Chapter 5

The Development of “Mamlūk” Slavery in the Sokoto Caliphate

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Over the course of one hundred years, an institutionalized royal slave system evolved in the most important emirates of the Sokoto Caliphate.¹ The development of royal slavery - a common and recurrent pattern throughout the Islamic world - linked the caliphate to the broader history of Islam inside and outside Africa.² Geographically, the caliphate was on the frontier of the Islamic world, and thus had access to slaves drawn from non-Muslim lands throughout the central Sudan. It was not, however, on the religious or political periphery of the Islamic world, but shared broader intellectual and social currents and ideology with it.

The spread of Islam in the central Sudan had long encouraged African state systems to incorporate Islamic conceptions about the structure and methods of governance. The Sokoto Caliphate relied on forms of government and administration that were common in the heart of the Islamic world. Royal slavery in the caliphate was, in short, a local adaptation of a “royal slave complex” exemplified most especially by the histories of the Ottoman Empire, Mamlūk Egypt, and Morocco.³ But this complex evolved for historically contingent reasons, and there were variations in the practice of royal slavery and the reasons for its adoption that were directly related to local cultural and historical circumstances.⁴ The historical similarities and differences in the uses of royal slaves in the Islamic world provide broad thematic insights into the nature and history of royal slavery as an institution.

Royal slavery was not an inevitable outgrowth of all Islamic state systems, although this is how the institution has been treated in previous scholarship.⁵ Across the Sudan, both pre- and post-jihad states faced problems of legitimacy and authority, but these problems were resolved in a variety of ways, often without the adoption of royal slavery.⁶ Although Islam was an important variable shaping the use of royal slaves in Africa and the Islamic Middle East, it cannot be deployed in isolation as an analytical tool to explain the diverse histories, cultures, and societies of the Muslim world. Rather, the interactions between institutions, ideas, events,
and people must be examined over time as part of an historical process. Islam was but one, albeit important, variable that shaped the use of royal slaves in Africa and the Islamic Middle East. In the nineteenth-century Sokoto Caliphate, the use of royal slaves was informed by the theories and practice of government of the jihad leaders, by the structure of the pre-jihad, Hausa administration, and by the actions of the royal slaves themselves. The use of royal slaves was related both to the government that Islam as a religion could generate and to local historical circumstances “on the ground.”

“Mamlūk”: A Definition
The term “mamlūk” originated in a specific place and time, the Abbasid Caliphate between 833 and 842, and was used to describe any owned person who served the state in a “military capacity.” The term also referred to a very particular kind of service to the state: the enslavement, training, and promotion of elite slave soldiers. The word “mamlūk” was not used in Kano, but I use it to highlight the fact that royal slaves underwent parallel processes of acculturation and socialization. In Kano, as elsewhere, mamlūk were slaves who were captured and brought to a central palace, where they were incorporated into households for training and acculturation. They were employed as elite cavalry and musketeer corps because as slaves they were initially more dependent than the freeborn on the ruler, who could therefore control them more completely. They were used, in short, because as slaves they were believed to be especially loyal to their master and patron:

Such slaves owed their status and power entirely to the ruler or dominant oligarchy responsible for their purchase. Highly impressionable adolescents, selected for their quick wit and physical prowess, would be trained not only to excel in the martial arts but also to bestow their undivided loyalty upon their benefactors. By such a strategy the rulers sought to secure their control over populations whose allegiance was often doubtful.

But state service also gave mamlūk the opportunity to acquire influence and prestige despite their slave origins or status.

The mamlūk-style process of enslavement and acculturation also occurred among slaves whose functions were not primarily military in character, but administrative. These mamlūk often used their positions and military strength to install their own puppets, or in some cases themselves, as rulers. Although the “mamlūk” of the Sokoto Caliphate never gained control of the state, their overall influence in politics increased over the course of the nineteenth century.
I do not intend to abstract the term “mamlūk” from its historical and cultural contexts, but the process of becoming mamlūk, and the use of slaves in government, had cultural and social characteristics that shared common features across specific times and places, and these characteristics were vital elements in determining how royal slave systems functioned. First, the relationship between ruler and royal slave was the primary pillar upon which the system operated. This relationship was based on personal ties between slave and master. Slave power was initially a result of royal slaves’ favored access and proximity to the ruler. The use of royal slaves to control independent constellations of power inside the court generally encouraged the centralization of power in the hands of the ruler. Second, the systematic creation and acquisition of knowledge was a vital component of royal slavery. The mastery of certain bodies of knowledge was an important element in determining an individual slave’s chances for promotion and advancement. The production, acquisition, and transmission of knowledge were central to the political and social organization of the state and to the way in which the royal slave community defined itself and the manner in which it operated. Third, royal slaves tended to control land from which they derived economic rewards. This facilitated the control and centralization of taxation and agricultural production, which were vital to the economic success of the state. Fourth, royal slaves were mobilized in slave household units, located spatially, politically, and culturally inside of the ruler’s own larger household unit. These households were centers of royal slave patronage and social life, and served as the political and social spaces in which royal slavery reproduced itself. Royal slaves used the distribution of political patronage to “recruit” clients and followers, who in turn increased their patron’s position and influence. Mobilizing and controlling people were the means by which free and slave elites exercised political power and maintained their hold on it. The ability to dispense, and benefit from, political patronage gave royal slaves the opportunity to develop large households composed of both kin and clients.

