chronicles written in Arabic, and of well preserved orally transmitted poetic records. It is generally assumed that chronicle writing began in Central Sudanic societies with the spread of Islam and Arabic. However, many traditionists are convinced that their immigrant ancestors once knew how to read and to write and that this knowledge became lost at a certain stage.³¹ On the basis of the records of Kanem-Bornu and Kebbi it can be shown that this opinion is not unfounded. With respect to the extremely well preserved poetic traditions of the Oyo-Yoruba it is not impossible that there was a written tradition for a long time.

4.1 Kanem-Bornu: Descent from Sargon of Akkad and from Hammurabi

The Chronicle of the Sefuwa kings of Kanem-Bornu, the *D3w1n*, constitutes a highly informative historical source owing to its well-proportioned coverage of reigns extending over eight centuries. With respect to chronology its considerable reliability can be established by eight synchronisms provided by data from contemporary sources between the thirteenth and the nineteenth century. From these data it appears that the chronology based on reign length is accurate within the limits of five to eight years.³²

Recent philological research in the prelude of the *D3w1n* has shown that the beginning of the Arabic chronicle was translated from a written text into either Hebrew or Aramaic. This conclusion is based on a number of specific features of the text which formerly went unnoticed. A first set of arguments concerns the patriarchal names included in the prelude of the document. With the exception of one omitted figure owing to the Yemenite reinterpretation of Sefuwa origins, the list of patriarchs is complete. It diverges from the canonical biblical version and hence also from the Arabic translations by four compound names which correspond to authentic Israelite additions of the well-known Priestly genealogy in Gen 5:21-27. These supplements to the list of biblical patriarchs rely on the Yahwist patriarchal genealogy and on extra-textual knowledge

³¹ Frobenius, *Und Afrika*, 609 (Nupe), 613 (Kanem).

³² Lange, *Chronologie*, 83-94; id., *Kingdoms*, 552.

which can be shown to be genuine. Since any borrowing of these elements from Arabic must be excluded, it seems likely that they bear witness to an ancient Israelite author and to subsequent Israelite transmitters to West Africa. The theory of an Israelite authorship of the list of patriarchs included in the *D3w1n* is confirmed by an orthographic specificity known in Hebrew as the *he locale*. Consisting of the addition of a final *-he* to certain nouns, this feature is current in biblical Hebrew – possibly also in Aramaic – but unknown in Arabic. In the Arabic writings in Kanem-Bornu we find it up to the sixteenth century, but from the seventeenth century onward it was progressively eliminated.³³

Another feature pointing to an ancient Near Eastern origin of the Chronicle is its name. Though the written text bears the title *D3w1n*, this and other chronicles in the Central Sudan are known orally as the *girgam*. In all likelihood the word *girgam* is derived from the Sumero-Akkadian term *girginakku* designating a “box of tablets” and a “library”. The Arabic name *D3w1n*, which is quite exceptional for a chronicle, means in particular a “collection of written leaves or papers” and seems to indicate a *verbatim* translation of the term *girgam* and hence *girginakku* into Arabic. However, in its form and content the *D3w1n* does not resemble any Mesopotamian chronicle but the biblical Book of Kings which is organized chronologically by reigns. Each description of a reign has stereotyped regnal formulae, indicating at the beginning paternal and maternal descent and at the end the regnal length and the place of burial.³⁴ Similar information is provided by the *D3w1n* in a formulaic language characterized by repetitions.³⁵

A fourth element suggesting the existence of an ancient written precursor chronicle of the *D3w1n* is the title of Sef, the eponymous founder of the Sefuwa dynasty: “King of the world in its Quarters”. It is nearly identical to the most prestigious ancient Near Eastern royal title assumed by the Akkadian and by the Assyrian kings: “King of the Four Quarters (of the universe)”. In the Arabic form of the title one finds the unexpected word *qibla* which normally means “direction of the prayer, south” and not “region” or “quarter”. In fact in this epithet, the Arabic *qibla* is a near-homonym of the Akkadian *kibr1t* suggesting that Akkadian or the related Aramaean was the donor language of the title translated into Arabic.

³³ Gen 4:18-23; Lange, “Patriarchs“, 591-7.

³⁴ S. W. Holloway, “Kings, Book of 1-2“, ABD, IV, 69-81.

³⁵ Lange, *D3w1n*, 16-18, 24-58.

