

A LETTER FROM KI-TORO MAHAMMAN GAANI, KING
OF BUSA (BORGU, NORTHERN NIGERIA) ABOUT THE
'KISRA' STORIES OF ORIGIN
(c. 1910).

P.F. DE MORAES FARIAS

The context of the documents presented in this paper is firstly the history of Busa ('Bussa' in maps and administrative language), and Busa's place within the general history of Borgu; secondly the traditions of origin of Borgu ruling lineages; and thirdly the West African travels of the French explorer G.R. de Gironcourt (1908-1909 and 1911-1912). We will briefly examine these three areas in succession, before turning our attention to the documents themselves.

Busa in Borgu: Factors for unity and factors for cleavage

Busa is best remembered in Europe as the place where Mungo Park met his death in March or April 1806. But in its own right Busa is a major historical area within the region traditionally known as Borgu. The location of Busa's capital has changed over time, and it is now at New Busa following the construction of the Kainji dam across the Niger.¹

Borgu has a significant degree of historical cohesion, which was brought about by three overlapping factors dating from the precolonial period. The first factor was the body of traditions about fanning-out migrations, and dynastic origins, which still links Borgu's old polities together. According to these traditions, initially members of the same lineage founded a few kindred states, but new fissions took place in these states: segments of the

1 See K. Lupton, 'The Death of Mungo Park at Bussa', *Nigeria Magazine*, 72, 1962, 58-70; M. Crowder, *Revolt in Bussa*, London 1973, 19.

ruling lineage would break away to found new polities, or would be assigned to new locations to guard access to their polity of origin. Thus a system of principal polities and subordinate chiefdoms was created.

The second factor was the network of connections between Borgu's old trade centres, which made the region into a commercial, and cultural, cross-roads between other cultural areas—to the north the Sojoy (Songhay), Zarma and Dèndí, all of whom speak forms of the Sojoy language; to the south and southeast the Yorùbá; to the east the Nupe; and to the northeast the Hausa; while to the west and southwest stretched the routes that crossed Borgu to link the countries east of the Niger with the Volta basin. The diaspora of long-distance Muslim traders established in Borgu before the seventeenth century spoke Dèndí, and this language continues to be spoken by their descendants, and by others assimilated to these descendants.²

The third factor was the generally successful resistance of Borgu polities against encroachment by surrounding powers—Sojoy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Ọyó in the eighteenth century, and the Sokoto Caliphate in the nineteenth century. In or around 1837, contingents from all over Borgu fought side by side with the *Aláàfin* of Ọyó, and together with him were defeated, at the battle of Ilorin. But Borgu political autonomy mostly survived this disastrous defeat. This preserved a space for the persistence of political institutions, and of compromises between Islam and traditional religion, that mirrored one another across the dividing lines between Borgu states. The best example of these shared institutions is the *Gaani* festival, which continues to be celebrated by kings and chiefs throughout Borgu.

But Borgu's relative cohesion has been maintained against heavy odds. Following the Franco-German Convention of 1897 and the Anglo-French Convention of 1898, Borgu was divided

2 P. Lovejoy, 'The Role of the Wangara in the Economic Transformation of the Central Sudan in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries', *Journal of African History*, xix, 2, 1978, 173-93.

between the British and French colonial empires.³ It remains divided by the border between the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the Republic of Benin. Some of the principal Borgu polities are within Nigeria, namely Busa, Ilo ('Ilo'), Wawa, and Kããma ('Kaiama'). Others are within Benin, namely Nìkì ('Nikki'), Kãni or Kandi, Kpande ('Kouandé'), and Kpàràkú or Kòròkú ('Parakou').

But deeper than the modern divide between Francophones and Anglophones, another linguistic cleavage cuts across Borgu: the language of traditional political culture is not the same in all the precolonial states. In Busa and Wawa it is a variety of Boko-Busa or Boo-Busa, a Manding language also spoken in the northeast of Béninois Borgu. Another variety of the same idiom, known as Boko-Baru, is spoken in Kããma. In Ilo, Boko-Busa is in retreat and is being replaced by Hausa, which is also spreading among the inhabitants of other areas of Nigerian Borgu. In contrast with all this, the dominant language in Béninois Borgu is Bààtónúm, a Gur or Voltaic language, which is also spoken in southern areas of Nigerian Borgu.⁴

The traditions of Ilo and Busa agree that their respective foundations were closely linked, though they put forward different views as to the respective degrees of seniority of these two polities. Wawa and Nìkì, according to their own traditions, were founded from Busa. Nìkì appears after that as the major centre of dispersion, from which were founded a number of polities including Kãni or Kandi, Kpande, and Kããma. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, Nìkì was the most powerful of

3 O.B. Bagodo, 'Liens ethniques et systèmes de chefferie traditionnelle comme élément de coopération transfrontalière: l'exemple des "Bariba"', paper delivered to the Nigeria-Benin Transborder Cooperation Workshop, Badgary, 8-14 May 1988; K. Lupton, 'The Partitioning of Borgu in 1898 and the French Enclaves in Nigeria, 1900-1960', *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, xii, 3-4, 1984-5, 77-94; M. H. Stewart, 'The Borgu People of Nigeria and Bénin: the Disruptive Effect of Partition on Traditional Political and Economic Relations', *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* xii, 3-4, 1984-5, 95-120.