The Mamluk System: From Capture to Incorporation in Kano Emirate
Usman dan Fodio, Muḥammad Bello, and Abdullahi dan Fodio provided the intellectual and spiritual authority that the local jihad regimes drew upon to establish the political institutions of the emirates. They eventually came to realize that in order for Islam to survive, an alternative had to be found to the uncomplicated state structures of the early Islamic governments on which they had
initially hoped to model the caliphate. As Muḥammad Bello noted in *al-Ghayth al-Wābil*,

The ruler is a mansion and the army is its foundation; if the foundation is strong the mansion lasts, if it weakens the mansion collapses. Hence there is no Sultan without an army, and no army without money, and no money without *kharaj* and no *kharaj* except with prosperity and no prosperity without justice, and thus justice is the foundation of the other managements.16

Within a decade, the number of officials in each emirate expanded, and royal slaves began to conduct state business, protect ruling families, and serve in the emirate armies.17 There is no better example of this trend than in nineteenth-century Kano. In 1819 Ibrahim Dabo became emir of Kano Emirate. Dabo launched a policy designed to centralize his own control of government and to eliminate internal and external opposition to his rule. The previous emir, Suleiman (reigned 1807-19), had relied on only a few officials and was faced with a series of challenges to his authority from other jihad leaders. Dabo tried to put an end to these threats and formally revived the royal slave system in Kano. He initially appointed people who had either served as slaves under the regime of Sarkin Kano Alwali (reigned, 1781-1806) or had been his own personal slaves before he came to power. Dabo presided over the consolidation of the “*mamlūk*” system and introduced reforms (on the advice of individual royal slaves) that effectively institutionalized the royal slave system. The process continued throughout the nineteenth century, as the royal slave community expanded in the reigns of Abdullahi Maje Karofi (1855-82) and Aliyu Babba (1895-1903).

Both during and after Dabo’s reign, royal slavery was systematically expanded, incorporating new slaves captured in warfare and raids into the expanding palace community. The same process occurred in nearly every emirate, including Katsina, Daura, Hadeija, Zazzau, and even Sokoto, the capital of the caliphate. Slaves generally came from outside the boundaries of Kano, especially Ningi, Damagaram, Bagirmi, Adamawa, and Borno. Missionary and traveller Charles Henry Robinson witnessed the arrival of one-thousand slaves in Kano during the Civil War (1893-95): “in course of our march from Kano to Bida was passed towns and villages, literally without number, which had been recently destroyed and their inhabitants sold as slaves” as a direct result of raids from Kano.18 Regions surrounding other caliphate emirates were subjected to a similar process. In Adamawa, on the fringes of the caliphate, Heinrich Barth noted that some head slaves had “as
many as a thousand slaves under each of their command, with whom they undertake occasional expeditions for their masters.’”

Like the previous Hausa rulers, Dabo used and manipulated the distribution of titled offices to strengthen his own position on the throne, appointing his clients and supporters to important positions. The “officialdom” that developed out of Dabo’s reforms was constructed in the language and ideology of lineage and family relationships. Corporate groups composed of relations and clients became associated with certain titles. Unlike free officials, who had access to networks of relationships by birth and marriage which helped them to gain and secure their official positions, royal slaves were dependent for elevation on the emir, who in turn was able to dismiss difficult royal slaves in a manner impossible among the free-born aristocracy. They were subject to violence and coercion emanating from their status as slaves and socially isolated “outsiders.” This was the reason royal slaves were initially so useful to Ibrahim Dabo and his successors.

In Kano, Islam encouraged the development of a particular kind of politics - government by the royal household - and offered an “ideal” Islamic model for governance that helped to bring about the adoption of royal slavery. In short, the emir’s household, composed of wives, concubines, sons, daughters, slaves and clients, governed Kano. As in Ottoman Turkey, authority “radiated outward” from this royal household, to which royal slaves were closely attached by personal relationships with the emir or by the institution of concubinage. As in the Ottoman Empire and Mamlūk Egypt, the system of titles and title holding was personalized and patrimonial. The ruler promoted slaves whom he could trust and with whom he had developed close relationships:

In a political system in which the institutional organization - especially at the centre - is weak, or has been decisively weakened, informal aspects of patron-client relationships or loyalty among the members of specific groups play an important role in the maintenance and stabilization of the political system.

The local context was vital to the adoption of royal slavery in Kano. The difficulties the jihad leaders had in consolidating their administration led to the incorporation of pre-existing Hausa political structures. Many nineteenth-century emirs faced challenges to their rule from hostile aristocrats who hoped to undermine the emir’s control of government. Numerous emirs therefore chose to employ royal slaves in order to counter these threats. This kind of response to political factionalism was common throughout the world.
of Islam. However, the particular form that royal slavery took in the Sokoto Caliphate was shaped by the pre-nineteenth century Hausa hierarchy of officials, despite the fact that Dabo and numerous other emirs altered the responsibilities of certain offices and created a more rigid distinction between “slave” and “free” titles. As in other places, the reasons for the use of royal slaves, and the ways in which they were used, were the products of an interaction between Islamic government, customary practice, and the internal dynamics of the royal slave system that developed over the course of the century.

