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# KANEMBU-KANURI RELATIONSHIP: A PROPOSAL<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The paper takes recourse to oral tradition and linguistics to ascertain the assertion that the present-day Kanuri and Kanembu speech forms emerged from the same parent language. In determining the parent language, the descriptions of the various components (i.e. clans and ethnic groups) of Kanuri and Kanembu are given as a first basis and the relation of each dialect of Kanuri and Kanembu to the other (i.e. dialect contiguity) is demonstrated as a second basis.

Taking into consideration the sociolinguistic background of both Kanuri and Kanembu, the brief history of their divergence, the strong contention of the Borno Ulama and the dialect contiguity of the data presented, the paper concludes that Kanuri and Kanembu are initially one and the same language with ancient classical Kanembu being the parent language.

## Kanembu-Kanuri relationship: a proposal

### Introduction

The close genetic relationship of a group of languages referred to as Saharan, was recognised about one and a half centuries ago. This was evident in BARTH (1965), NACHTIGAL (1987), LUKAS (1951), TUCKER and BRYAN (1956), GREENBERG (1966) and CYFFER (1981, 1990, 1991).

Based on the genetic classification model of LUKAS (1951), GREENBERG (1966), PETRACEK (1966, 1978 and 1979) and CYFFER (1981 and 1990), the Saharan languages can be modelled as fig. 1 below.

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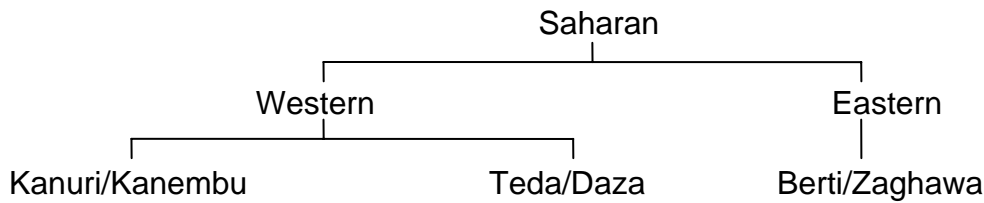


Fig. 1: Genetic model of Saharan languages

From the above model it can be deduced that the languages Kanuri/Kanembu, Teda/Daza and Berti/Zaghawa are either sister languages or dialect clusters of ancient/classical form of one of the other in each group.

It is the objective of this paper to (a) propose a parent language from which the Kanuri/Kanembu dialect cluster emerged; (b) make a mention of the various components (i.e. clans and ethnic groups) that constitute the Kanuri/Kanembu nation. This sociolinguistic background is necessary for a proper understanding of the nature of the Kanuri/Kanembu situation. McINTOSH (1961:1) has argued strongly in favour of this approach:

"... the students of dialects must take cognisance of a number of phenomena which seem to lie outside "dialectology" proper - for example, phenomena which would normally be regarded as coming more directly within the scope of a historian or a social anthropologist or a geographer, or even perhaps an ear-, nose-, and throat-specialist.

For without some understanding of the wider setting in which dialects are spoken and the conditions of life which have obtained during their evolution, a linguistic approach is bound to be too mechanical and to misinterpret some of the phenomena".

(c) identify the dialects in Kanuri and Kanembu so as to establish a dialect contiguity.

### Data acquisition and methodology

What is presented here is based on the researcher's many years of experience with the two varieties - Kanuri and Kanembu, supplemented by a three-month period of interrupted field research. The data presented were acquired through interviews with informants who are native speakers of the two varieties under consideration. The twenty-two lexical items given form part of an earlier, larger (150) corpus based on the Swadesh 100 basic vocabulary items, but with some modification. The modified list can be found in BULAKARIMA (1991). Though the greater part of the paper seems to be historical as well as anthropological in nature, synchronic linguistic factors were considered in analysing the data.

## Kanuri-Kanembu: separate languages or dialects?

The Kanuri are concentrated mostly in Borno and Yobe States in Nigeria and Diffa and Zinder provinces in the Republic of Niger. Speakers of the language are also found in southern and northern Chad and Cameroon respectively. The Kanembu speakers on the other hand are in larger concentration in the Bol, Lac and Kanem provinces of the Republic of Chad. A few Kanembu speakers are also found at the western side of the Lake Chad in Nigeria and Niger Republic.