4 In addition to Boko-Busa, Bààtónúm and Dèndí, other languages spoken in Borgu are Fulfulde, Yorùbá, and Hausa.

ail Borgu polities. It was under the command of the king of Nìkì that all Borgu troops fought in the battle of Ilorin.

But acknowledgement of having been founded from another polity did not necessarily imply political subordination to the founders' place of origin. In this regard, a large margin for dispute, and negotiation, remains to this day in traditional accounts. And it is clear that political allegiances varied over time with changes in the balance of power between different polities. Rivalries and conflicts often flared up between Borgu states in pre-colonial days.

However, according to its own traditions, Busa enjoys seniority over all other Borgu traditional polities, including Nìkì. This is of course a controversial issue. There are counterclaims nurtured by other Borgu polities, which deny that their origins are to be traced back to Busa, or which acknowledge an original link but deny any political overlordship by Busa. The matter has been complicated by territorial divisions and reorganisations during the colonial period and since independence.

In 1907, Ilo and the area to the south and southeast of it were administratively separated from the rest of Nigerian Borgu and attached to Sokoto Province. This separation has continued ever since. By 1954, the rest of Nigerian Borgu was organised in two Emirates or Native Authorities, respectively headed by Busa and Kããma. But in 1954 Kaiama Emirate was disestablished and its constituent districts were annexed to Busa Emirate, now renamed the Emirate of Borgu. It was only in 1989 that Kaiama Emirate re-emerged as a separate Local Government Area, coexisting with the Borgu Emirate or Local Government Area within Kwara State. This change was not well received in Busa and, following the administrative redivision of Nigeria on 27 August 1991, Borgu Emirate has been transferred to Niger State, while Kaiama Emirate remains in Kwara State. Ilo is now within the new Kebbi State, formerly part of Sokoto State.

Nevertheless Busa, particularly through its versions of the Kisra or Kisira stories of origin, continues to see Borgu as an indivisible cultural whole, with Busa as its natural head and heart.

Traditions of origin of Borgu ruling lineages: the Kisra or Kisira stories and ritual in Busa

According to stories that have circulated in Borgu since at least 1889, the ancestor of all Borgu royal lineages is Kisra or Kisira.⁵ The name of this ancestor is derived from the term *Kisrā*, which is used in classical Arabic sources as the title of the Sasanian rulers of pre-Islamic Iran. In the Borgu stories, Kisra or Kisira is a founding figure who migrated to Africa after refusing to convert to Islam. Different versions of those stories attribute different origins to Kisra, but he is always said to have come from the east, and is also always identified with opposition to the Prophet Muḥammad, or to one or another of the Qurʾānic prophets.

There is a persistent, though highly misleading, paradigm for the interpretation of the Kisra stories of origin. It was set by Frobenius, and its central features have remained basically unchallenged ever since, even by scholars who have criticised other aspects of Frobenius' work.⁶ In Frobenius' view, the central trait of the cultural identity of Borgu was systematic opposition to everything Islamic, and this trait was expressed in the Kisira narratives and ritual. These were construed by him as a celebration of a heroic, Byzantium-like, resistance to Muslim invasion extending over several centuries. Later scholars have focused rather on the nineteenth-century clashes between Borgu and the Sokoto Caliphate, and have acknowledged the presence of Muslim

5 See P. F. de Moraes Farias, 'Òrànmiyàn's Frustrated War on Mecca: Reflexes of Borgu Ritual in Johnson's Yorùbá Narratives', in T. Fálolá and D. Henige (eds.), *Studies on Samuel Johnson*, Madison (forthcoming); Captain A.F. Mockler-Ferryman, *Up the Niger*, London, 1892, 144; Lieut. de Vaisseau Hourst, *Sur le Niger et du pays des Tuaregs*, Paris, 1898, 418; D. F. McCall, 'Kisra, Chosroes, Christ, Etc.', *African Historical Studies*, i, 2, 1968, 255-77; P. Stevens Jr, 'The Kisra Legend and the Distortion of Historical Tradition', *Journal of African History*, xvi, 2, 1975, 185-200; M.H. Stewart, 'The Kisra Legend as Oral History', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, xiii, 1, 1980, 51-70.

6 See L. Frobenius, *Und Afrika sprach...*, 4 vols., Berlin-Ch. 1912, ii, 344; L. Frobenius, *The Voice of Africa*, trans. R. Blind, 2 vols., London 1913, ii, 627.

communities inside Borgu. Nevertheless, these scholars have continued to see the Kisra traditions as, essentially, an ideology of resistance to Islam and Muslim influence.

This is however a reductionist approach. In the stories and the ritual, Kisra's attitude towards Islam is depicted as an ambiguous one, rather than one of outright hostility. According to Busa tradition, though Kisra refused to convert to Islam, he (or one of his immediate successors) nevertheless agreed to perform Muslim prayers twice a year, and the Prophet Muḥammad himself regarded this compromise as acceptable. A ritual of prayer followed by warlike challenge to Islam was performed, year after year, by successive Busa traditional rulers, until it was abandoned during the reign (1935-67) of Emir Woru Babaki (*Alhaji* Mahamman Sani), a pious Muslim.⁷ Clearly the Kisra stories and rites have signified a limit to the ruler's association with Islam, rather than an uncompromising reaction to Muslim ways. Such stories, and rites, fitted well with a situation in which kings were required to retain roles that were incompatible with Islam, yet were also required to maintain good relations with traders, and other Muslims, in their territory. In short, kings should neither become Muslim nor entirely refuse to associate themselves with Islam.