**Titles and Households**

Slaves in Kano were attached to households that were headed by the major royal slave office-holders. The titles of these officials varied from emirate to emirate, but in all cases a small number of titled slaves were responsible for important political, military and economic tasks. In Kano, the three most influential slave positions were the *shamaki*, *dan rimi*, and *sallama*. Other important positions included the *kilishi*, *sarkin dogarai*, *shettima*, *sarkin hatsi*, and *kasheka*. These were not static positions, but were mutable political offices that changed along with the individuals who occupied them and with a variety of historical circumstances. This structural fluidity replicated a pattern found throughout Sudanic Africa.23

The system can be represented as a pyramid, with the few most influential slaves at the top and the vast majority laboring below. Titles held by subordinate slaves were generally derivative of the senior slave title-holder (e.g., the *ciroman shamaki* was the *ciroma* of the *shamaki*). The senior slaves were given a great deal of freedom over the slaves directly under them: they chose whom to promote and punish. The emir, however, appointed slaves to the most senior slave positions.

The means of acquiring slave titles was shaped by the formation and elaboration of royal slave households. Over the course of the nineteenth century, slaves born to other royal slaves (Hausa: *cucanawa*) inside the palace also became more numerous. The *cucanawa* occupied special positions in the palace. As second-generation slaves, they had been acculturated into Islam and the Hausa language from birth. Individuals and families developed claims to certain titles based on their control of the knowledge associated with the titles they held. This knowledge was “inherited” by members of royal slave families and households. In other cases, kinship ties allowed slaves to provide their progeny with access to titles and influence. Ties of kinship with the royal household provided another avenue to informally influence policy and to protect the place of individuals in the slave community.24 Thus, over
the course of the nineteenth century in Kano, royal “houses” (Hausa: gida) evolved that came to associated with one of three slave titles, the shamakawa (people of the shamaki), the rimawa (people of the dan rimi) or the sallamawa (people of the sallama). This development marked the institutionalization of a “mamlūk” system in Kano. By the mid-nineteenth century, slaves titles were no longer held simply by individuals; rather, certain slave titles were inherited within slave families and transferred between them.

KANO CITY, C. 1851

Many male royal slaves had daughters or sisters who served the emir as concubines, and thus had access to the secrets and household of the emir. Ennaji has documented a similar pattern in Morocco, where slaves also had access to information and freedom to move in areas normally forbidden to others. A traveler who visited the Pasha Glawi stated that upon entering his mountain stronghold he:

followed a negro slave who had charge of a ring of huge keys, who opened doors ahead of me, and closed them immediately after, guiding me in the failing light through a labyrinth of corridors, some vaulted, some open to the sky, climbing snowy stairways, opening other doors, and finally showing me into a long, narrow room.25

Influence was not gained simply through the possession of a slave office, but through an individual’s ability to influence the opinions and policies of the emir.26 Personal ties were especially
important because the shamaki, dan rimi and sallama advised members of the Tara Ta Kano (a council of free officials that nominated candidates for the emirship) on the qualities and abilities of the prospective candidates for the throne following the death of an emir. Their advice was based on their knowledge of the candidate from his childhood. They briefed the councilors about each candidate’s character and supplied information about the candidate’s mother.27

The royal slave community defined their relationships with the emir as family or kinship ties between slave and free houses.28 As part of this relationship, royal slaves trained the royal princes, some of whom were destined for the throne. In Morocco, “young slaves served as companions to the princes, moving in their entourage and sharing in their games and studies. This distinction, proximity to the prince from his youngest days, did not fall to just any slave. Only the most assiduous and intelligent could obtain and maintain it.”29 Indeed, older slaves “played a central role in the princes’ preparation for court life.” According to Ennaji, in his youth Hasan I “was surrounded by some of the oldest palace servants, familiar with the lives of the previous kings they had served. The prince’s father had ordered them to tell him what they remembered, and they found him eager to learn.”30

Slave officials were also used extensively outside Kano Emirate. Thus, the Kano “mamlük” pattern can be generalized to the rest of the caliphate. Although the precise structure of the system varied from region to region, each emirate experienced the general process described above. The transition from a minimal, relatively informal government to a more complex system governed by a single royal household headed by an emir was accomplished in part by relying on royal slaves. Even in the capital of the caliphate, royal slaves were used to enhance the prestige and power of the caliph. For example, Mohammad Bello created a corps of slave riflemen in Sokoto. He also appointed slaves to numerous political offices at the Sokoto court.31 Other slaves were appointed by Bello to the fortified settlements (Hausa: ribat) that he founded on the frontiers of the caliphate.32 Caliph Ali Babba (reigned 1842-59) continued these policies and created a slave-based cavalry regiment composed of 700 slave warriors.33

In Daura Emirate slave officials were used extensively.34 Slaves collected taxes and led the slave cavalry that protected the emir. Other slave officials were employed in capacities similar to those in Kano Emirate. The sarkin bai was in charge of the royal slaves, and supervised a staff of nine; the turaki managed the emir’s granaries; the torno collected tax from the weavers and, during
periods of war, commanded a detachment of slave soldiers; the kacalla supervised a detachment of slave musketeers. In Daura, the slave who held the title of shamaki was responsible for the royal regalia and weapons. In 1907 A. Festing even noted that the emir of Daura, “Mai Gerdo [Gurdo],” was “run” by the “clique” of palace slaves. The British later complained that the “palace clique” also put Mai Gurdo’s son, So Gigi, on the throne without their knowledge or permission.

