

The Kotoko City-States

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The region south-east of Lake Chad, today divided between Nigeria, Cameroun and Chad, is inhabited by a people called Kotoko. They speak a Chadic tongue and have been Muslims for centuries. Fishing is the principal industry.

Apart from archaeological evidence and oral traditions the history of the Kotoko people is known from accounts of explorers, partly medieval descriptions in Arabic and partly nineteenth-century descriptions in English and French. Urbanisation and state formation took place contemporaneously in the period ca. 1100-1400 A.D. (Lebeuf [1981] 213) and between the 14th and 16th centuries the Kotoko were, politically, split up into half a score of small principalities, each consisting of a walled town with its immediate hinterland. Each principality controlled a territory of between ca. 100 and 1,000 km². They were self-governing communities, and they seem to have been independent of one another. Each principality was centred on a small town protected by a defence circuit, and local traditions testify to frequent wars between the towns (Lebeuf & Detourbet [1950]). Ca. 1600 the Kotoko were defeated by king Idris Alooma (1580-1617) and one by one the principalities were brought into subjection of the Bornu empire and converted to Islam. However, the rites still performed in the 20th century at the funeral of a Kotoko prince belong to a religion antedating Islam. These Kotoko principalities seem to have been city-states which together formed a city-state culture (Lebeuf & Detourbet [1950]; Rouland [1998] 135-7). They seem to have persisted as dependent city-states under Bornu domination and, in any case, in the 19th century, after the kingdom of Bornu had itself been weakened by the Fulani jihad, European travellers reported that the Kotoko were still, or once again, split up into – now – fourteen small autonomous principalities each centred on a fortified town. Seven towns to the north formed a federation under the prince who ruled the city of Makari. Five towns to the south formed another league under the prince who ruled the town of Logone Birni. The last two towns were still independent. The population of each of the towns is reported to have had its own dialect. The Makari dialect

is spoken all over the region and at some point Makari seems to have exercised some kind of hegemony over all the other cities. What united these cities was *inter alia* a tradition of common descent, namely from the Sao, the people who supposedly dominated the region before the Kotoko.

In the nineteenth century the Kotoko were torn between Bornu to the west and Bagirmi to the east; epidemics and ecological disasters were added to the losses suffered in war. The cities declined rapidly and some were depopulated (Lebeuf [1969, 1981]). In the 1890s the Kotoko came under Rabeah, the new ruler of Kanem-Bornu. He was killed in battle by the French in 1900; his possessions were divided between the European powers, and the Kotoko region fell to Germany. One can say that the city-state period came to an end with the colonial administration. However, the principalities were maintained as a kind of dependent city-states, and to some extent the city-state culture survived during the first half of the twentieth century (Lebeuf [1969]), just as the Meso-american city-state cultures survived under Spanish domination until ca. 1600.

Urbanisation can be traced back to the 12th century (Lebeuf [1981] 213). Due to the annual flooding of large parts of the region all towns are placed on eminences, and from June to December the region is isolated from neighbouring regions and the towns from one another. All the major towns are walled. Goulfeil, for example, is fortified with a wall ca. 10 m in height, enclosing an area of ca. 20 ha. The town is subdivided into six quarters (Lebeuf & Detourbet [1950] 74-87). Of monumental buildings the most prominent are the mosque, the palace of the sultan, and the *gudu*, a tower to which only the sultan has access. It is placed next to the assembly place and used for proclamations and ceremonies, such as the accession to the Throne of the sultan. It seems to serve no other purpose and its function is, primarily, symbolic (Lebeuf [1969] 90-3; Durand [1983] 334). In 1873 the population of Goulfeil was estimated at ca. 8,000 inhabitants (A. Lebeuf [1969] 30). By the mid 20th century it had dropped to ca. 2,000.