From the point of view of the Muslims established in Borgu, and tied by common interests and kinship links to local non-Muslims (including royalty), the same stories and rites justified their allegiance to 'pagan' kings, and fostered a sense of belonging in local society in spite of religious differences. Like the non-Muslim kings, the Muslims needed to preserve their own ritual identity, but also needed to maintain a close relationship with those on the other side of the classificatory, and religious, divide.

It logically follows that the Kisra narratives and ritual were not generated against the local Muslim population. Rather, the local Muslims themselves must have been instrumental in the creation of the whole body of Kisra traditions. After all, these Borgu traditions are couched in symbolic idioms borrowed from Islamic repertoires. Naturally, it was the local Muslims who had the best

7 See Moraes Farias, 'Òrànmíyàn's Frustrated War'.

access to the intellectual means of production required by the task.⁸ We will see that the documents collected by De Gironcourt, and published in this paper, confirm this view.

The West African travels of G.R. De Gironcourt and his acquisition of Ki-Toro Gaani's letter.

Georges Reynard de Gironcourt was a French *ingénieur agronome et d'agriculture coloniale*, trained at the Institut National Agronomique, and at the École d'Agriculture Coloniale of Vincennes. After being in charge for some years of an agronomic station in the Ardennes, he went to Madagascar to study the cultivation of the coconut palm. Then he went to Morocco to collect soil samples, and to establish a compendium of the local flora. While in Fez in March 1907, he was stoned by attackers and seriously wounded in the head, but managed to survive. The following year he undertook his first expedition to West Africa, which lasted thirteen months (August 1908–September 1909), and which was sponsored by the Ministère des Colonies and the Société de Géographie.⁹

The aim of this first expedition was twofold: to study the geography and populations of the Niger Bend, and to investigate the actual and prospective development of agriculture in French, English, and German colonies. De Gironcourt started from Timbuktu, which had been occupied by the French fifteen years earlier, but which was still surrounded by 'unpacified' country (a French military officer, Captain Grosdemange, was killed north of the town soon after De Gironcourt had met him).

At first De Gironcourt travelled in military style, in the company of a detachment of fifty *tirailleurs* commanded by a

8 Moraes Farias, 'Òrànmíyàn's Frustrated War'.

9 On De Gironcourt's expeditions and earlier career see: G.R. de Gironcourt *et al.*, *Missions de Gironcourt en Afrique occidentale, 1908-1909, 1911-1912. Documents scientifiques*, Paris: Société de Géographie, 1920; the report on a 1911 conference by De Gironcourt in the *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie de Lille*, lv, 1913, 321-45; and G.R. de Gironcourt, 'Mission en Afrique occidentale. De l'Adrar au Cameroun (1911-1912)', *La Géographie*, xxviii, 1913, 295-307.

French captain. But he was anxious to meet the local people in less intimidating circumstances. Hence he left the military detachment behind and travelled on horseback through Gurma country, to Hombori, with only two followers. Later he arranged to travel down the Niger in a steel canoe, with seven men and a young Arma cook-interpreter, Mahamane, recruited for him at Timbuktu by the famous Dupuis-Yakouba. For three months he travelled down the Niger, interrupting his canoe trip from time to time to investigate the hinterland, on horseback, with Mahamane. It was during one of these excursions that he first saw, at one of the Bentiya necropolises, the Arabic epitaphs which eventually would launch him on his second expedition to West Africa three years later.¹⁰

At Karimama, downstream from Niamey, De Gironcourt abandoned the Niger, and travelled south overland through what is now the Republic of Benin, observing the Fulbe populations of Borgu, and the Somba. He later visited Djougou, Abomey, Lagos, Ibadan, and Abeokuta. He returned to France with a 1/500,000 map of the Niger Bend, more than three hundred sets of physical measurements of African persons, several herbaria, and more than 730 photographs. Upon his return he was made a *lauréat* of the Société de Géographie.

In October 1911 he arrived again in Timbuktu, on a second trip sponsored by the Ministère des Colonies, the Ministère de l'Instruction Publique, and the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres—which had asked him to investigate the Arabic epigraphy of the Niger valley and adjacent areas. He travelled in Masina, visited Lake Debo (November 1911), and then returned to Timbuktu. In January and February 1912 he worked in and around Burem and Gao, and then travelled in the Tilemsi valley and the Adrar-n-Ifoghas with four soldiers (March 1912). A few weeks after he left the area, the detachment commanded by Lieut. Lelorrain, with which De Gironcourt had established contact north of Timbuktu and, again, north of Gao, was massacred by attackers coming from southern Morocco.

10 On Bentiya, see P.F. de Moraes Farias, 'The Oldest Extant Writing of West Africa: Medieval Epigraphs from Essek, Saney, and Egef-n-Tawaqqast (Mali)', *Journal des africanistes*, lx, 2, 1990, 66, 104-8.