In Zaria (Zazzau) the waziri (a high-ranking free official) told F. F. W, Byng-Hall that four of the emir’s slaves held office even in the colonial period, including the “Sintelli,” “Shamaki,” and “Kilishi.” Likewise, in Messau Emirate it was reported that in 1912 six slaves held important offices in the court, including the “Shameki,” “Makama,” and the “Yarma.” Indeed, the Assistant Resident at the time remarked that officials who had “far and away the biggest following” were the “Emir’s slaves, namely Shamaki 10th in the order of seniority and Jarma 16th.” In Hadeija a slave official known as the “Mella” played the same role as did the sallama in Kano. In Hadeija the shamaki supervised the feeding and stabling of the emir’s horses. In 1917 the Shamaki Mama (also known as Gaja) held the title, although he had inherited it from his father, Shamaki Bundi, who was originally from Ningi, the source of many of the slaves used in Kano Emirate. The long-standing prevalence and prominence of slave officials in Hadeija led H. M. Brice Smith to remark:

It is to be regretted that so many of the Hadeija Native officials are either slaves or ex-slaves; in addition to those referred to in para. 31, four out of nine district heads are ex-slaves. The older members of the Emir’s family . . . are rigidly excluded from office, and live the lives of ordinary individuals employing their time in trade.

As in Kano, royal slaves in Hadeija had clearly been increasing their influence and authority at the expense of freeborn officials, something that Brice-Smith called “typical Fulani custom.” In Jema’ari Emirate, C. N. Monsell noted that the emir was so weak from old age that much of his authority had passed to royal slaves and freeborn officials. In Gumel Emirate, H. J. Miller remarked that “little indeed may be looked for from an administration composed entirely of court favourites of the most servile type,” whose main goal, he complained, was to “add to the Emir’s already extensive ‘harem’ and to enable a show commensurate to their ideas of their own importance by constant crooked dealing and oppression.” In Katsina Emirate, C. L. Temple
noted that slaves held so much power that when their titles had been “abolished,” free officials were the “successors in many of the duties formerly held by Head Slaves.” Indeed, in 1906 the British complained their situation in the emirate had become “impossible,” owing to the fact that the emir was “purely a tool in the hands of the palace clique.” These comments were echoed as late as 1927 in Kano Emirate by C. W. Alexander, who noted that after the abolition of royal slavery in the palace some of the free councilors who had replaced the royal slaves were “still somewhat shy of their position not only in the Emir’s presence but in the eyes of the public” because they found it difficult to “step into the shoes of powerful slaves.”

On his arrival in Sokoto, E. J. Arnett was faced with a well-established and intransigent royal slave community. Arnett later noted that in 1912 “the real power . . . was in the hands of a ‘court circle’ or ‘Palace Clique’ consisting of Suitali, Kilishi and other head slaves of the Sultan’s Household.” Arnett went on to note that Suitali was a “very real stumbling block” because he had control of all communication between title-holders, and “orders and decisions of the Sultan frequently had no effect because they were not correctly conveyed to the proper persons.”

Although it is risky to project data from the colonial period backward in time, it is clear from the colonial sources that many emirates had large, formal, and powerful royal slave systems in place when they were conquered in 1903. These royal slave systems did not develop overnight, but were part of a long process - the emergence and consolidation of an institutionalized mamlūk-style system in the Sokoto Caliphate. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the royal slave communities grew in both strength and coherence. Certain individuals intervened in royal politics with the hope of securing the succession of their chosen candidate to the emirship. In 1855 Emir Abdullahi Maje Karofi (reigned 1855-82) gained control of the throne by relying on an armed contingent of royal slaves. Royal slaves played a central role in the Civil War or basasa of 1893-95. Shamaki Harisu and Dan Rimi Nuhu helped to secure the victory of Emir Aliyu at the expense of Emir Tukur, who had been appointed after his father, Emir Mohammad Bello, died in office.

The general trend in Kano was toward greater royal slave intervention in succession disputes and palace politics. As indicated above, this trend was replicated throughout the caliphate. In Daura, for example, the chief slave, or sarkin bai, sat on the electoral council that chose the emir. According to the British, in 1906 he said that he had deposed the previous two emirs and now intended to
install his own puppet on the throne.\textsuperscript{53} Indeed, immediately after Mai Gurdo was buried in 1906, six slave officials made Sogigi emir in order to frustrate the sarkin bai’s designs.\textsuperscript{54}

The Development of “Mamlūk” Slavery in the Sokoto Caliphate

The Mamlūk System: Training and Acculturation

The nomenclature of slave titles was associated with certain categories of knowledge. For example, “shamaki” literally means “stables,” and the holder of this title was responsible for the supervision of the palace horses and stables; the sarkin hatsi (“master of the grains”) was responsible for the collection and distribution of grains inside the palace hierarchy. When new titles were created, they were often chosen to reflect the duties and responsibilities each title-holder was expected to perform. The shamaki and his subordinates tended the palace horses and thus developed skills related to animal husbandry:

The function of the maja sirdi is to tie the saddle on the emir’s horses . . . the horses are under the care of the shamaki. All the saddles and other things for riding horses owned by the emir are in the house of shamaki. There is a special place for them. There is the stable. Every horse has his own linzami [bit] hanged. And every horse has a saddle. Embroideries are all there. The swords, spears etc. are all kept in the house of shamaki.\textsuperscript{55}

