

## Preface

‘So’ is the traditional name by which some of the people of north-eastern Nigeria and parts of Tchad and Cameroon have identified their pre-Islamic predecessors. Scholarly opinion has varied from regarding the So as an emerging complex society to denying that they ever existed. Some of the inhabitants of the *firki* clay plains, south of Lake Chad, have mythologized them as giants with superhuman strength, but relatively little else is remembered about them except that they were not Moslems, as the present occupants of the area are. Archaeological evidence is limited but in a small area of Borno (formerly Bornu), in Nigeria, is a group of villages in which there are unusually large pots that have become known as ‘So pots’ and have been curated in spite of some being cracked, broken, or even fragmentary. First described, and photographed, by European visitors at the beginning of the twentieth century, they appeared old even then but have survived until recent times, sometimes reused in various ways. Their original purpose was apparently for inhumation burial but they could later have been reused for brewing beer from sorghum, in an area with abundant grain harvests, or for dyeing, water storage, or grain storage. Documentary evidence suggests that their reuse as dye pits is the most likely. They could be up to four hundred years old, dating from before the Islamic state of Borno absorbed the area at the end of the sixteenth century AD or later, when the consumption of alcohol would most likely have been prohibited and when Islamic burial would have replaced pot burial. However, those changes and their chronology remain uncertain because the extent to which Islam was adopted probably varied and traditional practices could have lingered on.

Why should a few old and often useless pots be kept for so long? It seems that this happened because of their association with a previous indigenous population, that had been (at least partly) integrated into the Kanuri Borno state, or enslaved, or driven out. Neighbouring ethnic groups referred to these previous people as the So, probably a generic name by others to describe indigenous pagans, but it is unknown what the latter called themselves. The subsequent retention of the pots was most likely as memories of predecessors, symbolic connections with the past, not heirlooms but actually representing the former inhabitants. The pots had *become their past* for the later people of the villages where they existed, and for this reason they were valued and curated even after their use for dyeing had become uncommon.

Although frequently mentioned for over a century, the Borno So pots have attracted little specific attention from archaeological or ethnographic researchers and relevant

literature is limited. Furthermore, economic, social and cultural change, as well as serious terrorist activity in the area by the group known as Boko Haram, will inevitably impact on their continued survival, so that further study is unlikely in the foreseeable future. This makes it important to publish old records, mainly in the form of photographs, from the 1960s, 1970s and 1990s. For instance, Figures 75 and 76 in the book are photographs of large pots that were in the museum at Fort Lamy (subsequently N’Djamena) in 1966 but that city in Tchad has suffered from fighting on several occasions since and the fate of those pots is presently unknown.

Making such large pots raises technical questions about how this was accomplished, particularly concerning forming and firing. However, unusually large pots are known from other places, such as Kano, also in northern Nigeria, and in other parts of the world, both past and present. Although very different from the So pots of Borno, notable examples were in second millennium BC Crete, first millennium AD Turkey, and nineteenth century and modern Georgia (formerly part of the USSR); in the latter case there are absolutely gigantic pots.

For readers unfamiliar with the region, Borno is a state in the north-east of Nigeria, bordering parts of the southern and western shores of Lake Chad. It was formerly part of Northern Nigeria within the British colony of Nigeria and at that time and during the early years of Independence after 1960 its name was spelt ‘Bornu’. The area in which the Borno So pots were located was part of the German colony of Kamerun from 1884 until 1916, and after World War I it became a mandated territory under the League of Nations administered by Britain and eventually joining Nigeria in 1961 after the latter became independent in 1960.

Borno State consists mainly of dry savanna, some of it in the Sahel climatic zone. It has a hot climate, particularly in the dry season, and visitors unfamiliar with it could mistake it for semi-desert at such times. Lake Chad is situated in an internal drainage basin, and its levels fluctuate mainly because of the amount of water flowing north in the Chari and Logone rivers from equatorial regions and because of the loss of water from evapotranspiration. During the later Pleistocene or early Holocene the lake was much more extensive than in later millennia and substantial deposits of montmorillonitic clay, known in the region as *firki*, were laid down in lagoonal areas, particularly south of the lake. As the lake levels subsequently fell, the resulting plains have provided relatively fertile conditions for arable agriculture during and after the wet seasons, as

well as important dry season pastoralism. Large amounts of sorghum are grown in the area, on the residual moisture retained in the montmorillonitic soil into the dry season, following extensive flooding during the wet season. This grain could have been used for brewing beer in the area, a practice probably curtailed by the Islamization of the plains from the late sixteenth century AD onwards, as mentioned above. The unusually large pots found in only a small part of the grain-growing area in Borno have been preserved until recent times, even when damaged and unusable, apparently because they preserve memories of people at a former time, a people mythologized as giants and called the 'So'. The distribution of these pots, restricted to a narrow gap between the northern end of the Mandara Mountains and the southern shore of Lake Chad, is in an area that has probably had a dynamic ethnic mix over the centuries as influences and people intruded particularly from the east. Such movements have been along what might be called the 'Sahel Corridor', that stretches from the Nile to the Atlantic coast.

Archaeological research in Borno was pioneered by the writer during the 1960s, 1970s, and the beginning of the 1980s, and better-resourced work was conducted in the 1990s under the direction of Peter Breunig of the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, Frankfurt, but in both cases attention was mainly focussed on early periods so that the Borno So pots were relatively neglected in relevant studies. This book attempts to remedy this situation but unfortunately most of the available record is limited to photographs and for this reason its illustrations have been reproduced at large sizes wherever possible, in order to make the decoration and condition of the pots more easily appreciated.

