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Citation: Dewiere, Remi (2021) Looking for the lost norm: The power letters of Borno (1823-1918). *Quaderni Storici*, 2021 (2). pp. 497-535. ISSN 0301-6307

Published by: Societa Editrice il Mulino

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1408/102884> <<https://doi.org/10.1408/102884>>

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# Looking for the Lost Norm. The Power Letters of Borno (1823-1918)

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## Introduction

The comparison of the letter in question with a letter from the Sheikh, which there is reason to believe is still extant in this country, may serve to establish the authenticity of the letter addressed to you, and I have therefore to instruct you to send home the original letter<sup>2</sup>.

In 1836, an African ambassador coming from Borno (N. E. Nigeria) presented himself to the British vice-Consul of Alexandria Charles Sloane, in Egypt, with a letter written by his ruler, the Shehu Muḥammad al-Kanemi (*šayḥ* Muḥammad *al-amīn* al-Kānimī). Sloane sent an Arabic copy of this letter to London<sup>3</sup>. However, the Foreign office expressed doubts on the authenticity of this letter; on August 20, 1836, British Foreign Secretary Henry John Temple sent a letter to the Consul-General of Egypt Patrick Campbell, asking for the original letter whose seal, general design and layout could be compared with former bornoan diplomatic letters, written in the 1820s. This episode raises the question of the writings of power, as well as the signs that give written documents their official status. The necessity to rely on the external characters of an official document acknowledges that in the Sahel, to use Jacques Poloni-Simard's words, "the 'modern' administration of the kingdoms is accompanied by a rationalized management of the written word at the same time as the setting up of special mechanisms to establish the authority of the monarch through this instrument<sup>4</sup>". This observation was later echoed by several researchers, who stressed the care taken of the visual aspect of certain letters written by Sahelian Muslim rulers, seeing it as a sign of the existence of "formal rules of epistolary diplomacy in use in the region<sup>5</sup>". The Borno of the Kanemi

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<sup>1</sup> This article is the result of research conducted during my postdoctoral fellowship in EHESS, at the Centre Alexandre Koyré, as Max Weber Fellow, at the EUI and as WIRL-COFUND in the University of Warwick. I would like to thank Jean-Louis Triaud and Mauro Nobili for their fruitful remarks, as well as Nora Lafi, Martin Moure and Stéphane Colovitch, who gave a great contribution in localizing some of the letters. I also wanted to thank the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments. This article is the first part of a working paper; the second part, entitled "Les lettres du pouvoir au Sahel islamique : marques, adaptations et pratiques des secrétaires des souverains du Borno (1823-1918)", is published in *Cahier d'Études Africaines* (Dewièrè 2019b).

<sup>2</sup> Palmerson to Campbell, letter from August, 20th, 1836. London, National Archives, FO 141/13.

<sup>3</sup> Sloane to Palmerson, letter from June 27th, 1836. London, National Archives, FO 78/285, f. 71.

<sup>4</sup> Poloni-Simard 2001: 782.

<sup>5</sup> Lefebvre 2014: 67.

dynasty quickly attracted attention for the care taken in drafting the letters of power. As early as 1959, Adrian D. H. Bivar noted that two letters produced by the Borno chancery, in the years 1825-1835 and 1885-1893, “attests a firmly established protocol, with a standardized course of training for the official scribes<sup>6</sup>”.

These letters are then exceptional by their form. They are also part of a wider corpus of documents: the Arabic manuscripts of precolonial sub-Saharan Africa. In the last forty years, there has been a large reappraisal of Islamic manuscript cultures in Sahel, in Arabic or in Ajami, the African languages written in Arabic scripts, such as Hausa, Kanuri or Swahili. If palaeography and medieval epigraphy have played a pioneering role in the study of the culture of writing in Africa<sup>7</sup>, the study of Arabic literature in sub-Saharan Africa, along with Christian Ethiopian literature<sup>8</sup>, became a major field of research. Since the 1960s, scholars such as John Hunwick and Rex Sean O’Fahey, greatly contributed in rediscovering the richness of written production in African societies, materialized by the voluminous catalogue of the *Arabic Literature of Africa*<sup>9</sup>. The valorisation of the immense corpus of Arabic manuscripts in Africa created an important branch of study on African manuscript cultures, in West Africa, the Horn of Africa and the Swahili coast<sup>10</sup>. A ground-breaking work has been done in the field of manuscript studies in sub-Saharan Islamic societies, in the field of literature, history and codicology. Nevertheless, it has only been recently that the focus shifted on non-literary documents, namely “writing registers linked to the exercise of administrative and legal functions”<sup>11</sup>, such as legal contracts, identity documents, administrative papers and diplomatic letters, in precolonial, colonial and post-colonial Africa.

This shift was favoured by the development of the social history of reading and writing in premodern societies. In the aftermath of the archival shift from archive-source to archive-subject, the written object was no longer confined to its source status, but became a subject<sup>12</sup>. The “material turn” was decisive for questioning the paper supports of writing as objects<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Bivar 1959: 336.

<sup>7</sup> Ficquet & Mbodj-Pouye 2009: 753; Wion et al. 2016; De Moraes Farias 2003.

<sup>8</sup> This branch of study has produced a large literature. See Bosc-Tissé and Derat 2011; Wion and Bertrand 2011; Bausi *et al.* 2015; Tegegne 2015, and many others.

<sup>9</sup> O’Fahey & Abu Salim 1983; Hunwick 2005

<sup>10</sup> Krätli & Lydon 2011; Delmas & Penn 2012; Tamari and Bondarev 2013; Brigaglia & Nobili 2017. To mention the ERC project no. 322849 *IslHornAfr* led by Alessandro Gori (2013-2018), that aimed to produce a picture of the Islamic literary history in the Horn of Africa; or the ERC project no. 759390 Langarchiv, led by Camille Lefebvre, that works on corpus of texts in Hausa and Kanuri in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

<sup>11</sup> Wion, Barret and Mbodj-Pouye 2016

<sup>12</sup> Stoler 2009, see also Jungen & Raymond 2012

<sup>13</sup> Roche 1997; Hall 2000; Stolorow 2010.

In the footsteps of Guglielmo Cavallo and Armando Petrucci, Roger Chartier and Christian Jacob played a seminal role in the study of writing and reading in Europe,<sup>14</sup> and many researchers in African studies were directly inspired by his work, from anthropologists to historians<sup>15</sup>. In precolonial Muslim Africa, the work of G. Lydon, M. Nobili, B. Hall and many others highlighted the close relationship between power and writing, as well as the challenges surrounding the conservation and archiving of texts of power<sup>16</sup>.

Several research projects and studies have revealed the existence of a rich corpus of pragmatic writing in Africa, such as letters, legal charters, case law treaties or financial documents, particularly in Islamic societies<sup>17</sup>. However, their materiality and their visual identity, in relation with their use as instruments of power, have received little attention from researchers. Except for few exceptions, the medieval and early modern history of Africa has long remained on the side-lines of this question, except in the context of contact with European colonizers<sup>18</sup>. One of the reasons given, as J. Goody stated, is that “pre-colonial Africa provides very limited examples of the uses of writing for political and other purposes<sup>19</sup>”. The materiality of diplomatic letters, legal documents and royal edits in precolonial Sahelian states has yet to be properly analysed. About the visual aspect of these letters, others are even more categorical: “In West African Islamic societies, there is hardly any public writing of power [...] The letters are short and in an unattractive style”<sup>20</sup>.

With the analysis of Borno letters as objects of power, the present study makes it possible to demonstrate that writing for political purposes was a common practice that created specific skills and rules, as well as original graphic identities in service of administration and diplomacy. In fact, several anecdotes featuring validation marks show their importance in written communication in the Sahel and Sahara. In the 1810s, Muḥammad ‘Umar al-Tūnisī, a merchant who lived in Darfur and Wadai, reported that the Sultan of Wadai (Chad) plotted against his rebelled brother by convincing him that members of the court were rallying to his

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<sup>14</sup> The bibliography on the subject is very extensive. However, we can mention the pioneering work of F. Furet & J. Ozouf (1977), G. Cavallo (1983), A. Petrucci (1979, 2008) and R. Chartier (1985, 1987, 1991). The *Annales* special issue entitled “Writing Practices. A History of Written Culture,” (2001, 56 (4-5)), reports on the progress made in the history of Europe in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Other works, such as *Lieux de savoir 2. Les mains de l’intellect*, dirigé par C. Jacob (2011), et *The Nature of the Book*, d’A. Johns (1998), have become essential references.