As in many mamlūk systems, royal slaves led army regiments made up of male slave warriors, supervised taxation and rural agricultural production, and enforced palace protocol and etiquette. In seventeenth-century Morocco, Mulāy Ismā‘īl established a “permanent, professional army corps of black soldiers,” who numbered at the end of his reign between 30,000 and 50,000.\textsuperscript{56} In this case, training lasted eight years, generally beginning around the age of ten. Slaves were first trained in “the use of draft animals” and then masonry; five years later, “military training proper” was initiated.\textsuperscript{57} According to Ennaji, “A Black guard symbolized power, and constituted the best means of dissuading subversive maneuvering.”\textsuperscript{58}

Over the course of the nineteenth century in Kano, the “houses” or “families” of royal slave officials became the centers of training and learning in the palace. Young slaves were attached to one of the major royal slave houses, where they were initiated into royal slave culture and the palace community. Children and young slaves developed informal relationships with the sons of free title-holders in the palace, observed other slaves at work, and were gradually integrated into daily palace life. Most slaves initially held menial jobs. Young slaves who showed promise and ability were
given new tasks to perform. The vast majority of these laborers held no titles and possessed little influence. Gradually, however, a select few assumed low ranking titled positions and were trained in particular skills.

Slave knowledge was passed to younger generations of slaves through a system of face-to-face apprenticeship. In Kano, the sallama was in charge of the slave riflemen or ‘yan bindiga. Young slaves were trained in skills with guns in the household of the sallama. Slaves who through long experience and training had gained skills trained younger slaves, who were attached to particular slave households for this purpose. Mai Tafari Hussaini noted that his own father had been adopted into the house of a sallama. This association with the house of the sallama gave his father the opportunity to acquire knowledge about guns, which he in turn passed down to later generations of royal slaves: “and this was how we get to become ‘yan bindiga. Since our father had done [the work], that was how we inherited it and it became hereditary to us [his family].”59 In this case, the mastery of a certain body of knowledge became the domain of a particular family, who then trained other slaves in its secrets. The personal relationship between master and apprentice through which slave riflemen were trained was conducted in the idiom of the slave household or “family.” Although the relationship was an individual one, training was formalized, followed a prescribed course, and was designed to impart specific skills. Slaves progressed from menial duties to increasingly important and complex ones. Hussaini said:

Whenever there was a new [slave] he will be attached with someone who has acquired long experience, who is an expert, to work as his apprentice. He will carry the gun wherever they are going, watching all that is going on. Let’s say when the emir is coming out or going around the town, then his master will give him [the apprentice] the gun to hold. Until he is collecting the gunpowder then he will take the gun along with him, and go and collect it from mai tafari. The apprentice will be observing how he is operating, until the time when it seems he has learned the theoretical aspects of it. Then he will be put through a practice test. He will be given half of the amount [of gunpowder] that his master can take [or use]. And even then, he will not be left on his own. His master will be instructing him on how to do it: “Hold it here, touch this, press that, grab this.” His master will support him. He will not be allowed to hold it alone because he is learning and could easily get wounded. The training went on until he seems to be good [skilled], then he will be left to do it on his own, but still under the watchful eye of his master. If he made a mistake he can then correct him.”60
Other fields of expertise included the supervision and management of royal farms and plantations worked by slaves. Malam Umru Sarkin Gida emphasized that royal slaves supervised both the foundation of new plantations and taught local plantation slaves specialized skills: “the Shamaki of Kano at present Inuwa Dan Indo...supervised the cutting of trees and the removal of roots - the clearance of bush. After that, Abdullahi sent me to Dorayi to coach them in working with cows and from there I came to Hungu.”61

Alhaji Kabiru recounted the history of one dan rimi who was alive before the jihad. He was associated with the dissemination of knowledge in the palace, city, and countryside:

During the time of the Wangarawa there was a crisis, where a person called dan rimi went to seize books from Mallam, the chief Imam of Madabo [Madibo], who was forecasting events, doom, blessings, and famines when his pupil came to town [Kano] and started to spread the story. The Emir sent this man, he was believed to be very large [strong] named dan rimi, to seize the books and bring him along. When the Mallam heard about it [the plan] he put everything in this well. When this dan rimi came, he killed the Mallam and later he saw the books in the well. Since then people keep on trooping there to drink the water for healing . . . until the time of Bayero who ordered it closed. At that time tap water and hospitals were introduced. Dan rimi is the person who consulted with the Mallams about what will happen and [he also] sought [seek for] the solutions. He is responsible for all the knowledge and some studies like knowing what will happen in the year and they will know how to solve the problem.62

This story also indicates that the title of dan rimi was associated with the invention and transmission of knowledge in Kano, as was the more general royal slave community. The ability to find solutions to problems arising from politics or natural events was disseminated outside the palace, through the metaphor of the well, to the commoners throughout Kano. Some knowledge was associated with aspects of Islam, and some with the prediction and or forecasting of events. The dan rimi in the story killed the purveyor of this knowledge and then became responsible for it. In effect, royal authority, through this dan rimi, assumed control of the knowledge that was initially outside the control of the emir.