JARRETT (1977) regarded Kanuri and Kanembu languages as separate languages. He went further to state that the latter's dialects are regarded as belonging to a separate but very closely related language - Kanembu-Kanembu. HUTCHISON (1981:3) had also made a mention of Kanembu as a language having several dialects. Contrary to JARRETT (1977), HUTCHISON (1981) and TUCKER and BRYAN (1966), GREENBERG (1971:425) sees Kanembu as a variety of Kanuri, thereby distinguishing Kanuri and Kanembu as two historic languages. Kanembu was the language of the old Kanem Empire, while the Kanuri language was the language of the old Borno Empire (cf. JOUANNET, 1982). GREENBERG (1971:425) reports as follows on the Kanuri and Kanembu languages:

"[...]Kanuri proper, which has by far the larger number of speakers, and Kanembu, spoken in and around Nguigmi in Niger north-west of Lake Chad. Kanembu was once more widely spoken, e.g. in Nigeria and was the language of the important medieval empire of Kanem while Kanuri is basically the language of its successor state, Bornu".

NACHTIGAL (1987:159) has this to say on the term Kanuri:

"The name Kanuri is always used as a collective term and never to indicate descent, nationality and this makes it especially probable that it developed only at a later date. Anyone who makes enquiries about the sub-sections of the Kanuri is at first completely confused when he hears names which obviously indicate fragments of the Kanembu, the Tuku and others ..."

However, the Kanuri people have a strong contention that their language - Kanuri - emanated from Kanembu, and the Kanembu language in its "pure" or "classical" form<sup>2</sup> is regarded as the parent language. For this and other political reasons the "pure" or the "classical" form of the Kanembu language is until today partly used as the language of religious interpretation by the traditionalist Ulama.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The term classical is employed to refer to a language which is considered to be at the highest stage of its development; cf. HARTMANN and STORK, 1976:36, and CRYSTAL, 1980:61. The term "classical Kanembu" refers to the variety of Kanembu which is confined to traditionalist Ulama.

<sup>3</sup> Kanuri modern preachers usually do not use the classical Kanembu.

Based on the above assertion and those made by ALKALI (1978), TIJANI (1980:162) and BULAKARIMA (1991), it may be assumed that the modern-day Kanuri and Kanembu have emerged from what we can refer to as the ancient/classical Kanembu.

### Kanuri-Kanembu divergence

Although the exact date of the emergence of Kanuri as a dialect of the "classical" Kanembu is not known yet, the period of their divergence can be said to be towards the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth centuries A.D. (ALKALI, 1978 and TIJANI, 1980). This was the period when the Kanembu, Zaghawa, Bulala and Tubu were in a serious conflict over the leadership of Kanem. This conflict led to the movement of the state capital from the east of the Lake Chad to the western side of the lake. The Sayfawa, being well known for their fief system - the system of incorporating the autochthonous groups they encountered in their settlement was continued at the western side of the Lake Chad (cf. COHEN, 1970:151 and HICKEY, 1985). This makes it especially probable that the old ethnic groupings (e.g. Magumi, Kangu, Tura, etc.) got fused and at the same time gave way to the present-day ethnic groupings (e.g. Kaama, Wuje, Zarara, Mowar etc.). The unification/absorption process can be said to have assisted both Kanuri and Kanembu in developing their components at the western and the eastern parts of the Lake Chad respectively.

### Kanuri and its components

The Kanuri language is spoken by the following ethnic groups as their mother tongue: Bodai, Fadawu, Ngumatiwu, Koyam, Zarara, Wujewu, Mowar, Suwurti, Karda, Kaama, Ngazar, Lare, Dagura, Manga, Tumaguri, Malama and Bilmawu. Within each of these ethnic groups, there are several clans which include: the Magumi, Tumaguri, Karda, Kangu, Ngazar, Karde, Ngalaa, Tura, Kunguna, Kuwuri, Nguma, Dowodi, Kowa, Kayi, Ngurma- Dukku, Kajidi, etc. There is no clarity as to which clan or group of clans belongs to which ethnic group. However, BULAKARIMA (1991) classified the Kanuri components into six dialects based on their speech forms. These six dialects are: Bilma, Dagura, Manga, Mowar, Suwurti and Yerwa.

If the Mowar dialect is given the central position in relation to the other dialects of Kanuri, we have the Bilma dialect in the far north of Mowar; Dagura and Manga dialects in the west; Yerwa dialect in the south; and the Suwurti dialect in the east.

### Kanembu and its components

Undoubtedly, the Kanembu speakers are found in large concentrations in the Kanem region with their headquarters at Mao. However, they are also found

on the western shores of the Lake Chad in Niger and Nigeria. In Maiduguri, the Borno State capital, Kanembu speakers are also found in Custom, Guwori and Diyejiri wards.