<sup>15</sup> Peterson 2004; Cohen 2017; Mbodj-Pouye 2009, 2013, Dewièrè and Bruzzi 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Fiquet and Mbodj-Pouye 2009; Hall 2011; Lydon 2011, 2019; Dewièrè 2019; Nobili 2020.

<sup>17</sup> O’Fahey and Abu Salim 2003, Wion 2006, Bang 2008, Lydon 2009, Lefèbvre 2014, Wion, Barret and Mbodj-Pouye 2016, Warscheid 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Madeira Santos 2009, Lefèbvre 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Goody 1986: 92.

<sup>20</sup> Salvaing 2005: 76.

cause. He used their signatures to make a false letter credible<sup>21</sup>. Similarly, in 1906, the *sarki* and notables of Zinder (Niger), accused of revolt against the French through a false letter of conspiracy, tried to defend themselves by questioning the validity of the document through its form – the presence or not of a date – and its handwriting<sup>22</sup>. Thus, the letters represented the figure of the monarch<sup>23</sup>. In the Jihadist spheres of 19<sup>th</sup> century Central Sahel, letters were tools of governance and propaganda medias<sup>24</sup>. As a public object, they were used and shown to all strata of the population, whether literate, semi-literate or even illiterate<sup>25</sup>.

The letters of Borno are therefore part of a context in which the production and use of the written word went beyond the restricted circles of the literate<sup>26</sup>. In fact, taking a quote from Poloni Simard, one could argue that, in precolonial Sahelian societies, a large body of population had, at least once in their life, access to written objects: letters, invoices, talismans, religious texts... If only a small part of the population could actually write or read, written documents were accessible and used by everyone, in any aspect of religious, economic, intimate or administrative life<sup>27</sup>. It is then impossible to draw a “clear demarcation between those who could write and those who were excluded from this knowledge<sup>28</sup>”. The signatures of interpreters, witnesses, rulers, judges and Sahelian imams<sup>29</sup> on the treaties imposed by the French during the colonial conquest testify to the variety of literacy levels in West Africa<sup>30</sup>. Writing had many political, social and economic uses. In this context, where a largely illiterate society and a strong presence of the written word coexisted in superimposition<sup>31</sup>, documents stemming from power<sup>32</sup>, like diplomatic letters, are the tip of the iceberg of documentary writing<sup>33</sup>. They concentrate on an object a set of techniques and know-how that are otherwise reserved for sacred writing. Above all, the emergence of standards and techniques specific to

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<sup>21</sup> El-Tounsy 1851: 115.

<sup>22</sup> Lefebvre 2017: 959.

<sup>23</sup> Castillo Gómez 2001: 813.

<sup>24</sup> Zehnle 2020: 67.

<sup>25</sup> “Illiterate people generally have a particular respect for official documents. [...] It is the external aspect, rather than the content, that arouses fear” (Tóth 2001: 874-875).

<sup>26</sup> One of the most striking examples is the correspondance between slaves and their owners in the context of trans-Saharan trade between Timbuktu and Ghadamès (Hall 2011: 279-297).

<sup>27</sup> Poloni-Simard 2001: p. 781.

<sup>28</sup> Tóth 2001: 863.

<sup>29</sup> On the identity of the signatories, their practices and the validity of signatures, see Surun 2014: 336-337.

<sup>30</sup> These treaties can be found in the Archives Nationales d’Outre-Mer in Aix (ANOM, FM 131 MIOM/2/6).

<sup>31</sup> Tóth 2001: 880.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Bertrand, in the tradition of Michael Clanchy, refers to “administrative documents” (Clanchy 2015: 7).

<sup>33</sup> Recently, several studies have shown the extraordinary variety of documentary writing and its supports, from maps (Zehnle 2018: 29) to lists (Dewière 2017: 64); from paper to sand (Lefebvre 2015).

documentary writing highlights the role of secretaries in controlling and standardizing the act of writing<sup>34</sup>.

However, the study of secretaries faces a major problem: the lack of information on the actors in charge of writing the letter, as well as on the economic, social, cultural and political contexts of their manufacture. The whole challenge is precisely – based on these letters and the small amount of information extracted from European travel accounts – to bring out these essential elements to understand their material transmission and structure<sup>35</sup>, as well as the people behind their conception and realization. The approach is halfway between ethnography and the archaeology of texts. On the one hand, I study of the practices of writing and the products of this practice in Muslim societies in pre-colonial Sahel, in order to understand the structures and possible changes in textual authority, or the way in which political authorities used the written word to express their power and materialize their identity in the political communication<sup>36</sup>.

On the other hand, the letters are like archaeological objects, “deserving to be studied<sup>37</sup>” for themselves. The rapprochement between diplomatics and archaeology is particularly apt when it comes to perceiving the norms of writing, or the “must do<sup>38</sup>” of power writing: to what extent these letters reveal administrative rules? Did these norms survive several generations of rulers, of scribes and political systems? What is the part of personal variations in their redaction? What are the constraints related to the environment and technical know-how<sup>39</sup>? What is the part of innovation and of local and trans-regional influence in the *longue durée*, and how the colonial experience faded these norms? Finally, what can these documents tell about the precolonial administrations in sub-Saharan Africa? Can we integrate the Borno experience of power writing in a larger history of state construction? These questions are part of a broader reflection that began three decades ago, on the connection between power and textuality<sup>40</sup>. The example of Borno letters is then a new stone to a general debate on the development of writing in Islamic administrations, from the end of the Early Modern period to the 19<sup>th</sup> century’s age of reforms.

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<sup>34</sup> Castillo Gómez 2001: 821.

<sup>35</sup> Petrucci 1988: 823.

<sup>36</sup> Messick 1993: 5.

<sup>37</sup> Clanchy 2015: 7.

<sup>38</sup> Bocquentin *et al.* 2010: 159.

<sup>39</sup> Bocquentin *et al.* 2010: 159.

<sup>40</sup> Goody 1986, Findley 1989, Messick 1993, Bertrand 2015, Fitzgerald 2015.

Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, European explorers, colonial officers and historians produced a large literature on the history of Borno and its neighbour, Sokoto. In the 1960s-1980s, several monographies explored the political, religious and economic history of 19<sup>th</sup> century Sokoto and Borno, or on their leaders<sup>41</sup>. In the past ten days, there has been a large renewal of this literature, questioning the relation between writing, power and space, especially focusing on the concept of frontier and the geographic representations of power in 19<sup>th</sup> century Central Sahel. Scholars questioned the place of Sokoto and Borno in their regional contexts, highlighting the trans-national circulations of people, ideas and practices, and placing it in the larger framework of regional and global transformations operating at that period. in the context of European scramble for Africa and reconfiguration of politico-religious authority<sup>42</sup>. Works, such as Paul Naylor's recent book, focused on the role of jihadist literacy in building new legitimacies and shaping the new States, as in other parts of Sahel<sup>43</sup>. Mauro Nobili's work on the sultanate of Hamdallahi also dedicates a chapter to the Sahelian diplomacy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>44</sup>. Along with this rich and still understudied literature, documentary writings, such as legal charters and diplomatic letters, are part and testimonies of such changes<sup>45</sup>. Letters from Sokoto and Borno, bearing the seals of their rulers, reached European courts, written techniques and objects circulated among courts and across long distances, and new visual identities characterised this period of reformism that impacted parts of the Islamic World. The present article studies these new practices through the analysis of written norms in Borno documents, in order to show that this Sahelian power organised a dedicated administration to express its own visual identity and ensured its continuity over a century.

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<sup>41</sup> Last 1967; Adeleye 1971; Hiskett 1973; Brenner 1973; Smaldone 1977; Bala Usman, and Nur Alkali 1983.

<sup>42</sup> Lefebvre 2015; Hiribarren 2017; Zehnle 2020; Naylor 2021.

<sup>43</sup> Dewièrè 2017; Nobili 2020.