Starrat records a similar tradition. During the Hausa period a Madabo malam named Isa Gashi complained about the conduct of the sarki and was killed by a dan rimi.63 Madabo quarters were said to be the site of the old palace of the Hausa rulers, where the sacred
tree was destroyed by Al-Maghili when Islam first came to Kano in the fifteenth century. Although the evidence that Madabo quarter was a center of Islamic learning before the nineteenth century is contradictory, the story nonetheless suggests that the dan rimi was attempting to eliminate pre-Islamic history and knowledge. However, the commoners in Kano refused to accept his actions and visited the well for the enlightenment it provided. The story also suggests that royal authority eventually emerged triumphant. Tellingly, the end of “slave knowledge” is associated with the reign of Abdullahi Bayero and the coming of the British, who supervised the removal of slaves from high state positions in 1926 and “westernized” indigenous knowledge and its transmission (exemplified here by the introduction of tap-water and hospitals). It is also important that the dan rimi was associated with books. Palace tradition asserts that the dan rimi was in charge of maintaining palace tradition and history, and scholars who visited Kano were placed in the house of the dan rimi. This is perhaps a reflection of Dan Rimi Barka’s reputation as a learned malam and scholar. Ennaji notes that in Morocco royal slaves acted as the “guardians of the royal memory.”

**Land Administration, Tax Collection, and Royal Plantations**

Elsewhere in the Islamic world, elite slaves secured economic prosperity by administering waqf lands. Mamlūk were thus able to secure an income for their own households and progeny. In the Sokoto Caliphate they supervised royal plantations (Hausa: gandaye), to which they often had their own income-generating farms attached. Royal slaves also administered and supervised the taxation of outlying districts, which offered many royal slaves opportunities to amass wealth. The control of these agriculture estates in turn consolidated the control of slave labor in the hands of elite slaves and thus the emir. In addition, parcels of land were attached to certain slave offices, which effectively became the agricultural estates of these royal slave title-holders.

The emir used these slaves as a means to enforce his own will and to govern Kano from the center outward. He depended on royal slaves not just for advice but also for information about the palace, the districts, and other emirs and emirates. The networks of knowledge extended from palace into the districts, where members of the households of certain royal slaves channeled information back to their patrons and providers at the court. Although Polly Hill has argued that Kano government had no “properly organised, institutionalised, hierarchy of authority,” in point of fact institutionalised networks of authority, knowledge, and individuals
emanated from the capital. Royal slavery, as an institution, effectively governed and administered the emirate. Royal slaves tied the center to the periphery in Kano through face-to-face contact and ties of obligation, dependency, coercion, and profit, all bound together by the institutionalized framework of offices and titles, the emirship, Islam, and the legal courts in Kano. Rural and urban areas were bound together economically through production and exchange, and by the political networks of knowledge and information that served as the basis for the administration of Kano Emirate. In this sense, “districts” were not territorial units, but collections of people who worked the land and were taxed under the authority and supervision of a title-holder and his representatives in Kano, Hill observes:

The lands...arbitrarily assigned to the rapacious rule of the Emir’s nominees were frequently not homologous. A district which happened to be available owing to the death or removal of its feudal Chief would be granted to a favourite, irrespective of whether it lay near his territory or not…. It came about that a territorial Chief might hold jurisdiction over and claim taxes from, a number of detached areas situated like islands in the heart of another jurisdiction.70

This pattern of land administration and tax collection existed throughout the Sokoto Caliphate.71

Royal slaves acquired knowledge about the districts under the general supervision of free hakimai by virtue of their positions as “gates” to the emir. While formal administrative duties were held by the various hakimai, the kofa of a particular town or village made important administrative decisions and could offer advice and recommendations about policy. The slave kofa was essentially in charge of the administration of the districts under his control. In 1904, H. R. P. Hillary described this aspect of the pre-colonial administration in the Sokoto Caliphate:

no one, however important, can gain access to the Emir except through a “Kofa,” gate, i.e. introducer. The “Kofa” is the patron of his district, its representative at Court; he looks after its interests, puts forward its claims, requests or grievances, procures for it protection or assistance in case of war. It can easily be understood what an advantage it is to a town to have a powerful “Kofa.” On the other hand the Emir holds the patron responsible for the administration of his district, for the promulgation and performance of his orders, for the arrest of criminals, for information as to the right man in case of succession, and for the payment of all moneys due.72
Of course, if free title-holders of high status administered a district, the role of the *kofa* could simply be the transmission of orders or information, as the district headman, or *hakimi*, was responsible for the district in question. However, in the case of smaller districts, the *kofa* often became the district head. Hillary noted that without the *kofa* he would not have been able to identify the “herd owners, nor obtained the information on which to assess them, nor enforced payment, the Sarkin Muslimin could not have provided the information on which to assess the land tax.”

Thus, by virtue of their positions, slave *kofofo* acquired a familiarity with the intricacies of political and economic life in many of the districts. Hillary argued for the retention of these positions:

> Distinction should be made between those persons who are employed by the Emir for purposes of his household and those who are employed on official business. It is easy to say that all satellites must be got rid of, but I think it will probably be found that these much abused satellites are really doing useful work. It must be of great assistance to the Emir to have an intermediary between him and the D. Heads. He cannot be expected to remember the details of a thousand transactions, and the intermediary with his special knowledge of the Districts and of precedents is useful.

Access to and control of knowledge allowed royal slaves easy recourse to extortion, bribery, and other forms of political corruption. They monitored a large number of exchanges between representatives from the districts and the emir. This provided them with access to income, as they demanded a gift or bribe before allowing any person, free or slave, to be conveyed into the presence of the emir. Emirate officials who wished to see the emir normally had to provide financial compensation to the slave official that served as their “gate.”