It was in the Adrar, in Gao, and later at Bentiya and other locations downstream from Gao, that De Gironcourt produced most of his precious collection of more than eight hundred *estampages* (paper-squeeze impressions) of Arabic and Tifinay inscriptions, now kept at the Institut de France. While travelling south from Gao, he visited encampments of the Kel Essouk on the Gurma side of the Niger, and gathered Arabic manuscripts written by them for him (May 1912).¹¹ Then he spent one month at Zinder, where the Soṅoy *‘ālim* Isufi Alilu, who had studied for eight years in Sokoto, arranged for copies of works of Sokoto literature to be made by his disciples for the French traveller.¹² While De Gironcourt was at Zinder, a hut collapsed on him—he was dug out after a while, with a badly injured knee. For one month he was unable to walk, but then proceeded to Say in June 1912, and from Say travelled to Nigeria, to begin the part of his journey that most concerns the present paper.

Travelling down the Niger in the dry season was difficult: the river was reduced to a string of shallow pools linked by rapids. De Gironcourt’s faithful steel canoe had to be abandoned in favour of a local canoe, which itself was abandoned in favour of portage downstream from Yelwa, at the beginning of the Tsulu rapids, north of Busa. After visiting and photographing Busa, De Gironcourt proceeded to Jebba, where C.L. Temple (then Deputy Governor of the Northern Provinces) arranged for him to travel down the river to the sea. But it was at Bajibo, upstream from Jebba and south of Busa, that De Gironcourt was given the documents to which we must now turn.

The letter of King Ki-Toro Mahamman Gaani and its enclosure

At Bajibo, on 15 August 1912, the German elephant hunter Ed. Weber (who gave his postal address as ‘Niger Company, Jebba’) presented De Gironcourt with three 18 cm x 24 cm leaves of laid paper, bearing three unequal crescents of the moon as

11 See Moraes Farias, ‘The Oldest Extant Writing’, 85-6.

12 De Gironcourt later tried to obtain the French academic distinction *Ordre des Palmes Académiques* for Isufi Alilu.

watermark.¹³ The recto and verso of one of these leaves (Ms. 223) contained a letter addressed to Weber by the king of Busa. The other two (Ms. 222) contained a note enclosed with the letter. According to the information sheet attached by De Gironcourt to the two manuscripts, it was believed that they had been written not by the king himself but by his 'marabouts', and that they contained information on the traditions of the area—and in particular about 'a silver ring bearing Arabic inscriptions, preserved since time immemorial by the Busa chiefs'.

No further information about Ed. Weber is available at the moment, and it is not possible to determine what kind of relations he had with the king of Busa. The ring referred to by De Gironcourt is, of course, the famous ring with an attached silver medallion still in the possession of the present Emir of Borgu, *alhaji* Musa Mohammed Ki-Gera III.¹⁴ In Busa, the medallion is believed to have been a gift from Mungo Park, though it was actually presented by the Lander brothers. The medallion and ring apparently were attracting local European interest at the time De Gironcourt was in the region, since in the following year J.C.O. Clarke, District Officer, Yelwa, wrote a note about it.¹⁵ It is actually a King George III medallion struck in 1814, for distribution among Native American chiefs who supported Britain in her war with the United States.

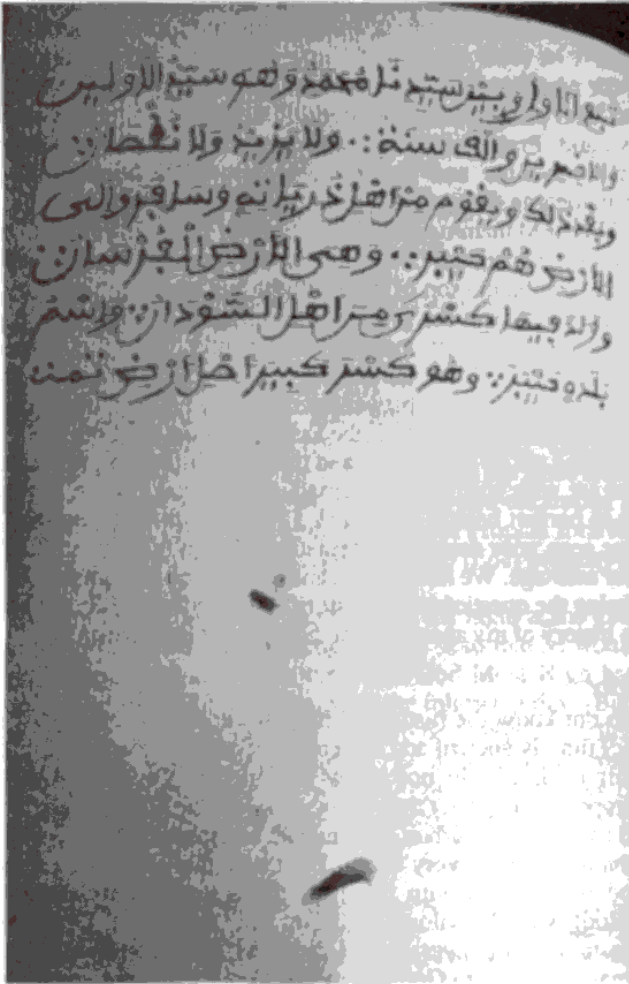
We will now translate, and comment on, the two manuscripts.