<sup>44</sup> Nobili 2020: 182-201.

<sup>45</sup> Some scholars speak of "pragmatic writings" or "ordinary writing": an analytic category encompassing all everyday life written documents, institutional or individual, that are usually dedicated to an internal use and that are not literature (Bertrand 2015: 14-15). See also Boyle 1995: xiii.



Figure 1 Africa, the Mediterranean and Europe

The history of Islamic Borno starts in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, when the Sefuwa dynasty installs itself in the western shore of lake Chad, in present-day Nigeria. After a phase of consolidation, the Sefuwa sultans establish their capital the 1470s at Birni Ngazargamu. In the two following centuries, the Borno Sultanate is one of the most powerful States in Sahel. At the crossroad between West, North and East Africa, the Borno extend its political and cultural influence on Kanem, Bagirmi and the Hausa States. Borno was an important producer of salt, and they specialised in the Trans-Saharan slave trade. Their rulers sent embassies to Istanbul, Morocco and Tripoli, claiming the leadership in large parts of Sahel after the fall of the Songhay

sultanate, in 1591.<sup>46</sup> The rise of the Sokoto caliphate, in present-day Northern Nigeria, abruptly put an end to the declining leadership of Borno in Central Sahel. After the destruction of Birni Ngazargamu in the 1800s, the Sefuwa relied on a Islamic religious leader to survive. This *ṣayḥ*, Muḥammad al-Kanemi, progressively reduced the Sefuwa sultans to an honorific position, before their eradication by his son ‘Umar, in 1846. Between 1814 and 1893, the Kanemi dynasty partially restored the Borno strength in the new capital Kukawa, leaving the political, cultural and economic regional leadership to Sokoto. Nevertheless, the Kanemi established diplomatic relations with Tripoli, United Kingdoms and Germany, as well as with their neighbours. In 1893, the Sudanese adventurer Rabiḥ b. Faḍl Allah brutally conquered Borno and established his capital at Dikwa. Seven years after, the French killed Rabiḥ and Borno was split between British and German empires until 1914.<sup>47</sup> In this long history, Borno courts produced an important documentation, although most of it was destroyed in the sacks of the different capitals in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Documentary writing is old in Borno, even if it is difficult to perceive the extent of its practices before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The first diplomatic letter, preserved until today, was issued in 1391. It was written in the name of the Sultan of Borno, ‘Uthmān b. Idrīs (1389-1421), for the Mamlūk Sultan of Egypt al-Zāhir Barqūq (1382-99)<sup>48</sup>. Thereafter, the traces of documentary writing are fragmentary. In Early Modern times, a passage from the work of Aḥmad b. Furtū refers to the drafting of a list containing the names of the Saw Ġafatā captives after their surrender in the years 1565-1570<sup>49</sup>. Similarly, the number of letters exchanged between Borno, Istanbul, Morocco and Kanem, as well as the existence of exemption tax charters issued from the sultans to scholars and traders, the *maḥram*<sup>50</sup>, show that administrative practices were already in place in Borno before the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The first surviving samples of diplomatic letters from Borno date back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Diplomatic and administrative correspondence attracted the attention of the first European travellers and colonizers, who discovered the intense epistolary activity that animated the Sahelian region. As early as the 1820s, the originals of several hundred letters from Sahelian rulers were kept in Europe or in African archives<sup>51</sup>. More than ninety of them were produced

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<sup>46</sup> On the history of Borno in Early Modern period, see Dewière, 2017.

<sup>47</sup> Hiribarren 2017.

<sup>48</sup> Dewière 2019a.

<sup>49</sup> Lange 1987: 14.

<sup>50</sup> Bobboyi 1993.

<sup>51</sup> Lefebvre 2014: 58.

by the rulers of Borno, the Shehu of the Kanemi dynasty, who ruled independent Borno from 1809 to 1893<sup>52</sup>, and the colonized Borno under French, German and British rule, from 1901 to 1960<sup>53</sup>. To this day, I gathered more than forty of them, that are my corpus of analysis (see Table 1).

Through the diplomatic study of Borno original letters and one legal charter (*maḥram*), dated 1823 to 1918, I wish to identify the norms that governed the drafting of these letters beyond the particularities of the scribes and dynastic successions. The longevity of these standards reveals the existence of an administration in charge of the sovereign's written communication, as well as a particular mastery of writing techniques by a category of actors solicited for their technical skills. These letters, written in Arabic, bear aesthetic and identification marks that express the authority of the Borno rulers beyond their borders, and create a "house of trust<sup>54</sup>" for the receivers, even if they are illiterate<sup>55</sup>. As an artefact bearing and representing the word of the sovereign, these letters were the subject of great attention at the time of their writing. The writing and power marks on the document were used to ensure its validity. Their use, whether these marks were original or falsified, gave credence to a wording that aimed to satisfy the recipient's expectations, to comfort or deceive him/her<sup>56</sup>. Beyond the text, the quality of the paper, the empty spaces, the leaf and text's proportions carry a political message and show a true unity of design, which survived the first years of colonization. In this way, I will seek to understand how the templates of the Borno administration resisted or adapted to political changes, including colonization. This analytical work is the first step to write a history of administration and administrators in premodern Islamic Sahel.

### **I. Constitution of a corpus**

This study is based on a corpus of forty-two documents – Forty one letters and one *maḥram* – written over a century or so, between December 10, 1823 and December 10, 1918<sup>57</sup>. These documents are "direct testimonies of the material practices of manufacturing and writing diplomatic correspondence<sup>58</sup>" in Borno. I had access to their originals, such as the letters stored

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<sup>52</sup> On the chronology of this period, see Lavers 1993. On the history of the al-Kanemi, see Brenner 1973; Hiribarren 2017.

<sup>53</sup> Between 1893 and 1901, Borno was ruled by the Sudanese adventurer Rabiḥ b. Faḍl Allah. The al-Kanemi dynasty is the traditional authority of Borno State today.

<sup>54</sup> Bertrand 2015: 364.

<sup>55</sup> Mbodj-Pouye 2004.

<sup>56</sup> Reinfandt 2019: 217.

<sup>57</sup> See Table 1.

<sup>58</sup> Petrucci 2008: x.

at the National Archives and the Royal Geographical Society in London, the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, the Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer in Aix<sup>59</sup>, the Weston Library in Oxford or the Staatsbibliothek and the Bundesarchiv in Berlin. The other documents are facsimiles, published in the related literature in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>60</sup>. The authors found these letters in different archives or libraries in Durham, Tripoli and Nigeria. Thus, the corpus is split between the different recipients and owners of the letters in Europe and Africa. This corpus still must be completed by extensive research in archives, especially in Nigeria. In fact, the volume 2 of the *Arabic Literature of Africa* and Brenner's book allowed me to identify forty-nine letters in Nigeria written by or for the Kanemi rulers<sup>61</sup>. This corpus is enriched by several English translations of letters that were received by the British consulate in Tripoli but were not found yet. Finally, a certain number of administrative documents, such as legal charters, lists or court judgements bring complementary information on the administrative practices in Borno<sup>62</sup>. Among them, two documents are still missing, although their translations were edited in the second volume of Clapperton, Oudney and Denham's narrative: there are the "document containing the list of the Property left by Mr. Tyrwhit" and the certificate of validity issued by Muḥammad al-Kanemi<sup>63</sup>.

The letters were written on behalf of seven rulers of the al-Kanemi dynasty. Five of them ruled over independent Borno in a period covering 82 years. The other two were installed by the French, German and then British colonial authorities between 1901 and 1922<sup>64</sup>. All letters are written in the name of the sovereign, except two. The first one was written by the Borno ambassador Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir b. al-Ḥāḡḡ 'Abd Allah during his stay in Alexandria, in 1836<sup>65</sup>. The other one, dated 1901, was written by Borno notables in the name of the ruler, who affixed his *ḥātām*, or printed seal, to the document<sup>66</sup>. To this corpus, I have added two other documents produced by the kanemi, which have some of the validation marks affixed to the letters studied, starting with the *ḥātām*. The first is an Anglo-Bornoan treaty, written in 1852

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<sup>59</sup> I would like to thank Stéphane Colovich, who kindly informed me of the existence of these manuscripts.