The first annalistic section of the *D3w1n* provides information on ten pre-Islamic kings of the Sefuwa. The position of these kings before the late eleventh century king Humme and the remark that the fourth king died in Kanem give the impression that these ten kings were local rulers who reigned in the tenth and the eleventh century. In fact, from a number of origin chronicles preceding king lists it appears that the early Sefuwa kings conquered different countries and people in the Fertile Crescent.³⁶ This is confirmed by the *D3w1n* which describes the dynastic founder S2f or Sayf first as “the son of the king of Baghdad” and later as “King of the Four Quarters (of the universe)”, a title first attested for Sargon of Akkad. Other information provided for the early Sefuwa kings such as the maternal ascent and the burial places can only be tentatively referred to the ancient Near East, it certainly does not designate figures or places in the region of Lake Chad. With respect to the great exodus from the Near East to the region of Lake Chad the different available texts vary between three different rulers to whom this important undertaking is attributed: Duku (3), Fune (4) and #Abd al-Jal3l b. Siyu (11). The *D3w1n*’s allusion to the forth king’s death in Kanem seems to correspond to a residual reference to a migration which has been deliberately shortened in order to give the impression that the early Sefuwa kings were local kings of Kanem. Apparently lacking any information concerning the pre-Islamic period of Kanem history, the early chroniclers writing in Arabic tried to point out two different aspects of early Sefuwa history; the dynastic origins in the Near East in Mesopotamia – shifted to Yemen under the influence of Arab historiography – and a long period of local rule in Kanem. Squeezed between these two requirements, they could not reach a clear position with respect to the particular ruler to whom they might attribute the leadership of the great exodus.³⁷

From onomastic and comparative research it appears that the first ten first kings mentioned in the *D3w1n* and other dynastic records of Kanem-Bornu were rulers of the ancient Near East whose names and descriptions were cogently arranged in order to transmit a coherent idea of the ancestral history before the great exodus. An examination of these ten kings and some details of their regins show that an early chronicler familiar

³⁶ Palmer, *Memoirs*, II, 93-94; Smith, “Legend“, 44-50.

³⁷ Lange, *D3w1n*, 65-67; id., *Founding*, 9-11.

with historical thinking and Mesopotamian list science drew an outline of ancient Near Eastern history in conformity with the interests of the state founders of Kanem. Following a chronological order and calling the main rulers by oral nicknames, he cogently gives an overview of the major developments which led to the great exodus. He begins with Sargon of Akkad (2334-2279) and ends with the Assyrian refugee king Assur-uballit II (612-609) – the additional Siyu/Semiramis (10) being a concession to oral tradition. He subdivides the earliest nine reigns into three sections, putting the Neo-Assyrian domination over the Fertile Crescent in a clear historical perspective.

The first section comprising three reigns indicates the historical basis on which the state founders of Kanem could rely independently of the Assyrian oppression endured at the time of the deportations. It begins with the unifying figure of the Akkadian empire founder Sargon of Akkad, continues with Abraham in order to associate the Western Semites with the state-building enterprise and ends with Hammurabi in order to indicate the Babylonian contribution.

The second section of the *D3w1n* has four names referring to the period of Assyrian domination. It begins with Tiglath-pileser III (744-727), the founder of the Neo-Assyrian Empire and the ruthless organizer of mass-deportations and continues with three kings of the subjected nations, standing for the deportation and resettlement of large numbers of people. These nations were Urartu, Elam and northern Arameans from Sam'al which are also referred to by the names of their outstanding kings in other Central Sudanic records.

The third section of the *D3w1n* has three names standing for the end of the Assyrian Empire and the exodus. It begins with the name of the Babylonian conqueror of the Metropolitan cities of Assyria, continues with the name of the Assyrian refugee king and ends with a female figure probably representing Semiramis. In fact, the addition of this tenth figure cuts short the chronologically arranged and factually correct history of the ancient Near East for precise reasons. In concession to oral traditions, the emphasis on a female figure seems to insinuate that - parallel to the Hausa queen mother Magajiya - the bulk of the refugees were not Assyrians but members of deported communities.³⁸ At the same time the insistence on the important role of an ancient queen provides historical legitimacy for the key institutional role played by the Queen Mother – as among the

³⁸ Lange, *Founding*, 11-18.