Like Kanuri, the Kanembu language is also spoken by several ethnic groups which include: Kuwuri, Darka, Galla, Kaidi, Ngala, Surma, Kangu, Bade, Kafa, Kowuna, Njeliwu, Nguyin, Kuri, Diyiri, etc. Within each of these ethnic groups, there are several clans among which are Maami, Kuwuri, Surmuwu, Gairawu, Kowuna, Tumaguri, Tedewu, Manu, Didiwu, Melea, Kowa, Guladuwu, Ngim, Bade, Kalakalawu, Diyee, Ajaa, Kofa, Ngalduku, Sumbulliwu, Maraya, Saliya, Kafoya, Adeya, etc.

Although the work on Kanembu is still at its tender stage, two dialects have been identified from the data available. These dialects are Diyiri and Kowuna. The features of these two dialects seem to be very much similar to those of Kanuri dialects which is contrary to the earlier statement made by LUKAS (1937:ix) referring to Suwurti as western Kanembu. This claim might be true some sixty years back but presently as evidenced by the data available, Kanembu itself has undergone several weakening processes and the similarity is observed not only in Suwurti dialect alone but in almost all the other dialects of Kanuri. It is assumed that more dialects can be determined as the research on Kanembu progresses.

### Kanuri-Kanembu dialect contiguity

Dialect contiguity in Kanuri and Kanembu can best be illustrated by comparing words from Kanuri dialects on one hand with their equivalents in the dialects of Kanembu on the other hand (see appendix).

From the data given in the appendix the resemblance between the two dialect groups - Kanuri dialects on one hand and Kanembu dialects on the other hand - seems to be very much alike. Looking through the twenty-two lexical items one sees evidence of the following phonological processes occurring in all the dialects:

- a) Palatalization as in lexical items numbers 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 12, 17, 21 and 22 where the consonant sounds k, s, t, and j are palatalized to c, y, š, etc.
- b) Deletion as in lexical items numbers 6, 7, 9, 15 and 17 where the consonant sounds nz, k, y are completely deleted.
- c) Voicing as in lexical items 6, 11, 16 and 19 where the consonant sounds k and t are voiced to g and d respectively.

These phonological features are common to Kanuri and Kanembu. These were brought about by synchronic allophonic variation which points to further weakening in the two languages. Judging from the data presented here and those collected during field trips in Maiduguri and shores of the Lake Chad in January through April 1995, Kanuri and Kanembu seem to be one and the same language.

## Conclusion

Taking into consideration the sociolinguistic background of both the Kanuri and the Kanembu components, the brief history of their divergence, the strong contention of Borno Ulama towards the origin of their language, the dialect contiguity data given in the appendix, and the demographic compositions of these dialects, there is every reason to draw a conclusion that Kanuri and Kanembu were in the past one and the same language. This seems to ascertain the assertion that the present-day Kanuri and Kanembu languages are offshoots of an ancient/classical Kanembu but not Kanuri. It can be ancient/classical Kanembu for two reasons:

- (i) The Kanuri people have never doubted that their language is an offshoot of an ancient/classical Kanembu as contained in their oral tradition.
- (ii) The ancient/classical form of the Kanembu language can yet be traced in manuscripts, especially in religious interpretations (cf. BYNON, 1977).

The ancient/classical form of the Kanembu language referred to above has been identified from three sources as mentioned in BIVAR (1960). However, several other sources have been identified in Borno (especially in the towns of Maiduguri, Baga and Monguno). The commentary to the said religious text, according to BIVAR (1960:203), was dated 1669 A.D. However, the Ajami tradition within the Kanembu Ulama circle existed much earlier.

The genetic model presented in fig. 1 above can therefore be extended to accommodate the parent language proposed for the present-day Kanuri and Kanembu dialect cluster.

With intensive research it is believed that our understanding of the languages referred to as Saharan could greatly be improved. The paper cannot yet be said to be conclusive, for our knowledge on the dialects and the ancient/classical Kanembu referred to above is still scanty and the subject is under investigation.