Representatives of both the emir and the *hakimi* traveled to the villages and districts to receive the taxes collected by the village head, or *dagaci*. The emir’s representative was appointed by one of the leading slaves and was generally taken from their own household. Afterwards, the proceeds were taken by the slave *jakada* to their royal slave patron, who in turn conveyed them to the emir. These slaves could extract a portion of this revenue for their own use. They were also held accountable for the assessment of taxation and ensured that the emir’s interests were guarded: “For the assessment of other taxes the *hakimi* sent down his agent accompanied by the agent of the emir’s slave; these worked in
concert with the digachi and the hamlet head and watched their master’s interests; in the case of appeal against assessment the Emir would look to his slave for a report on the circumstances. Often, the dogarai stationed in the districts were recruited from the households of one of the three leading slave officials. One district officer even complained that the yara “of the chief slaves even after being recruited placed allegiance to their masters before that to the commander of the force.” This comment is supported by oral testimony that when a district head died, his slaves were evacuated to the palace, where the shamaki, dan rimi, or sallama took custody of them.

The use of royal slaves became one means by which the political elite of the Sokoto Caliphate could dominate both secular and sacred authority. Royal slaves also secured the state from external threat and internal subversion. With varying levels of success, royal slaves allowed and encouraged the centralization of authority in Kano, Zazzau, Katsina, Daura, Hadeija, and beyond. Royal slavery in Hausaland was partially an outgrowth of the nature of the Islamic state, as it was elsewhere in the world of Islam. Royal slaves were used because there was a political imperative to do so. Governments by “household,” so common in the caliphate (as in much of the Islamic world) needed some way in which to secure “the center” from powerful aristocratic elements that were so often destabilizing forces. The principles upon which the system was based were similar too: recruitment through slavery, conversion to Islam, and training in households and palace schools, all leading to eventual accession to titles and corresponding levels of influence.

Royal slavery also generated specific internal political and social dynamics of its own, and the institution of royal slavery in the Sokoto Caliphate cannot be divorced from the pre-existing “Hausa” system of slave offices. The jihad leadership drew upon Hausa precedents as they created and reconstituted royal slavery. The so-called retreat from the high ideals of the early jihad leaders was not so much a retreat as it was a natural outgrowth of the Islamic state that they implemented in Hausaland. Royal slaves were used to combat specific local conditions and to address the larger problems of political stability, as they were throughout the world of Islam. The manner in which the system functioned was part of a broad, dominant pattern that emerged throughout the dār-al-Islām.

Notes

1 On Islam in Africa, see, for example, Peter B. Clarke, West Africa and Islam: A Study of Religious Development from the 8th to the 20th Century.
104 SLAVERY ON THE FRONTIERS OF ISLAM


4 This point has been made in relation to the so-called plantation complex; my thanks to Joseph C. Miller for raising this point in a presentation to the Harriet Tubman Seminar at York University, Toronto, March 1999.


7 Frederick Cooper has emphasized that it is vital to examine the process that led to a reliance on slaves, rather than simply analyze “the determining role of institutions, attitudes and markets.” See Frederick Cooper, Plantation Slavery on the East Coast of Africa (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 13.

8 Mamlûk were used during the Umayyad period (715-750), but not as extensively or as systematically as they were during the Abbasid Caliphate. See Carl Petry, The Civilian Elite of Cairo in the Later Middle Ages (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 15. Eventually, the word “mamluk” came to be primarily associated with “Turkish” or “Turkicized” boys. See also David Ayalon, “Aspects of the Mamluk Phenomenon,” Der Islam 53, 2 (1976): 196-225; Ayalon, “On the Eunuchs in Islam,” Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam 1 (1979).

9 Nasser Rabbat, “The Evolution of the Concept of Mamluk after the Founding of the Mamluk State in Egypt” (paper presented to the Conference on Slave Elites in the Middle East and Africa: A Comparative Study, Tokyo, 10-11 October 1999), published in revised form as “The Changing Concept of Mamluk in the Mamluk Sultanate in Egypt and Syria,” in Slave Elites in the Middle East and Africa: A Comparative Study, ed. Toru Miura and John E. Philips (London, 2000), 81-98. See also David

10 Petry, Civilian Elite of Cairo, 16. This point is stressed throughout the literature; see also Ayalon, “Mamlukiyat,” 326-27, and Petry, Protectors or Praetorians, 72-101.

11 Although the literature has generally argued that mamālīk were emancipated before taking a commission, it now appears this was not always the case. Over time, however, mamālīk in many parts of the Middle East were freed as a matter of course, and thenceforward were expected to recruit their own slaves to repeat the process. See Ayalon, “L’esclavage du Mamelouk,” 66, and Rabbat, “The Evolution of the Concept of Mamluk,” 4-5. On training and succession, see Nasser O. Rabbat, The Citadel of Cairo: A New Interpretation of Royal Mamluk Architecture (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), 133-34.

12 For example, in Kano and most of the caliphate, royal slaves remained slaves throughout their careers, and unlike the mamālīk of Egypt, they never took direct control of the state.