Hausa – in Kanem-Bornu in order to forstall any restauration of the Assyrian despotism in the great African pioneer state of the Central Sudan.

4.2 Kebbi: Ancient Near Eastern state builders

The extensive king list of Kebbi exists in form of a list comprising only the names of the successive kings or in form of a list of names and reign lengths incorporated in a Chronicle apparently written up in the middle of the nineteenth century.³⁹ The Chronicle traces the origin of the people of Kebbi to Madayana beyond Mecca and it claims that nearly all the ancient kings, more than thirty, ruled in Egypt. The exodus is divided into three distinct migrations, the first from Madayana to Mecca, the second from Mecca to Egypt and the third from Egypt to the Central Sudan. As the leader of the first the text mentions an Islamic, as the one of the second the first king of the list, Burunburun, and as the leaders of the third the last three kings of the list. From this arrangement it is clear that the names of the king list are used to fill gaps in the transmission of information: for each migration either a fictive figure or a ruler of the king list is given the function of the leader. Though there is hardly any additional information, the analysis of the list of thirty kings reaches some precise conclusions. In the case of the Kebbi king list, the arrangement of the names is in four sections corresponding to distinct developments either in the ancient Near East or in the Central Sudan.

The first section includes fourteen royal names of ancient rulers standing for precise ethnic groups which contributed to the formation of the Kebbi state after the settlement of the refugees from the fallen Assyrian Empire in the Central Sudan towards 600 BCE. From the Kassite king, Burunburun/Burnaburiash, mentioned in the first position it appears that Kassites played an important role in the founding of Kebbi. The other ethnic groups referred to by at least one king but more often by several are Urartians, Aramaeans, Babylonians and Assyrians. Other king lists of the Central Sudan mention the same ancient Near Eastern ethnic groups by using other royal names.⁴⁰

The second section of the Kebbi king list comprises five names indicative of the period of empire-bilding in Mesopotamia in the second half of the third and the first half

³⁹ Rattray, *Folklore*, 16-21; Harris, *Gazetteer*, 230-5.

⁴⁰ Lange, *Founding*, 13-15; *id.*, “Bayajidda”. (in press).

of the second millennium. Tracing the rise of the Akkadian Empire - which is also the subject matter of the official Kanta legend - it begins with the Babylonian epoch ruler Tammuz, and continues with a short name of the only king of Uruk who was the predecessor of Sargon; in the third and fifth position it has substitute names designating the Akkadian and Babylonian empire builders Sargon of Akkad (2334-2279) and Hammurabi (1792-1750).

The third section of the list has eight names standing for northern Mesopotamian developments leading to the rise of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Most remarkable in this section are the first three kings who are among the semi-legendary Assyrian kings datable to end of the third millennium BCE.

The fourth section of the list comprises the names of six kings of the Neo-Assyrian period in nearly exact chronological order. It begins with Tiglath-pileser II, the founder of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, and ends with the very last Assyrian king; in the third position it has a short name for Assurbanipal, the last great king of Assyria; in the fourth position we find the name of the last king of Metropolitan Assyria, in the fifth, the name of the Babylonian conqueror of Assyria and in the sixth the name of the Assyrian refugee king who fled from Nineveh to Harran. By following the sequence of the last names, it is possible with the help of additional knowledge to trace the achievements of these kings with regard to Assyrian history: the rise of the Neo-Assyrian Empire under the conqueror Fumi/Tiglath-pileser III; the empire's greatest expansion from Egypt to Elam under Ganbi/Assurbanipal, the last important king; the final defense of Metropolitan Assyria by Sakai/Sin-shar-ishkun; the conquest of central Assyria by Maru-Tamau/Nabopolassar, the founder of the Neo-Babylonian Empire; the flight to the west under Maru-Kanta/Assuruballit II and the final collapse of the Assyrian resistance against the Babylonian and Median advances.⁴¹

The Kebbi Chronicle provides the key to understanding the reasons for the mass migration leading to the foundation of the Kebbi state by attributing the exodus to the last three kings of the king list: Kotai/Sargon II, Gabi/Assurbanipal and Sakai/Sin-shar-ishkun. Though the migrants supposedly departed from Egypt, the names of the presumed leaders of the migration clearly point to an origin in Syria-Palestine: Assyria was

⁴¹ Harris, *Gazetteer*, 230-3; Lange, "Successor state", 369-375.