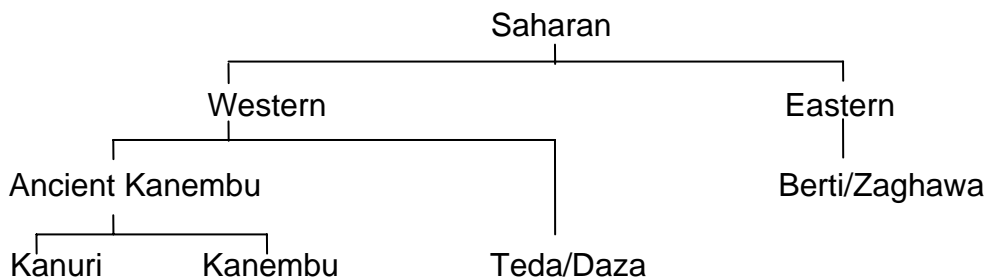


Fig. 2: Modified genetic model of Saharan languages

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## Appendix

## Kanuri - Kanembu dialect contiguity

|     | Gloss | Bilma   | Dag@ra  | Manga          | Mowar           | Suwurti        | Yerwa        | Diyiri     | Kowuna |
|-----|-------|---------|---------|----------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------|------------|--------|
| 1.  | belly | cúró    | cúró    | tsúró/<br>cúró | cúró            | cúró,<br>shúró | súró         | círó       | cúró   |
| 2.  | bone  | shílà   | híllà   | tsíllà         | yílà            | shílà, sílà    | shílà        | shílà      | yíllà  |
| 3.  | eye   | shîm    | hîm     | tsîm           | yîm             | s@m, sîm       | shîm         | s@m        | sîm    |
| 4.  | grass | kàyîm   | kàyîm   | kàyîm          | kàyîm           | gàyîm          | kàjîm        | gàyîm      | kàyîm  |
| 5.  | foot  | shî, sí | sî, tsî | tsî, sí        | yî              | dû, sí         | shî          | dû         | dû, sí |
| 6.  | louse | kùngúsù | kàngúzù | kàngúzù        | k@ ng@<br>sh@   | k@ ng@š<br>@   | k@ ng@<br>s@ | kùnû       | k@ n@  |
| 7.  | mouth | cî      | cî      | cî             | cî              | k@yî, kîi      | cî           | kíyî       | kîi    |
| 8.  | name  | sû, cû  | cû, tsû | tsû, cû        | yû, cû          | shû, cû        | sû           | cû         | cû     |
| 9.  | nose  | kínjà   | kínjà   | cínjà          | kínjà           | k@njà          | k@nzà        | k@sà       | k@sà   |
| 10. | seed  | kùsúni  | kàzúni  | kàsúni         | kùyúni,<br>cúni | kùyúni         | kùsúnyî      | kùs@n<br>i | -      |
| 11. | smoke | kànj@   | kànjê   | kàngê          | kàngê           | g@njèi         | kàngê        | k@njèi     | g@njèi |

|     | Gloss | Bilma   | Dag@ra    | Manga      | Mowar              | Suwurti    | Yerwa    | Diyiri  | Kowuna   |
|-----|-------|---------|-----------|------------|--------------------|------------|----------|---------|----------|
| 12. | star  | shíláù  | hílléù    | síwálò     | yílléwù,<br>sílléù | shílléù    | shílléwù | shílláù | shílléù  |
| 13. | water | @njî    | ngî       | yìngî, njî | @ngî, njî          | ìngî       | njî      | njî     | nkî      |
| 14. | horse | fûr     | fûr       | f@r        | fûr                | fûr        | f@r      | fûr     | -        |
| 15. | cow   | fíyè    | fê, fíyè  | fê         | fíyè, fê           | fíyè, fê   | fê       | fê      | fê, fíyè |
| 16. | goat  | kànî    | kànî      | kànî       | kànî               | gànî       | kànyî    | kànî    | kànyî    |
| 17. | mat   | bújì    | búi       | búshì      | búyì               | búshì, búi | b@jì     | n@shì   | b@yì     |
| 18. | cap   | jówó    | jówá      | jóká       | jówá               | jóká       | záwá     | jówá    | jáwá     |
| 19. | hut   | táli    | gîm, hádò | ngîm, njîm | nyîm               | kái, n@m   | njîm     | fódà    | fádà     |
| 20. | tears | s@mála  | cúmálò    | ts@málò    | y@mála             | yímálò     | shímálò  | s@ála   | -        |
| 21. | black | cil@m   | cúlúm     | ts@l@m     | cil@m              | cil@m      | s@l@m    | cil@m   | cúlúm    |
| 22. | s/he  | shí, tí | tí        | tí         | sí, shí            | tí, sí     | shí      | sí      | sí       |