Most of the illustrations in this book are photographs taken by myself or are reproduced by the permission of Nicola Rupp, of the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, Frankfurt, Germany. A small number of illustrations are from other sources, the copyright of which is now difficult to ascertain after the passage of time. The author offers his apologies for any omissions resulting from this and would be grateful to be contacted concerning the matter. In all such cases the source of each illustration is detailed in its caption.

My thanks are due to Detlef Gronenborn, of the Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum, Mainz, Germany, and to Nicola Rupp, mentioned above, for information about their work in Borno during the 1990s. As apparent from some of my 1960s photographs, the patience of Haruna Shuwa, my driver and mechanic, and of Julius Tilleh, my Tiv assistant, both of whom frequently acted as living scales alongside the pots, must also be acknowledged. In addition, I remain grateful for my friendly reception by the Borno people in the villages that had So pots. They are remembered with affection and I am saddened to hear of the dangers that they have recently had to face.

I have to thank four anonymous referees selected by the publisher, who commented favourably on a previous version of this book and made a number of helpful suggestions which led to significant improvements. As on many occasions, I am also indebted to Andrew Stawowczyk Long and David Pearson for help with digital and other technical matters.

Finally, the originals of the negatives and prints of the photographs of mine reproduced in this book remain in my possession, and of Nicole Rupp's slides in her possession.

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Canberra, Australia  
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## The Context

Borno (formerly spelt Bornu) is a regional state in the north-east of modern Nigeria, bordering on the countries of Cameroon and Chad to its east and Niger to its north, and adjacent to Lake Chad (Figure 1). It is located in the savanna, partly in the Sahel, with alternating dry and wet seasons and rainfall that diminishes from south to north. Its principal inhabitants are now known as Kanuri, but their origins are complex and there are also other ethnic groups present. The region almost certainly has a longer human history than the last few thousand years currently indicated by the available archaeological evidence. Climatic oscillations and consequent geomorphological changes have probably buried earlier evidence to depths from which it is unlikely to be recovered except by accident, as was the case with the boat from Dufuna, an 8000-year-old dugout canoe found accidentally in 1987, the oldest known boat in Africa and the earliest archaeological evidence from Borno (Breunig 1996).

The next piece of evidence is the site of Konduga, located on the Bama Ridge, a shoreline of a larger ancient Lake Chad, a little to the north-west of the town of Bama (Breunig and Neumann 2002: 135). This site produced pottery associated with charcoal that yielded a radiocarbon date of 7500 to 7000 years ago. The makers of the Konduga pottery were probably fisher-hunter-gatherers because there is no evidence of the herding of cattle in the Lake Chad region until about 3800 years ago (Breunig and Neumann 2002: 137, 140).

From about 3800 to about 2400 years ago there are numerous occupation sites situated to the south-west of Lake Chad between the Bama Ridge and the clay plains known as the *firki*. These sites belong to the Gajiganna Complex, named after the one that is best-known. Their inhabitants were village-dwellers who kept domesticated cattle but also hunted and fished. In addition they gathered wild plant food, particularly from various grasses, and from about 3200 years ago gradually adopted the cultivation of millet. With the adoption of agriculture, a more sedentary lifestyle became common and the sites grew larger, although after about 3000 years ago they shrank, perhaps because of climatic factors. However, between 2800 and 2400 years ago much larger settlements developed, of which Zilum, north of Maiduguri, is the most studied. This was a large village of about 12 hectares, surrounded by a defensive ditch and bank, with a population of 1750 to 2500 people. Throughout the Gajiganna–Zilum period, technology remained dependant on tools of bone and stone, the latter material carried for long distances from outside this stoneless area (Breunig et al. 2001; Breunig

and Neumann 2002: 132–150; Rupp 2005; Magnavita et al. 2006).

From about 3000 years ago there is abundant evidence for human settlement of the *firki* clay plains, in Nigeria, Cameroon, and Chad (Lebeuf and Masson Detourbet 1950; Lebeuf 1962a; Connah 1981; Gronenborn 1996; 1998; Gronenborn et al. 1996; Holl 2002; 2006) (Figures 1 and 2). Numerous villages grew up on sandy islands that remained habitable during seasonal flooding of the plains and continued to be occupied for many centuries. Best known of these sites are the mounds of Kursakata and Daima, that were agro-pastoral villages whose inhabitants grew millet or sorghum but also fished, hunted, and collected wild plant food. At first, tools were of bone and stone but iron came into use between about 2400 and about 2000 years ago (Gronenborn 1996: 456). Subsequently, the presence in these sites of bronze and of beads of semi-precious stones and glass indicates contact beyond the immediate region (Connah 1981: 194–195). Some of these sites were abandoned between 700 and 400 years ago, as new people moved onto the clay plains, but others continued to be occupied until the present day or were reoccupied. After about 1200 years before present there is written evidence for the development of early states, initially east of Lake Chad such as Kanem but subsequently to the west and south of the lake. Archaeological manifestations of the later phases of these are present at Birnin Gazargamo and Gambaru along the Komadugu Yobe [River Yobe], and in changes in pottery on the clay plains south of the lake. Pottery excavated from Yau, in the Yobe Valley, of about 1200 years ago, might relate to the origin of these developments (Gronenborn and Magnavita 2000; Gronenborn 2001).

This is the context in which the pots in Borno known as ‘So pots’, the subject of this book, belong. According to oral and archaeological evidence, they relate to pre-Islamic inhabitants of the region south of Lake Chad, in Nigeria, Cameroon, and Chad before ethnic and religious changes at the end of the sixteenth century AD or later. Distinctive terracotta figurines and bronze-work also characterised the material culture of these inhabitants (Lebeuf 1962b; Connah 2017), particularly in Chad. (Figures 3–5).