destroyed by the Babylonian conquerors, its last troops fled to the west, where they were again defeated in spite of the Egyptian support. Owing to the breakdown of public order subsequent to the battle of Carchemish in 605, the people resettled in Syria-Palestine were uprooted and fled to Egypt from where many continued to West Africa. This reconstruction of the events leading to the founding of the Kebbi state is based on Kebbi sources and on ancient Near Eastern texts. From the local evidence it appears that the Babylonian conqueror of Assyria, Nabopolassar, was not considered as a destroyer of the people's home country but rather as their liberator from the Assyrian oppression. The Assyrian refugee king, Assur-uballit II, was apparently appreciated as a leader who provided the different refugee communities with a sense of unity. Yet the kings mentioned in the first section of the list make it clear that in the new Kebbi state the Assyrians were excluded from all leading positions. Instead, leadership in the newly founded pioneer state was bestowed on members from different ethnic communities but Kassites impregnated by Babylonian culture were the *primi inter pares*.

In view of these conclusions drawn from an analysis of the Kebbi king list – and secondarily also from the Kebbi Chronicle – we have to ask who was the author of the list and on what sources he relied. From the historical information purposely or accidentally incorporated into the king list it can be assumed that the author was a scholar familiar with Sumerian and Akkadian texts. Since the list was composed some time after the founding of the Kebbi kingdom, it appears that he had at his disposal at least four different texts: the Sumerian King List and the Babylonian Royal chronicle for the writing of section two, and the Assyrian King List and the Babylonian King List A for the drawing up of section three. For the other two sections the sources were apparently a variety of king lists and oral traditions. Moreover, from the distortion of a number of names it can be shown that these deformations resulted from misreadings of the Assyrian King List.⁴² Such written material in form of tablets with cuneiform writing – some perhaps as broken pieces – may have reached West Africa by scholars who participated in the great exodus. It cannot be excluded that the author of the Kebbi king list relied instead on abridged translations in Aramaic of which no copies survived in the Near East due to the perishable material like leather or papyrus.

⁴² Glassner, *Chronicles*, 117-125, 136-143, 214-229; Lange, "Successor state", 368-378.

4.3 Oyo-Yoruba:

The dynastic traditions of the Oyo-Yoruba consist of well-structured royal poems dealing with the reigns of twenty-nine kings who ruled before the Fulani Jihad which began in 1804. Although there is no synchronism for any of these kings, it has generally been supposed that they were rulers of the Oyo Empire whose reigns immediately preceded the period of the Jihad. This assumption neglects the floating gap which we have seen to follow the rule of the classical kings in Kanem-Bornu and Kebbi dynastic traditions. In fact, it can be shown that the Oyo dynastic traditions are affected by the same gap between the classical kings and the kings who ruled during the Islamic revolutions at the beginning of the nineteenth century and that the supposed two eighteenth century synchronisms are fallacious.⁴³

According to the palace tradition of Oyo, the Yoruba originated from the Near East either from Mecca, Medina or Mondiana. Their first king, Nimrod, was supposedly killed during a religious uprising led by Braima/Abraham but Oduduwa, the son of the first king, was able to escape with his people and reach the Central Sudan. There are various indications that Oduduwa was an Assyrian epoch ruler who represents in particular the Assyrian refugee king, Assur-uballit II (612-609) in the Yoruba tradition of origin.⁴⁴ Apart from the prelude concerning the origins in the Near East, the Oyo dynastic tradition consists of four sections dealing with Israelite-Assyrian history.

The first section comprises seven names beginning with Oranyan/Jacob and ending with Jeroboam II (790-750). Although it includes the names of three Assyrian kings, its historical outlook is clearly centred on Israel. The second section deals accordingly with the Assyrian exile of deported Israelites in Igbo/Xubur, a region which is nowadays supposed to be situated within the Oyo Empire. The five kings of this section are Assyrian rulers from Ofiran/Sargon II to Abipa/Assurbanipal mentioned in chronological order. The third section comprises the names of eleven kings who are mostly Assyrian rulers from the period of decline. The fourth section offers a remarkable shift in perspective insofar as it adopts the point of view of the Babylonians. It begins with Labisi/Nabonassar (747-734), the founder of the Neo-Babylonian kingdom, who was

⁴³ Law, *Empire*, 53-54; Lange, "Lost tribes", 591.