20 In theory all title-holders became agents of the emir and hakimai, or officers of the state. The term “hakimi” likely originates from the Arabic word “hakama,” meaning “to rule”, or “ḥākim,” meaning “ruler.” See Abdullahi Mahadi, “The State and the Economy: The Sarauta System and Its Roles in Shaping the Society and Economy of Kano with Particular Reference to the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries” (Ph.D. diss., Ahmadu Bello University, 1982), 288.
21 In the words of Ehud Toledano, *Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East*, 31. For the original argument, see Leslie P. Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 3-9.
26 See Neil Skinner, unpublished translation of an interview with Malam Mahmadu, Hausa poet. Mahmadu’s father and grandfather were both malamai.
27 Interview with Wakilin Panshekera Alhaji Abba Sadauki, 30 March 1998. See also interview with Babban Zagi Garba, 18 March 1998, and anonymous, *Fayd al-Qadir Li-Awsaf Al-Malik Al-Khatir*. According to the author, Waziri Muhammad al-Bukhari recommended to the Commander of the Faithful that Wombai Shehu be appointed emir after the death of Mohammad Bello because he was popular with the slaves. Generally, the senior slaves had to agree with the choice of emir, although they had no formal role in choosing the successor. They often chose an emir who they thought would provide them with an opportunity to wield power and influence, and were unconcerned with how learned or pious he was. In this regard, see interview with Madaki, 4 February 1996.
28 Interview with Makaman Dan Rimi Mustapha, 26 June 1996. According
to Sa’i’du, the emirs of Kano commonly took concubines from Gandun Nassarawa, and according to one informant: “When we said a female slave had been ‘locked (up)’ by an Emir or District Head we meant that he made her his concubine with whom he could sleep only in the day time.” See Sa’i’du Abdul Razak Giginyu, “History of a Slave Village in Kano Gandun Nassarawa” (B.A. diss., Bayero University, Kano, 1981), 131-32.

29 Ennaji, Serving the Master, 99.


35 Ibid., 178-79.

36 National Archives of Nigeria, Kaduna (hereafter cited as NAK) SNP 7/8 2392/1907.

37 NAK KANOPROF 5/1 6675.

38 NAK SNP 10/9 105p/1921.

39 NAK SNP 7/13 4896/1912.

40 NAK SNP 7/13 4896/1912. See also NAK SNP 7/13 601/1912.

41 NAK SNP 10/5 181p/1917.

42 NAK SNP 10/5 181p/1917.

43 NAK SNP 10/5 181p/1917.

44 NAK SNP 10/5 181p/1917.

45 NAK SNP 10/1 631p/1913.

46 NAK SNP 7/13 6824/1912.

47 NAK SNP 7/10 3635/1909.

48 NAK KANOPROF 5/1 6675.

49 NAK SNP 17/8 K. 6892.

50 Rhodes House, Mss. Afr s. 952, Box 612 (Comments on a Draft of Sokoto Report, 13/8/23).

51 Ibid.


54 Ibid., 300-301.

55 Interview with Sarkin Shanu Muhammadu Mansur, 7 June 1996. See also interview with Maja Sirdi Ibrahim, 20 August 1996.


57 Ibid.

58 Ibid., 9.

59 Interview with Mai Tafari Hussaini, 12 March 1998.

60 Ibid.

61 Interview with Malam Umaru Sarkin Gida, 1/2/1976, Yusufu Yunusa Collection. See also interview with Sarkin Hatsi Sani, 19 March 1998.

62 Interview with Shamakin Turakin Kano Alhaji Kabiru Kwaru, 21 August 1996.


64 Ibid., 114.

65 See Starrat (ibid., 115), who suggests that the ward may have long been a center of Islamic scholarship, and John Chamberlain, “The Development of Islamic Education in Kano City, Nigeria, with Emphasis on Legal Education in the 19th and 20th Centuries” (Ph.D. thesis, Columbia, 1975), 96-98, who argues for a mid-nineteenth century origin.


67 Interview with Shamakin Turakin Kano Alhaji Kabiru, 21 August 1996. The *maja sirdi* was directly responsible for training and maintaining the health of the emir’s horses, Alkali Hussaini Sufi, *Mu san Kammu* (Kano, 1993), 98-99, and interview with Maja Sirdi Ibrahim, 20 August 1996.


72 NAK SOKPROF 3/27 s.2909. See also NAK SNP 15/1 Acc 109.
The Development of “Mamlūk” Slavery in the Sokoto Caliphate

73 NAK SOKPROF 3/27 s. 2909.
74 NAK SNP 10/9 120p/1921.
75 Interview with Alhaji Mohammad Hassan, 10 March 1998. See also NAK SNP 7/10 472/1909.
76 See SNP 10/9 120p/1921 for comments on royal slave wealth.
77 Interview with Dan Madanin Alhaji Nura Mohammad, 9 March 1998. See also NAK SNP 15/1 Acc. 289, Dawaki ta Kudu Assessment Report.
78 NAK SNP 15/1 Acc. 289, Dawaki ta Kudu Assessment Report.
79 See NAI CSO 26 No. 09560, cited by Ubah, Government and Administration of Kano Emirate, 91.
80 Ibid.
81 See interview with Mohammadu Sarkin Yaki Dogari, 28 September 1975, Yusufu Yunusa Collection. On one occasion, Sarkin Dutse Bello rebelled over a disagreement with Abdullahi Maje Karofi, and was brought to Kano, arrested, detained in prison, and later executed. Afterwards, his slaves were brought to the “Fada,” or royal court/chambers in Kano. A similar tradition is discussed by Nasiru Ibrahim Dantiye, “Study of the Origins, Status and Defensive Role of Four Kano Frontier Strongholds,” 157. According to Dantiye’s sources, a jakadu reported to Mohammad Bello that Sarkin Dutse Irema kept seventy young girls and seventy young men in his household. Irema was summoned to Kano, but denied the accusation, and claimed the jakada was lying. The emir’s courtiers intervened and persuaded Bello to detain Irema. Although he was eventually exonerated, he lost the title of sarkin dutse.