- 13 De Gironcourt collection of Arabic manuscripts, Bibliothèque de l'Institut de France, Ms. 2416, xii: 222-223.
- 14 We thank His Highness, the Emir of Borgu, for kindly showing the ring to my Béninois colleagues Mr. O.B. Bagodo and Mr. O. Banni-Guéné, and myself, at his palace on 12 January 1990.
- 15 Lupton, 'The Death of Mungo Park', 59, 62-3, 66. See also Crowder, *Revolt in Bussa*, 221.

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ وَكَبْرِي صَلَوةٌ وَسَلَامٌ عَلٰى مَنْ سَبَّحَ الْحَمْدَ فِيهِ
 خَلِقَهُ الْعَمَلُ لِلّٰهِ النَّاءِ جَعَلَ الْوَشِيْقَةَ لِرَاةِ اَبْدَانِ وَمَنْ يَزِيْلُ
 الْبَهْتَلُ وَتَغْفِيَةٌ تَصَدِّقُ فِيهِ كَلَامُ رَاذِ اَوْ فَعِ امِيْنِ
 بِمَرْحَمِمْ عَلَانِي اميرنو تسلا بر جبير يتر تشور جبيدة
 كستر الكريم وابير الكريم فدورث المجد اجد ادو
 والمجد اكبر اكبر از كس تجية وسلام ورضو وكرام
 كاييل او تغقب تواضع وتكريم الي صيب الكريم
 الصالح الامور بيرا ناسر ذاك صيب المسمى قلمتر
 البنفردر قلمتر في بلد جتا سلت علما فينتك وعافية
 الجماعتك وكافة مر معك صغير او كبير وان
 تسال علما فنح بر خير والعافية اما بعد اعلامك
 رايت بريدك المر اثنيير مع وثيقتك وفراناه
 وسمعتا ما فيهما بكلام الخبر عجوز نر انر
 لا يعلم خبره عجوز نر كلام خبره كستر القديم

ان لا تعرف غير احد من كلام غيره و زمان
 وقت زمان بقدم القديم ان امير بوسيد الا علام
 ان انتم البتور و اما بعد عطاهك قد بلعنا
 نمر مع عمارة ابيض مع الحجره هب مع طيب
 وشكر تلك وشكر كثير و جرم و سرار
 غير و نعمه اطول الله عمره مع عمره اما بعد
 الحمد لله والحمد لك حير اننا بريدك
 طيب منزلة غسل ايضا هب يتبع الك
 واحد مع جارة عشر بعثت و دع شكري
 نمسة اما بعد اعلامك ان امير بوسيد
 كثير بقله بريد مع بريدك
 نظره عايفيتك هب و سلام على من تبع

وسميتم مكة: . ويفتقها العلماء ورواه
 له: لا لاله الا هو يشرك مكة وهذا
 عند الله حرسها الله تعالى بالجنين
 ويولد الولد اسمه محمد رسول الله صلى الله
 عليه وسلم: . وهو قاتم الشيبير وامام
 المنسلي: . ويكثرت تبع الاوالات بعتر سنة: .
 وفرضه مولد النبي محمد صلى الله عليه وسلم
 الاجار ابنته تنرا بعد موضع البلاد للجنين
 وينسرتبع الاوالات في المدينة اربع مائة
 دينار: . الا ان النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم علمه
 وبكثرت في المدينة: . وفلم تبع الاوالات
 مكة والى الارض الهند: . وترا بكتسان: . ومط
 بعتر سنة ثمة الله في طاعة الله ورسوله: .
 وينسرتبع الاوالات ولادة وخرماتية: . ويتبع
 تبع الاوالات



*Ms. De Gironcourt 223: the letter from the King**recto:*

In the name of God. And He suffices. Blessing and peace upon him who praised God with a rosary of pebbles¹⁶ in the palm of his hand. Praise be to God who has established letters to give rest to bodies and to do away with falsehood, and for strengthening the truth of every matter that occurs.

From Maḥamma Ghānē, the Emir of Būsā, Ibn Jibrīlu Dan-Tūru, granddaughter [*sic*, a mistake for ‘grandson’] of the noble Kisra, who is the son of a noble who has inherited the glory of his ancestors and the greatest greatest glory. Purest greetings, peace, contentment, honour sufficiently, extreme respect, followed by humility and respect to my noble friend, the instrument of reconciliation between peoples, my beloved friend called Jāman [German] al-Batūrī [the European]—in the town of Jabba [Jebba]. I ask of your health and that of your people and all those who are with you, great and small. Should you ask about us, we are in perfect health. After that, I [wish to] inform you [that] I have seen your despatch [consisting of] two men together with your message. We have read it and understood its contents. Concerning the question of the history of my ancestor, I do not know the history of my ancestor. The history of Kisra is ancient.

verso:

I do not know the history of my ancestors. The history of his [*sic*] time is ancient and his epoch very remote and old. I, the Emir of Būsā, do not know his history. Perhaps you, the European, [do]. After that, I have received the gift you sent me: a red robe, a white turban, gold nugget and rose scent [rose water]. I thank you very very much. I am extremely happy, and may God reward you with [His] goodness and bounty. May He prolong your life along with His life. After that, I [wish to] inform you that ever since I received your communication I remain thankful to God and to you. Your letter is sweet in my heart like the sweetness of honey.