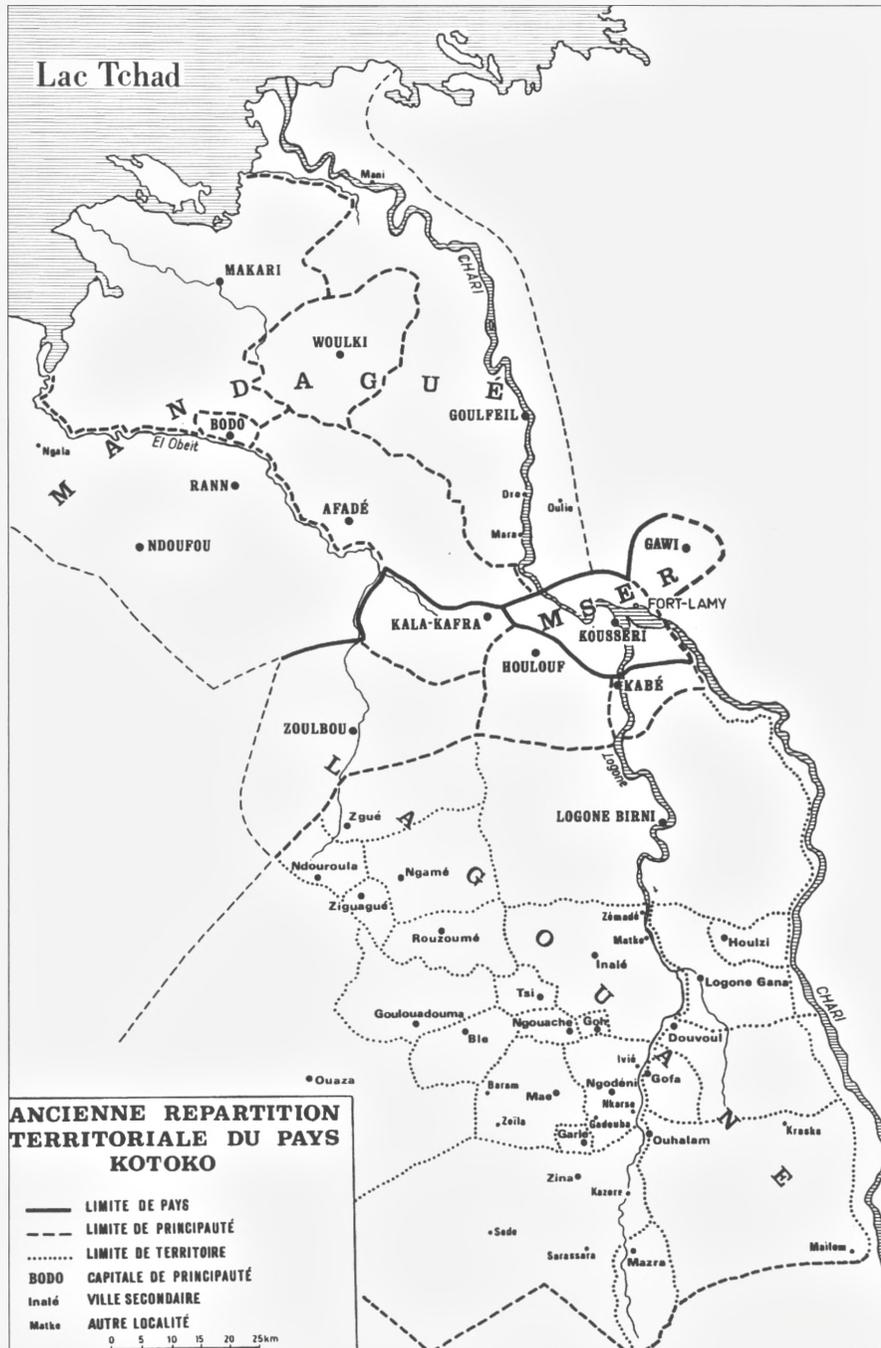


Fig. 1. Historical map of the region inhabited by the Kotoko. From Lebeuf (1969) 94-5.

Notes

- I discovered the Kotoko city-state culture only in December 1999 when it was too late to find a specialist who could provide me with a full account. Instead of leaving it out I preferred to write a short description myself on the basis of what I believe are some of the essential publications. I am most grateful to Professor Pierre de Maret for having read my survey and confirmed that, apparently, I have not made any serious mistake. If I have, the responsibility is mine.

Bibliography

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