<sup>60</sup> Bivar 1959, Martin 1962, Gwarzo 1968, Al-Naqar 1972.

<sup>61</sup> Hunwick 1995: 385-387; Brenner 1973. A fieldwork was planned in May 2020 to survey and analyze them. Unfortunately, the Covid crisis postponed this fieldwork to 2021.

<sup>62</sup> For example, a list written with the same handwriting than the official letters and with the same introductory *ḥamdallah* is kept in the Denham archives of the Royal Geographical Society (see Table 1).

<sup>63</sup> Denham, Clapperton and Oudney 1826: 2: 387-390. Other translations were not edited. See NA, Kew, FO 76/20, f. 193-196.

<sup>64</sup> On the installation of the al-Kanemi during colonial rule, see Tukur 1989: 84-86.

<sup>65</sup> London, National Archives, FO 78/285, f. 95.

<sup>66</sup> Déroche 2005: 335.

at the request of the German traveller Heinrich Barth<sup>67</sup>, and the second is a facsimile of a *maḥram*, written in the name of ‘Abd al-Raḥman al-Kanemi, in 1853<sup>68</sup>. I have not yet had access to documents issued by Ibrāhīm b. ‘Umar (1884/5-1885/6), Abū Bakr (1893-1894), ‘Umar Sanda Wuduroma (1894), or by ‘Umar Sanda Kore (1900). However, the corpus of letters studied covers the entire period, with a concentration of letters in the 1820s (9 documents), 1830s (5 documents), (1850s (6 documents), 1870s (5 documents), 1900s (6 documents) and 1914-18 (4 documents). Except for the 1830s, these periods correspond to the African expeditions of Clapperton, Oudney and Denham, and Nachtigal, as well as the period of reinstallation of the Kanemi as native authorities by the colonial administrations and the First World War<sup>69</sup>.

Table 1 List of the letters studied in this article

Letter	Date	Source	Type	Sender	Recipient
1	1823/12/10	NA, CO 2/13, f. 315	Draft/copy	Muḥammad al-Kanemi (1809-1837)	Emir of Kano Ibrāhīm Dabo (1819-1846)
2	1823/12/27	NA, CO 2/13, f. 347	Official	Muḥammad al-Kanemi (1809-1837)	Caliph of Sokoto Muḥammad Bello (1817-1837)
3	1823/12/28	RGS, DD/24/3	Copy	Muḥammad al-Kanemi (1809-1837)	Caliph of Sokoto Muḥammad Bello (1817-1837)
4	1824 (end)	NA, FO 76/18, f. 306-307; RGS, DD/24/5	Partial copy	Muḥammad al-Kanemi (1809-1837)	<i>ṣayḥ</i> Abī T-b-l
5	1824	NA, CO 2/13, f. 351	Official	Muḥammad al-Kanemi (1809-1837)	Hugh Clapperton
6	1824	RGS, DD/24/6/1	Autograph	Muḥammad al-Kanemi (1809-1837)	Hugh Clapperton
7	1824	RGS, DD/29/6/1	Official (list)	Muḥammad al-Kanemi (1809-1837)	King of England Georges IV (1820-1830)
8	1824/08/11	NA, CO 2/13, f. 151	Official	Muḥammad al-Kanemi (1809-1837)	King of England Georges IV (1820-1830)
9	1824/08/14	NA, CO 2/13, f. 158	Official	Muḥammad al-Kanemi (1809-1837)	British Consul in Tripoli
10	1825-1835	Nigerian Department of Antiquities, Northern Nigerian centre of Sokoto (Bivar, 1959, Plate 1)	Official	Muḥammad al-Kanemi (1809-1837)	Muḥammad Dan Tanoma, Emir of Gumei (1825-1843)
11	1828/09/11	Berlin, Staadtbibliothek, K.3 34; Nachtigal, Sahara und Sudan, 1881, vol. 2, annexe	Copy	Muḥammad al-Kanemi (1809-1837)	Council of Borno

<sup>67</sup> London, National Archives, FO 93/17/1.

<sup>68</sup> Aminu 1981: 36.

<sup>69</sup> On this subject, see Dewièrè and Hiribarren 2018.

12	1831/1836	BNF, MS. Arabe 5693, f. 1r-2v	Autograph	Muḥammad al-Kanemi (1809-1837)	Fulani leader al-Ḥāḡḡ ‘Umar (1794–1864)
13	1835/12	NA, FO 78/284, f. 30	Official	Muḥammad al-Kanemi (1809-1837)	Vice-consul of England in Alexandria (Egypt)
14	1836/02/08	ANS, 15G79, no 82	Hybrid	Muḥammad al-Kanemi (1809-1837)	Fulani leader al-Ḥāḡḡ ‘Umar (1794–1864)
15	1836	NA, FO 78/285, f. 75	Copy	Muḥammad al-Kanemi (1809-1837)	Vice-consul of England in Alexandria (Egypt)
16	1836/06/21	NA, FO 78/285, f. 95	Official/Diplomatic	Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir b. al-Ḥāḡḡ ‘Abd Allah (Borno ambassador)	King of England William IV (1830-1837)
<i>maḥram</i>	1853	Aminu, 1981, 36	Official	‘Abd al-Raḥman b. Muḥammad (1853-1854)	<i>al-‘ālim</i> (the scholar) Muḥammad b. Fāṭima
17	1854	NA, FO 101/36, f. n. i.	Official	‘Abd al-Raḥman b. Muḥammad (1853-1854)	Queen of England Victoria (1837-1901)
18	1855/05/06	NA, FO 101/45, f. n. i.	Autograph	‘Umar b. Muḥammad (1837-1881)	Queen of England Victoria (1837-1901)
19	1855/05/06	NA, FO 101/45, f. n. i.	Official	‘Umar b. Muḥammad (1837-1881)	Queen of England Victoria (1837-1901)
20	1855/05/06	NA, FO 101/45, f. n. i.	Official	‘Umar b. Muḥammad (1837-1881)	Vice-consul of England in Fezzan Gagliuffi
21	1857	NA, FO 160/36, f. n. i.	Copy	‘Umar b. Muḥammad (1837-1881)	Vice-consul of England in Fezzan Gagliuffi
22	1858-1859	NA, FO 160/36, f. n. i.	Official	‘Umar b. Muḥammad (1837-1881)	Vice-consul of England in Fezzan Gagliuffi
23	1870/07/26	Berlin, Bundesarchiv, R901-37482-1, f. 64	Official	‘Umar b. Muḥammad (1837-1881)	William II, king of Prussia
24	1870/07/30	Tripoli archives (Martin, 1962, annexes)	Official	‘Umar b. Muḥammad (1837-1881)	Pasha of Tripoli Muṣīr ‘Alī Ridā (1866-1870)
25	1872/02/20	Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, K.3 34; Nachtigal, Sahara und Sudan, 1881, vol. 2, annexe	Official	‘Umar b. Muḥammad (1837-1881)	Alifa of Gulfeī
26	1873/01/30	Berlin, Bundesarchiv, R901-37483, f. 96	Official	‘Umar b. Muḥammad (1837-1881)	William II, king of Prussia
27	1873/01/30	Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, K.3 34; Nachtigal, Sahara und Sudan, 1889, vol. 3, annexe	Official	‘Umar b. Muḥammad (1837-1881)	Sultan of Wadai ‘Alī (1858-1874)
28	1877-1880	Nigerian Department of Antiquities, Northern Nigerian centre of Sokoto (Bivar, 1959, Plate 2)	Official	‘Umar b. Muḥammad (1837-1881)	Sultan of Sokoto Mu‘azz b. Muḥammad Bello (1877-1881)
29	1881/12/12	Tripoli archives (Gwarzo, 1968, p. 65)	Official	Abū Bakr b. ‘Umar (1881-1884/5)	Pasha of Tripoli Muḥammad Nazif Basha (1881-1882)
30	1885-1893	Nigerian Department of Antiquities, Northern Nigerian centre of Sokoto	Official	Hāšim b. ‘Umar (1885/6-1893)	Emir of Gumel Muḥammad Dan Tanoma (1872-1896)