16 For a possibly comparable expression, see J.O. Hunwick, *Sharīʿa in Songhay: The Replies of Al-Maghilī to the Questions of Askia al-Ḥājj Muḥammad*, Oxford, 1985, 6-7 (Arabic text), 64 (transl.).

My gift to you includes one ram,¹⁷ ten chickens, and I send money in thanks—five shillings. Now then I [wish to] inform you [that] I, the Emir of Būsā, granddaughter [*sic*] of Kisra, am enclosing the reply to your communication, and I hope it finds you in good health. Peace be upon him who follows the right path.

Ms. De Gironcourt 222: Note enclosed with the letter

recto:

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. God bless the noble Prophet.

Concerning *suḷḷān* Kisrā [or: Kistrē], and the treasure houses¹⁸ of the land of Kisrā in Fāris [Persia] and Rūm [the lands of the Byzantine empire]. They are people of the Yemen. The name of their ancestor was Ḥumayr b. Wurda^a.¹⁹ His title was *Tubba^c al-awwal* [*Tubba^c the First*]. He ruled the lands from Yemen to °Irāq, until he came with his troops and encamped at the gate of Mecca. [This was] after the death of Prophet Ibrāhīm (peace be upon him) and his descendants of the [first] progeny of Ismā°il and Ishāq.

He was *Tubba^c al-awwal* and he spent the night at the gate of Mecca with his troops. He thought in his heart that he would eat up [conquer] Mecca—[the city] that God Most High had protected—with war, in the morning of the following day. [But] in the night he was taken ill with a severe headache. He called before him his °ulamā°, including an °ālim [who was] from among the saints of God, and who begged him for news of [what was happening] to his head—to disclose the cause of his headache.

17 Reading *kabsh* instead of *kabs*.

18 The expression *khazā°in al-arḍ* is from Qur°ān xii, 55, and may be translated as 'treasure houses' or 'grain storages'. I thank Professor J.O. Hunwick for calling my attention to the Qur°ānic passage, and for other very valuable editorial comments.

19 'Ḥumayr' is probably a distorted vowelting of 'Ḥimyar', the name of the famous Yemenite ancestral figure. But so far I have not been able to find the name 'Wurda°a' in the genealogies of legendary Yemenite ancestors.

Tubba^c al-awwal declared that he had formed the intention of, in the following morning, eating up [conquering] that city (.....)

1 verso:

called Mecca. The ‘*ulamā*’ dissuaded him [from doing it]. They told him ‘No, No, No, No !’ He should leave Mecca alone because it was a city of security before God.²⁰ God Most High protected it with a [supernatural] army. Therein would be born a boy called Muḥammad the Messenger of God (upon him be God’s blessing and peace). He would be the Seal of the Prophets, and the *Imām* [prayer leader or ‘pre-eminent’] of the Messengers of God.

Tubba^c al-awwal stayed on for forty years waiting for the birth of the Prophet Muḥammad (upon him be God’s blessing and peace), so as to see him. Given the long time the soldiers stayed away from their country, *Tubba^c al-awwal* built four hundred houses in the city [for them]. And, in honour of the Prophet (upon him be God’s blessing and peace), he settled his ‘*ulamā*’ in the city. [Later], *Tubba^c al-awwal* proceeded from the land of Mecca to the land of India. He stopped at ‘Ulsān²¹ and died there (God’s mercy [be upon him]), in submission to God and His messenger. He left behind children and [other] descendants. And between

2 recto:

Tubba^c al-awwal and our *sayyid* [lord] Muḥammad, who is the *sayyid* of the people of former and later times, there was a thousand years—no more, no less. Afterwards, some of his

20 The expression ‘town of security’ appears in connection with Mecca in Qurʾān xciv, 3.

21 ‘Ulsān’ is possibly a distortion of ‘Khurāsān’, the name of one of the countries which, according to Muslim legend, were conquered by the *Tubba^c* kings of Yemen. The distortion probably reflects oral transmission of bookish knowledge. The phoneme /t/ is replaced by /l/, as often happens in languages spoken in the region (cf. the alternative forms ‘Ki-Toro’ and ‘Ki-Tolo’ for the name of the king of Busa), and the Arabic phoneme /kh/—which does not occur in those languages—is replaced by a less unfamiliar one.

descendants travelled to their land, Ḥaybar.²² It was a land of *fursān* [knights]. It was there that Kisra [or Kistrē] of the Sūdān people [i.e. of the blacks] was born. The name of his town was Ḥaybar. And he was Kisra [*sic*] the great, the origin of the [people of this] land. End [of the ms.].

Commentary on the two manuscripts, and concluding remarks

Ms. 223 (the king's letter) supports the first of the two main points made in the present paper. In a very striking manner, it shows that it was not the king but, rather, the Muslims in his court, who possessed the means of production of traditions about Kisra, Kisra, or Kistrā.

The evidence in Ms. 222 (the enclosure that came with the king's letter) confirms the other main point made in the present paper. It shows that the Kisra or Kisra traditions embody not a rejection of Islam but, rather, an ideology of subtle compromise between the local Muslims and their 'pagan' kings. This type of ideology constituted, in the nineteenth century, something of an alternative to *jihād* ideologies.²³ It certainly deserves more careful study than it has hitherto been granted.