⁴⁴ Johnson, *History*, 3-5; Lange, "Lost tribes", 582-4.

subjected by Gaha/Tiglath-pileser in 745 BCE, continues with three Babylonian kings who endured the Assyrian oppression, and ends with the insurrection of Abiodun/Nabopolassar (626-605) and his overthrow of the Assyrian domination.⁴⁵

The dynastic traditions of Kanem-Bornu, Kebbi and Oyo reflect in different terms the same situation of the fall of the Assyrian Empire. They begin with the pre-Assyrian period, emphasize the importance of Assyrian domination and acknowledge the beneficial effect of the Babylonian conquest. However, only the Oyo tradition clearly points out the humiliating effects of the despotic oppression by a figure, which can be shown to represent the Neo-Assyrian kings, and the generally felt relief on the liberation of the people by a figure corresponding to Nabopolassar, the founder of the Neo-Babylonian dynasty.

5 Conclusion

The Assyrian hypothesis is based on evidence provided by different disciplines: history, archaeology, linguistics, philology and ancient Near Eastern studies. Its elaboration benefitted from the results of ethno-historical research promoted by German and Scandinavian anthropologists during the colonial period.⁴⁶ However, contrary to previous theories it does not posit that cultural achievements were transposed from the Near East to West Africa by vague undated waves of migrations without major changes, or that there were no further developments in Africa. From the traditions of origin and the onomastic material included in several dynastic traditions a number of historically more precise conclusions can be reached. With respect to the transcontinental continuities and discontinuities, they can be summarized as follows.

The collapse of the Assyrian Empire in the years between 612 and 605 BCE resulted in a mass migration having important consequences for the rise of social complexity and the diffusion of ancient Near Eastern technologies to sub-Saharan Africa. The people participating in the formation of states in the Central Sudan were mainly deportees belonging to different nations subjected by Assyria who were deported and resettled in Syria-Palestine. During the final collapse of public order in Syria-Palestine following the battle of Carchemish in 605 BCE, these resettled deportees had to flee

⁴⁵ Johnson, *History*, 143-196; Lange, "Lost tribes", 582-591.

⁴⁶ Frobenius, *Und Afrika*, 605-336; Baumann, "Völker", 50-71; Oliver/Fage, *Short History*, 44-52.

because they were harassed by their neighbours eager to recover their lands and to take revenge for the oppression endured under the Assyrians. Though some Assyrians participated in the exodus to sub-Saharan Africa, they were outnumbered by far by the former deportees and deliberately excluded from leading positions. Resenting their former oppression, the people prevented them from restoring their domination on African soil and thus from perpetuating their former despotism.

The new states founded in West Africa by refugees from the Assyrian Empire seem to have had little in common with Assyria or any other single ancient Near Eastern polity. From the reshaping of the ancient Near Eastern dynastic history of the refugees in the Central Sudan it appears that in each newly created African state different ethnic groups participated to different degrees in the state-building: in Kanem the indigenous Babylonians became the new leaders, in Kebbi the Kassites, and among the Oyo-Yoruba the Chaldean incursors in Babylonia. Since the most important principle uniting the Central-Sudanic state-builders was the desire to forestall the restoration of an Assyrian-like oppression in Africa, the different states created were founded on the constitutional principal to restrict the power of the monarch as much as possible. Egalitarianism among the state-founders and the constitutional control of the kings by different institutional means were the most important innovations which took place in Africa. Reaction against despotism, ethnic equilibrium and diversity are thus significant distinctive traits of the new states which on account of their innovative nature can be regarded as African pioneer states rather than ancient Near Eastern successor states. Though the available evidence only throws light on the Near Eastern immigrants, it may be assumed that the anti-oppressive and egalitarian principles were extended to the indigenous African population. The absence of any enduring cleavage between immigrants and locals, widespread intermarriage and the adoption of the local language in most cases seem to support this view.⁴⁷

Some critics may feel that the findings exposed here result in a rejuvenated Hamitic hypothesis. Hopefully, a careful reading of the paper will persuade them that the documentary basis of the research and its theoretical outlook owe nothing to racist

⁴⁷ Lange, "Successor state", 375-380; id., *Founding*, 18-23, 37.

speculations. Though conflicting with the present focus of African historical research on the African continent alone, its conclusions may be worthy of constructive discussion.

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