		(Bivar, 1959, Plate 1)			
31	1891/10/17	Sudan Archives, Oriental Library, Durham 100/14 (Lavers, 1968, appendix 1)	Official	Hāsim b. ‘Umar (1885/6-1893)	Kano pilgrim, al-Ḥāḡḡ ‘Isā
32	1901/09/04	Aix, ANOM, FMSG/AFRIQUE/VI/182, f. 79	Official	Abū Bakr b. Ibrāhīm Garbai (1901-1922)	Lieutenant-Colonel Destenave for the French government
33	1901/09/04	Aix, ANOM, FMSG/AFRIQUE/VI/182, f. 7	Official	Abū Bakr b. Ibrāhīm Garbai (1901-1922)	Lieutenant-Colonel Destenave for the French government
34	1901/09/09	Aix, ANOM, FMSG/AFRIQUE/VI/182, f. 11	Official	Abū Bakr b. Ibrāhīm Garbai (1901-1922)	Lieutenant-Colonel Destenave for the French government
35	1901/10/17	al-Naqar, 1972, p. 142	Official	Abū Bakr b. Ibrāhīm Garbai (1901-1922)	Pilgrim, Šarīf Aḥmad al-Šingītī
36	1902/04/02	Aix, ANOM, FMSG/AFRIQUE/VI/182, f. 80	Official	Borno notables, <i>ḥātam</i> from ‘Umar b. Abū Bakr (Sanda Mandarama, Dikwa) (1902-1906)	Lieutenant-Colonel Destenave for the French government
37	1906/06	Berlin, Bundesarchiv, R175-I-121, f. 195 (Microfilm) Yaoundé, Archives Nationales du Cameroun	Official	‘Umar b. Abū Bakr (Sanda Mandarama, Dikwa) (1902-1906)	Hauptmann Langheld, German governor of Northern Kameroun (Yola, Bornu)
38	1914/10/03	Weston Library, Oxford, MSS. Brit. Emp. s. 77, f. 53	Official	Abū Bakr b. Ibrāhīm Garbai (1901-1922)	Lord Lugard, Governor of Nigeria
39	1914/11/18	Weston Library, Oxford, MSS. Brit. Emp. s. 77, f. 11	Official	Abū Bakr b. Ibrāhīm Garbai (1901-1922)	Lord Lugard, Governor of Nigeria
40	1918/11/19	Weston Library, Oxford, MSS. Brit. Emp. s. 77, f. 65	Official	Abū Bakr b. Ibrāhīm Garbai (1901-1922)	Lord Lugard, Governor of Nigeria
41	1918/12/10	Weston Library, Oxford, MSS. Brit. Emp. s. 77, f. 129	Official	Abū Bakr b. Ibrāhīm Garbai (1901-1922)	Lord Lugard, Governor of Nigeria

At first glance, this corpus suffers from an important bias for the study of an endogenous administration. Most of these letters are “the product of a diplomacy of imperial contact at the initiative of European agents”, which raises the question of the asymmetry of sources<sup>70</sup>. Indeed, many of these letters were written in the direction of, or at the request of, European travellers during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in order to facilitate their journey. The letters written between 1901 and 1918 were addressed to the colonial authorities, in a subaltern position. In addition, several of these letters came to us because they were brought back by travellers to Europe, who sometimes

<sup>70</sup> Surun 2014: 315.

did not have to use them during their journey<sup>71</sup>. Similarly, not all official letters for Europeans were kept by them. Several letters remained in the hands of their recipients, such as the letter from Muḥammad al-Kanemi to the Emir of Kano, of which we have only a copy. Another bias is related with the edition process of these letters. When they edited a facsimile of the letters, the European authors generally did not reproduce the whole letter. Worse still, they could cut out the layout of the letters, as Gustav Nachtigal did with the letter 27 (see figure 2).

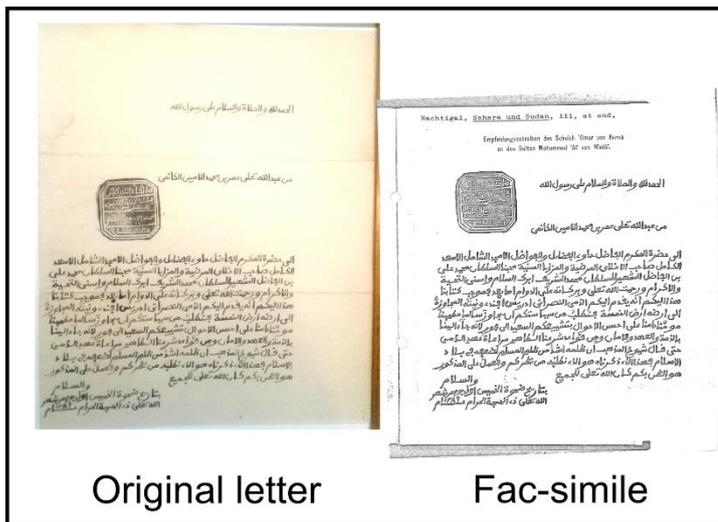


Figure 2 Edition issue. In the edition, the seal and the two first lines were cut and pasted in order to fit into the page

However, this corpus has the particularity of not being the only fruit of the confrontation between Europe and Africa. Between 1823 and 1893, half of the letters were sent to Africans. Several letters were produced in the context of relations between Borno and Tripoli, Sokoto, Bagirmi, Wadai or vassal states. Others, finally, are *aman* (safe-conduct) written for pilgrims seeking to reach Mecca across the Sahel, like the letters 31 and 35. These documents formed part of family archives that were collected in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The latter documents have the same form as the letters written for Europeans, who are only travellers or ambassadors like the others. Thus, the letter 28, written in the context of a border dispute between Borno and Sokoto<sup>72</sup>, has the same visual identity as the safe-conduct letters issued by ‘Umar b. Muḥammad to G. Nachtigal five years earlier. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, European travellers were only integrating into an already well-established system, where diplomatic letters and letters of safe-

<sup>71</sup> Letter 25.

<sup>72</sup> Bivar 1959: 333, Lefebvre 2015: 105.

conduct were central in the procedures for controlling and negotiating mobility by the authorities and traveller<sup>73</sup>.

During the colonial period, the conditions of epistolary production and the status of the Kanemi rulers changed dramatically. Here, Europeans became privileged interlocutors and the Kanemi didn't have either the administration or the room for manoeuvre that they had before. Their position as subordinates in the colonial administration affected even the shape of the sovereign's letters, as we will see. Nevertheless, the letter 35 shows that they still had an epistolary activity that escaped the eyes of the colonial administrations. Several letters addressed to Europeans, such as the letter 39, were also written on their own initiative<sup>74</sup>.

The letters at our disposal are only a fraction of the epistolary production of the rulers of Borno. There is much evidence to suggest that diplomatic exchanges between the Borno Shehu and their correspondents were regular, to such an extent that the interruption of correspondence may cause concern: in the 1850s, when tensions within the Borno court reached their peak<sup>75</sup>, the British consul in Murzuk and several notables in the Fezzan oasis were concerned that they would no longer receive letters from the Borno ruler<sup>76</sup>. From 1808 to 1812, Louis Brenner estimated that at least twenty letters were exchanged between the caliph of Sokoto Uṭman dan Fodio and Muḥammad al-Kanemi<sup>77</sup>: a letter was written every two to three months, knowing that the distance between Kano and Borno was from fifteen days to about one month<sup>78</sup>. The Borno case is not exceptional. The Sokoto leaders regularly exchanged letters with other political leaders, as shown by Stephanie Zehnle and Mauro Nobili<sup>79</sup>. At least twenty-six letters were exchanged between the ruler of Sokoto and Ḥamdallāhi in the inner Niġer Delta from 1818 to 1845: being one per year<sup>80</sup>. In the Caliphate of Ḥamdallāhi, the centralization and bureaucratization of the state was materialized by an important production of correspondence and dispatches<sup>81</sup>. Finally, Camille Lefebvre found 60 letters in the archives of Niamey, written by the Muslim rulers to the French in the context of the French military campaign in Niġer<sup>82</sup>.

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<sup>73</sup> Lefebvre 2015: 102-104; Zehnle 2020: 402.

<sup>74</sup> On this letter, see Dewière and Hiribarren 2018.