Both Ms. 222 and Ms. 223 display a fair degree of acquaintance with Arabic vocabulary and grammar (though this did not prevent mistakes, such as the use of the word for 'granddaughter' instead of 'grandson' in Ms. 223). Ms. 222 (the note enclosed with the king's letter) adds to this a knowledge of Islamic lore from the Middle East, displayed by a writer who was also able to read the Qur'ān in Arabic, and quote from it.

King Ki-Toro (or Ki-Tolo) Mahamman Gaani is a well-known figure. As stated in his letter, his father was king Jibrin Dan Toro, who is also known as Ki-Gera II, and who reigned from 1862 to 1895. In spite of his middle name, Ki-Toro Mahamman Gaani was not a Muslim at the time his letter to Ed. Weber was written. He reigned twice in Busa, first from 1903 to 1915, and later—after

22 'Haybar' is, of course, 'Khaybar' (cf. previous note), the name of the famous oasis situated ca. 100 miles north of Medina. In 7 AH/629 AS, the Prophet Muhammad expelled the Jewish population of Khaybar.

23 On this see Moraes Farias, 'Ōrānmfān's Frustrated War'.

conversion to Islam—from 1924 to 1935. The letter was written during his first reign, but we do not know precisely when. The date *c.* 1910 quoted in the title of this paper is purely notional.

Ki-Toro's conversion took place *c.* 1920, when he was in exile in Ilorin. His half-brother and rival Ki-Jibirin Kwandara (or Kpandara), who reigned in Busa from 1916 to 1924 (with the title of Emir from 1917), also converted to Islam *c.* 1920—he was the first Muslim ruler of Busa, and his conversion appears to have outraged the majority of his subjects. He is said to have destroyed a traditional shrine and thrown objects of traditional cults into the Niger, thus breaking the old compromise between Islam and traditional religion.²⁴ However, the Kisra stories of origin, which are a product of the old ideological dispensation, have survived to this day under Busa's Muslim emirs.

Ms. 222 (the enclosure that came with the king's letter) is an embodiment of the old ideology. Though short and devoid of literary graces, it is a rather sophisticated rhetorical exercise. It brings together 'paganism' and Islam in the putative ancestors of the kings of Busa. In addition, it offers a glorified picture of the role of 'ulamā' as counsellors of 'pagan' kings—an image extremely relevant to the situation obtaining in Busa and elsewhere in Borgu. It also provides clear evidence that local Muslims were very active thinkers, who shaped theories of distant origin so as to grasp local African realities, and who used in creative and topical ways the Islamic learning available to them.

The first move in the discourse developed by Ms. 222 is to link the kings of Busa with Yemenite, pre-Islamic, Arab ancestors. This means giving the Busa kings 'pagan' ancestors who, nevertheless, are described in positive tones in Muslim tradition. The figure of the Yemenite king Sayf b. Dhī Yazan plays a similar role in the stories of origin of the Sefawa dynasty of Kanem-Borno, as was brilliantly shown by the late Professor Abdullahi Smith.²⁵

24 See Crowder, *Revolt in Bussa*, 174-5.

25 A. Smith, *A Little New Light – Selected Historical Writings of Professor Abdullahi Smith*, Zaria 1987, I, 40.

In Ms. 222, the Yemenite king *Tubba^c al-awwal* (*Tubba^c* the First) is fused with Ḥimyar (if our reading of this name is correct), in a kind of genealogical shorthand which clashes with classical Arab sources, but which thickens the genealogical root being manufactured in Busa.²⁶ The story of the expedition against Mecca, and Yathrib (the future Medina), led by a *Tubba^c* king (not necessarily *Tubba^c* the First) comes straight from classical Arab sources.²⁷ In several of these sources the *Tubba^c* attacker desists from his plans following the intercession of Jewish rabbis, and honours Mecca and its *Ka^cba* instead. Furthermore he converts to Judaism upon his return to Yemen (it is well known that Judaism was adopted by Yemenite kings of the fifth and early sixth century AD). By contrast, other Muslim sources emphasise the acceptance of Islam before the birth of the Prophet Muḥammad by one of the *Tubba^c* kings. A *hadīth* states, ‘Curse not *Tubba^c* as he believed in Islam’.²⁸

Ms. 222 does not refer to *Tubba^c* Judaism—though, conceivably, there may be a vague allusion to it in the statement that the descendants of *Tubba^c* the First went, or perhaps returned, to ‘their land’—the Jewish oasis of Ḥaybar (Khaybar). Also, Ms. 222 does not refer to rabbis but, rather, stresses the positive role of ‘*ulamā^ʿ*’ cognisants of Islam, who accompanied the ‘pagan’ *Tubba^c* even in his ‘pagan’ wars—precisely as Muslims courtiers must have done in Borgu. It is the Muslim counsellors who prevent *Tubba^c* from attacking Mecca, and who persuade him to accept Islam—something that Borgu Muslims probably hoped to achieve one day with regard to their own rulers. The great worth of the ‘*ulamā^ʿ*’ is also reflected, towards the end of Ms. 222, in the

26 On this and the history of the *Tubba^c* kings of Yemen, see for instance al-Mas^ʿūdī, *Kitāb Murūj al-Dhahab*, ed. and transl. C. Barbier de Meynard and J. Pavet de Courteille, *Les prairies d’or*, 9 vols., Paris 1861-77, III, 149-55.