<sup>75</sup> Brenner 1973: 74-79.

<sup>76</sup> Martin 1962: 360.

<sup>77</sup> Brenner 1973: 40-42, Lockhart and Lovejoy 2005: 60.

<sup>78</sup> Dewière 2017: 212.

<sup>79</sup> Zehnle 2020: 425, 476, 636; Nobili 2020: 182-201.

<sup>80</sup> Stewart 1976: 498.

<sup>81</sup> Nobili 2016.

<sup>82</sup> Lefebvre 2014.

Moreover, diplomatic letters do not travel alone. Their bearers carry with them other letters, of a private or public nature, of themselves or from a third party. Clapperton's British journey between Kukawa and Sokoto, from December 14, 1823 to March 17, 1824, was accompanied by eight to nine letters, according to the count made by the English traveller. Among them, six to seven letters were written by the Borno Shehu, and were addressed to the Emir of Kano<sup>83</sup>, the Head of Katagum<sup>84</sup>, the representative of the Bornoans in Kano al-Ḥāğğ Ḥat Şalaḥ<sup>85</sup> and the sultan of Sokoto. Some of them, destined for Sokoto, were written after the British left Borno and were sent by a courier during their halt in Kano<sup>86</sup>. These letters served to facilitate travel, but the journey was also an opportunity to circulate letters between cities, within trading communities and between members of the same family.

## II. The Borno letter: "In search of the lost norm"

The letters of Borno are based on a wider model of letters of power, which includes the central Sahel region and reaches up to Morocco. Bradford Martin underlines the material similarities between the Borno letters and the letters of the Moroccan Alawite dynasty<sup>87</sup>. Similarly, Camille Lefebvre refers to a Maghreb influence in the drafting of letters from the Islamic authorities of the Sahel, the latter being "organised according to the standardised protocol of letters of chancellery that can also be found in the Maghreb<sup>88</sup>". This model differs from another model of spatial organisation of the text, in use in Tripoli, Darfur, Aceh or Yemen, which was based on a different epistolary model and layout: the spiral texts, as B. Messick called the way to write letters by "turning the corner and proceed, nearly upside-down in relation to the initial lines, back up the right side of the page"<sup>89</sup>. In that sense, Borno letters differed from models in use in Easter Sahel and Tripoli, and were close to models in use in West Africa and western Maghreb.

Beyond these general remarks, the analysis of the official Borno letters, i. e. the letters on which the sovereign's *ḥātām* is affixed, shows visual characteristics that are not found

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<sup>83</sup> Denham, Clapperton and Oudney 1826: 1:310-311. We have a draft of the letter for the Emir of Kano (London, NA, CO 2/13, f. 345).

<sup>84</sup> Denham, Clapperton and Oudney 1826: 2:227.

<sup>85</sup> Denham, Clapperton and Oudney 1826: 2:238. Al-Ḥāğğ Ḥat Şalaḥ was "al-Kanemi's commercial representative in Kano and Sokoto" (Lockhart and Lovejoy 2005: 486, 499).

<sup>86</sup> Denham, Clapperton and Oudney 1826: 2, 246, London, NA, CO 2/13, f. 347.

<sup>87</sup> Martin 1962: 352. This graphic similarity is confirmed by other examples of Moroccan official letters (Nehilil 1915).

<sup>88</sup> Lefebvre 2014: 67.

<sup>89</sup> Messick 1993: 233. To see an exemple on Darfur, see O'Fahey and Abu Salim 1983: 60, 72, 83. For Aceh see Gallop 2007: 54.

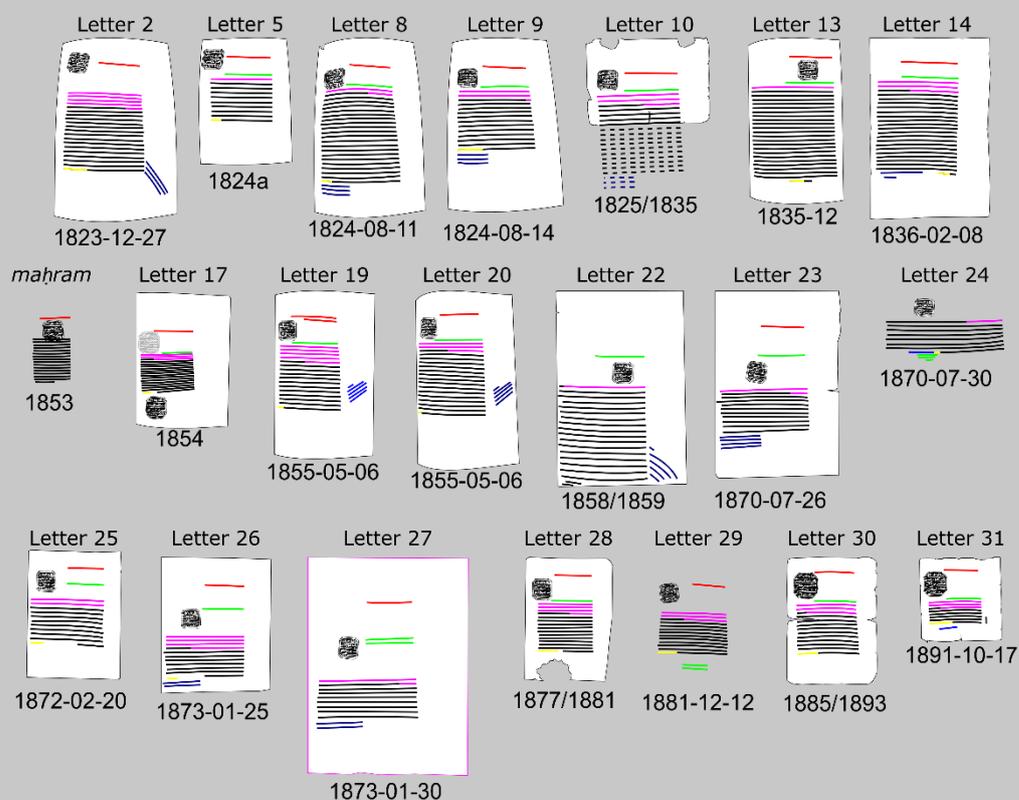
elsewhere. In the corpus, 29 letters have a *ḥātām*, to which I added a letter without *ḥātām* addressed to the Fulani leader al-Ḥāğğ ‘Umar and a *maḥram*, which had similar characteristics than the letters. In this article, I will focus on the organization of the text, the layout and the *ḥātām*, to show that there existed established norms for writing these written documents<sup>90</sup>. These three examples will also underline the effects of colonization on power writing practices in Sahelian societies, as the Kanemi dynasty has the particularity of having been resettled by Europeans, having been driven out by Rabiḥ b. Faḍl Allah’s invasion of Borno in 1893.

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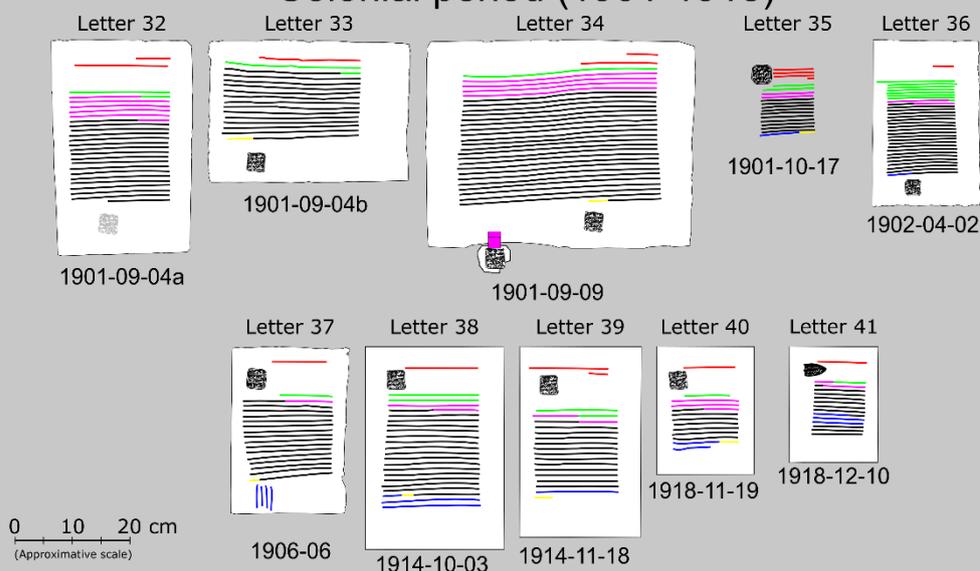
<sup>90</sup> The paper and its dimensions, the calligraphy, as well as the literary formulas can be subjected to the same analysis.

# al-Kanemi's letters

## Precolonial period (1823-1893)



## Colonial period (1901-1918)



Credit: Rémi Dewière

Figure 3 Official letters' outlines of the al-Kanemi (1823-1918)<sup>91</sup>. The red lines are the *iftitāh*; the green line is the *min fulān*; the pink line if the *ilā fulān*; the black lines are the body of the text; the yellow lines are the *salām* and the blue lines are the colophon.

<sup>91</sup> The scale is approximative. For the exact mesures, see Table 6. In grey are the unknown measures of the page.

### A. The organization of the text

The composition of Borno diplomatic letters observes the same divisions as those commonly used in the Arab world since the Mamluks<sup>92</sup>. It begins with an introductory protocol, the *iftitāh*, that is almost exclusively composed of a *ḥamdala*, one of the mandatory prayers that, along with the *basmala*, starts any writing in Islam. The *iftitāh* proceeds with the formula *min fulān ilā fulān* (from so-and-so to so-and-so), that declares the identity of the sender and the recipient<sup>93</sup>. After which, the *ba'diya* precedes the body of the text (*matn*), composed of one paragraph, which ends with the *salām*, the peace formula that closes a text<sup>94</sup>. The letter is usually dated, although this is not always the case<sup>95</sup>. Similarly, several letters have a colophon, whose position varies from one letter to another.

The scribes in the service of the Kanemi have attached particular importance to the position of the *iftitāh* and the *min fulān*, whose composition and organization on the sheet follow a firmly established protocol. The *iftitāh* of kanemi letters starts with a *ḥamdala*, translated as, “praise belongs to Allah and blessing and peace to God’s envoy<sup>96</sup>”. The use of the *ḥamdala* is very common in epistolary practices, being one of the three required things to be written at the beginning of any formal writing<sup>97</sup>. However, the Kanemi rulers rarely changed the *ḥamdala* used to introduce diplomatic letters, especially during the precolonial period<sup>98</sup>. This continuity differs from the neighbouring countries. By way of comparison, the six letters of Muḥammad Bello analysed by A. D. H. Bivar begin with six different *iftitāh*<sup>99</sup>. This formula is then a distinctive element of the documents of the Borno administration under the Kanemi, and became an element of identification of Borno official documents under the Kanemi. It can be found in internal correspondence letters<sup>100</sup> and in legal acts of the dynasty<sup>101</sup>. Its origin most

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<sup>92</sup> al-Qalqašandī 1915: 8: 116.

<sup>93</sup> Gully 2008: 175.

<sup>94</sup> Björkman *et al.* “Diplomatic”, *EI*<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>95</sup> The letters 5, 13, 17, 25, 28 and 30 are undated. It is difficult to find an explanation for this. The absence of date was noticed by Charles Sloane on the letter received in Alexandria, in 1836. He asked the reason to the ambassador Muḥammad Ṭāhir, who answered “that the date must have been omitted by error” (London, National Archives, CO 2/19, f. 81).

<sup>96</sup> الحمد لله والصلاة والسلام على رسول الله.

<sup>97</sup> Macdonald, *Hamdala*, *EI*<sup>2</sup>, II, 122.

<sup>98</sup> Bivar 1959: 327. Only two letters addressed to Queen Victoria start with another formula in the precolonial period (letters 17 and 19). Was it because the addressee was a woman, or because of the internal troubles the Borno faced at that period?

<sup>99</sup> Bivar 1959: 341.

<sup>100</sup> Letter 11.

<sup>101</sup> *Mahram* of ‘Abd al-Raḥman al-Kanemi (Aminu 1981: 36). The same *ḥamdala* is observed in three copies of *mahram* granted by Abū Bakr (1881-1884), Ibrāhīm (1884-1885) and Hāšim (1885-1893).

probably dates to Muḥammad al-Kanemi's personal epistolary practice<sup>102</sup>. In fact, this *ḥamdala* was used in his letters since 1812, during his exchanges with Muḥammad Bello<sup>103</sup>. From then on, the use of the *ḥamdala* did not change until the conquest of Rabah in 1893. This *ḥamdala* was adopted by the following rulers, as the ruler's hallmark. It became the norm in the Borno chancery to start any official document with it.

The place of the *ḥamdala* on the top of the leaf is also the subject of special attention. In eighteen letters, the line of the *ḥamdala* is as long as the *min fulān*. In fifteen of them, the name of God, "Allah", is above "al-Kānimī", the *nisba* (geographical affiliation) of the dynasty<sup>104</sup>. The superposition of the two names spatially brings the sovereign's family and God closer together, a rapprochement reinforced by the position of the *ḥātām* (seal), which frames the two terms. Between 1871 and 1873, there is a small variation in the layout: a space as large as between the *ḥamdala* and the *min fulān* is added between the text and the *min fulān*. The seal is between the *min fulān* and the text. This temporary innovation is related with one scribe and is a testimony of an administration at work, between norms and adaptations<sup>105</sup>.

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<sup>102</sup> Letter 6 and 12.

<sup>103</sup> Arnett 1922: 114-115. However, the first *iftitāḥ* of al-Kanemi, noted by Muhammad Bello, is much more developed: الحمد لله فاتح أبواب الهداية، ومانح أسباب السعادة، والصلاة والسلام على من بعث بالحنفية السحمة وعلى آله وأصحابه الذين هدوا الشرع وأوضحوا شرعه (Arnett 1922: 102). This form might have been used by Muhammad al-Kanemi because the letter opened new correspondence.

<sup>104</sup> Letters 5, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 20, 23, 25, 26, 27, 28, 30, 31 and 37. This is most probably the case with the letter 1, of which we have only a draft.

<sup>105</sup> To this subject, see my article "Les lettres du pouvoir au Sahel islamique : marques, adaptations et pratiques des secrétaires des souverains du Borno (1823-1918)".