27 In addition to al-Mas^ʿūdī, see also al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh al-rusul waʾl-mulūk*, ed. M. J. de Goeje *et al.*, *Annales*, 15 vols., Leiden 1879-1901, II, 901-4.

28 Ibn Wahb, *Jāmi^c*, ed. D. Weil, I, quoted by Muḥammad A. al-Ḥājj, ‘Ma^ʿadd and Yaman in Early Arabic Literature’, M.A. Thesis, University of London, 1962, 107.

statement that those following *Tubba*^c the First settled in Mecca to honour the Prophet Muḥammad.

Tubba^c becomes a figure to be remembered for two opposite reasons: his sacrilegious attempt on Mecca; and his conversion and frustrated hope to behold the Prophet Muḥammad with his own eyes. His symbolic ambiguity may be seen as mirroring, in reverse order, the ritual in which the kings of Busa first accepted to pray, but then made a warlike display against Islam. However, there is a fundamental difference: the final, total, identification with Islam of *Tubba*^c the First was not, at the time Ms. 222 was written, an option open to Busa kings. Hence a different kind of ancestor had to be brought into play in the manuscript—Kisrā or Kisra, descended from *Tubba*^c the First but born in the oasis of Khaybar, a place symbolic of opposition to the Prophet Muḥammad and Islam. The precise kind of balance required by Busa ideology was thus restored: though Kisra or Kisira is not much talked about in Ms. 222, other versions of the traditions of Busa clearly depict him as somebody willing to make compromises with Islam, but not to convert to the religion of the Qurʾān.²⁹

However, it is remarkable that Ms. 222 places so much emphasis on *Tubba*^c the First, and says so little about Kisra or Kisira. By doing so, Ms. 222 attenuates the ‘pagan’ side of the legendary genealogy of the kings of Busa. This may have reflected Muslim hopes that the conversion of the kings was now an achievable goal (as it actually proved to be). But, as we have already said, in the end the Kisra stories (though not all the Kisra ritual) have very well survived the conversion of the kings of Busa to Islam and no replacement of Kisra by *Tubba*^c as ancestral figure has taken place.

Other versions of the Kisra stories, which will not be discussed in this paper, construct the ‘pagan’ side of Kisra’s double, or ambiguous, identity with traits borrowed from those who opposed the Prophet Nūḥ (Noah), or from the Pharaoh who opposed the Prophet Mūsā (Moses), or from Nimrūd (Nimrod)—who, according to Muslim tradition but not the Qurʾān, was the opponent of the Qurʾānic Prophet Ibrāhīm (Abraham). The

29 See Moraes Farias, ‘Ōrānmíyān’s Frustrated War’.

symbolic game is always the same, though the counters used in it may vary. The mixing of elements from different narratives cannot be explained merely as a reflection of ignorance of the 'true' tradition, defective Islamic learning, and so forth. Rather, that mixing or recombination reflects a perceptive grasp of structural equivalencies across different clusters of Qur³anic stories.

But the borrowed counters need not remain what they were in the context of the narratives from which they were borrowed. In Ms. 222, the episode of the headache that afflicted *Tubba*^c the First is borrowed from a tale about Nimrūd, and then transformed. According to the tale, after Nimrūd challenged God with his army, divine punishment was visited on him. An insect entered Nimrūd's nose and went to his brain, and began to grow inside and devour it. The only relief to Nimrūd's pain was to have his head hit with a hammer or iron rod, which made the insect temporarily stop its activities. But gradually it was necessary to increase the violence of the blows, and finally Nimrūd's head was spit open and he died while the insect—now weighing about two pounds—escaped.³⁰ This tale is attenuated in Ms. 222, along lines well known to scholars of folklore.³¹ A monstrous and deadly punishment (in the case of Nimrūd) is transformed into no more than a severe headache that leads to repentance, conversion, and salvation (in the case of *Tubba*^c the First). Metaphorically, this attenuation reflects *Tubba*^c the First's movement from initial 'paganism', shared with Nimrūd, to submission to God and His Messenger.

Finally, a word must be said about the characterisation of Ḥaybar (i.e. Khaybar) as 'a land of knights'. By tradition horsemanship, and particularly skill in mounted warfare, was a very important status symbol for the ruling groups of Borgu—

30 See Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. °Abdallāh al-Kisā'ī, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*, ed. Isaac Eisenberg, *Vita Prophetarum*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1922-3, 141. This tale of Nimrūd's death has a textually very close counterpart in Talmudic tradition, in which it applies not to the Biblical Nimrod, but to Titus the destroyer of the second Jerusalem Temple: see D. Sidersky, *Les origines des légendes musulmanes dans le Coran et dans les vies des prophètes*, Paris 1933, 41-2.

31 See V. Propp, *Theory and History of Folklore*, Manchester 1984, 90-1.

though keeping horses seems to have been easier in Nìkì and the rest of Béninois Borgu than in Busa. To state that the ancestors of Busa royalty came from a land of knights was to emphasise their own knightly status.

When all this has been taken into account, the inescapable conclusion is—against prevailing views—that the Kisra, or Kìsira, stories were not an expression of resistance to Muslim influence. Rather, they were mainly engineered by the Muslims themselves, making use of Muslim cultural idioms, and within a framework of close co-operation between Muslims and ‘pagan’ ruling groups.