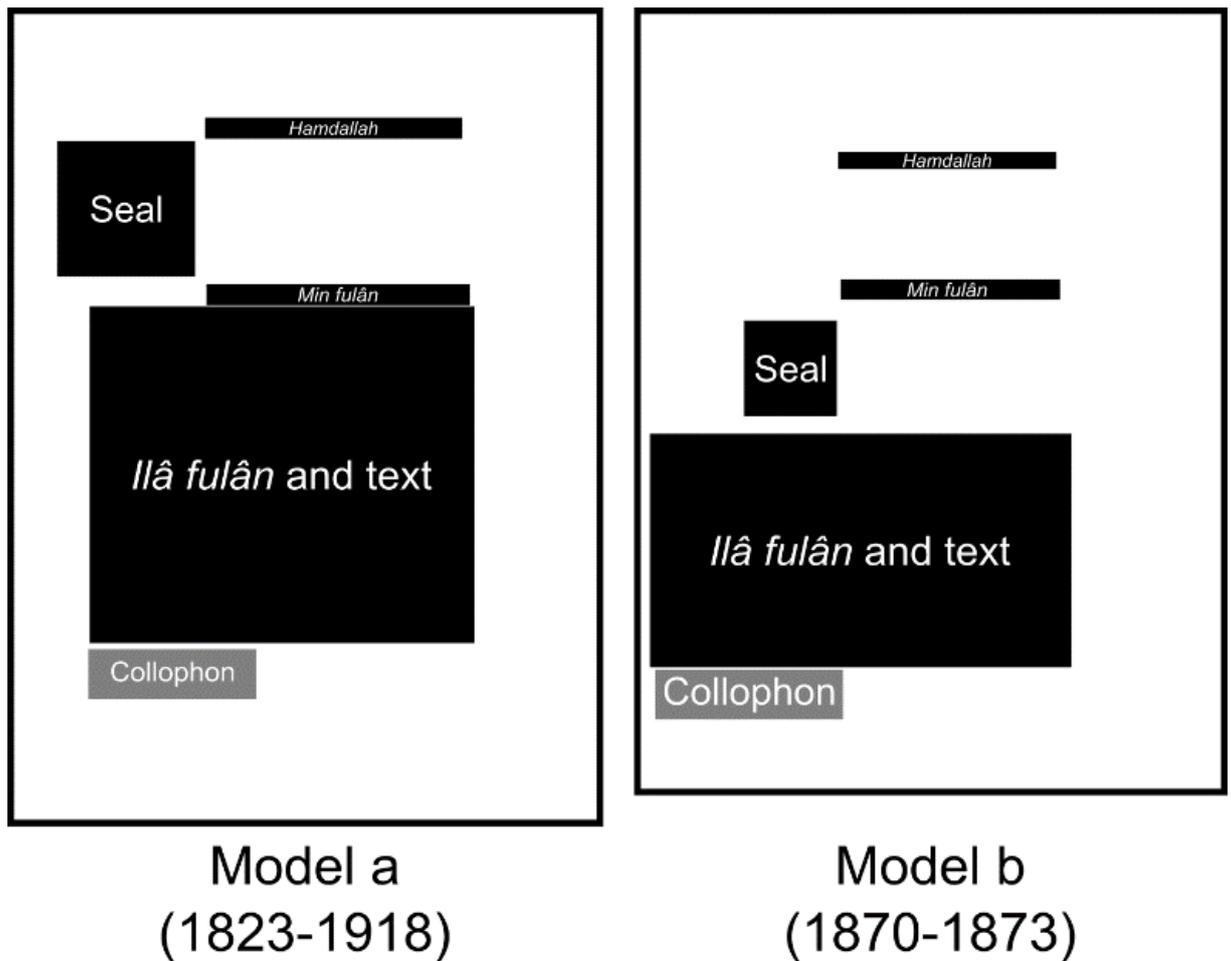


Figure 4 Organization of the text and seal in al-Kanemi's letters

From 1901 to 1918, the *iftitāḥ* underwent many variations. The rigour that governed the writing of *ḥamdala* began to give way to greater freedom of writing and composition by the scribes. Thus, the letters kept in Aix, which were written in the first year after the relocation of the Kanemi dynasty to what would become British and German Borno<sup>106</sup>, begin with a *basmala*<sup>107</sup>; some of them are followed by a *ḥamdala* on the next line. However, the letters sent to Lord Lugard by Shehu Garbai between 1914 and 1918 show a return to pre-colonial practices, although the mastery of the previous rules is not perfect. The letter 40 is a perfect example of this: if the *ḥamdala* is not identical to the pre-colonial period, the organization between the *ḥamdala*, the *min fulân* and the *ḥātām* is identical to that found in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (see Figure 3). This return to ancient normalized practices testifies to a willingness on the part of the scribes of the Shehu Garbai letters to remain within a graphic community, making it possible to produce

<sup>106</sup> Hiribarren 2017, Dewièrè and Hiribarren 2018.

<sup>107</sup> Letters 32, 33, 34 and 36.

letters of power that are immediately recognizable and identifiable by their subjects<sup>108</sup>. Fourteen years after the Kanemi's recovery, their written practice of power testifies to a renewed stability under European rule.

### **B. The *ḥātām* and validation marks**

The presence of a mark in the sultan's hand, which may be a signature, sentence or seal on the wax or printed (*ḥātām*)<sup>109</sup>, theoretically reveals the sovereign's control over the process of writing and correcting the diplomatic letter<sup>110</sup>. The validation mark is then applied to the writing surface of the letter after its redaction, in a space that can be reserved for it, as is the case in the Kanemi letters, or in the margin of the text, as it seems was the case with the Sefuwa<sup>111</sup>. Like in the rest of the Islamic world, the use of a printed seal is the most common practice among the Islamic rulers of 19<sup>th</sup> century central Sahel. It can be found in Bagirmi, Ahir, Sokoto or Wadai. This validation mark is a central element for the recognition of counterfeits. Thus, during his second stay in Sokoto in 1826, the British traveller Hugh Clapperton was accused of espionage: the letter accusing him was reportedly written by Muḥammad al-Kanemi to the Sokoto Caliph. However, this letter did not bear the Shehu's validation mark, which cast doubt on its origin<sup>112</sup>.

If the *ḥātām* is generally in the sovereign's hand, he can entrust it to his delegates, if they do not own a *ḥātām* themselves<sup>113</sup>. Thus, while H. Barth was trying to reach the capital of Bagirmi, he received a letter from the representative of the Sultan with “a large black seal”, telling him that the sultan was absent and that he would have to wait until he returned<sup>114</sup>. Similarly, a miracle reported by the traveller al-Tūnīsī reports that the *kātib* (secretary) of the “Sultan of Borno” was the holder of the imperial seal. One day, the vizier asked the scribe to write a letter in the sultan's name; he was quick to answer that he would only write after a direct order from the sultan<sup>115</sup>. It is difficult to know whether this account refers to the Sefuwa or the

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<sup>108</sup> Bertrand 2015: 364.

<sup>109</sup> Dekkiche 2011: 399-400.

<sup>110</sup> Péquignot 2002: 468.

<sup>111</sup> Dewière 2015: 446-450.

<sup>112</sup> Lockhart and Lovejoy 2005: 296 n. 57.

<sup>113</sup> Example of a *ḥātām* belonging to an emissary of the Sultan of Darfur in the 1850s (O'Fahey and Abu Salim 2003: 115-116).

<sup>114</sup> Barth 1857b: 3:327.

<sup>115</sup> El-Tounsy 1845: 353.

Kanemi, especially since an office at the court of the Sefuwa was precisely that of *ašab al-ḥaṭm* (guardian of the seal)<sup>116</sup>.

However, the written records show that the Sefuwa used an *‘alāma*-star-shaped signature, a signature drawn with a pen, instead of a *ḥātām* as a validation mark<sup>117</sup>. The dynastic transition from the Sefuwa to the Kanemi was accompanied by a shift from this practice to that of the printed stamp. Indeed, Muḥammad al-Kanemi used only a *ḥātām* after the death of Sultan Sefuwa Dunama in 1819/20<sup>118</sup>, when he formally took full power over the sultan’s son<sup>119</sup>. The passage of sovereignty from the Sefuwa to the Kanemi is therefore visually marked by the introduction of a new validation mark, in a break with the practices of the previous dynasty<sup>120</sup>. Before that date, Muḥammad al-Kanemi did not use the *ḥātām* in his correspondence; the rules governing its use were drawn up in 1819/20, unlike the *ḥamdala*, which was already in use.

From 1819 to 1918, the Kanemi rulers used at least nine different printed seals (see Figure 4<sup>121</sup>). Like the seals of the Darfur charters, the Kanemi seals were probably made of silver or copper. They were engraved in reverse script, so that the seal would give a white impression on a black or blue background, depending on the ink used. The engraved grooves are generally relatively coarse. If the seals are today missing, we can say that it was crafted with non-rotary engraving tools, such as a thin flat chisel<sup>122</sup>. Two seals differ from the others and have been done with rotary engraving tools: their grooves are thin and distinguished by a non-Sahelian script<sup>123</sup>. This demarcation is linked to the origin of the seal; the more refined seals are of foreign origin<sup>124</sup>. According to this interpretation, seven seals of the corpus are of local production and two were produced outside Borno.

Unlike local seals, which were made upon the accession to the sovereign’s throne, foreign seals were made during the reigns of ‘Umar b. Muḥammad and Garbai. These two

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<sup>116</sup> Bobboyi 1992: 120.

<sup>117</sup> For examples of the Sefuwa *‘alāma-signature*, see BnF, MF 12220, f. 322v; *Maḥram* of Shatima Muḥammad b. Ghuruma. Jos 174 in UiB, Bergen, O’Fahey papers f. 6.

<sup>118</sup> Brenner 1973: 52-53. The date of manufacture of the *ḥātām* divided the authors. Bivar the date of 1238/1823 (Bivar 1959: 329) and Lavers of 1237/1821 (Lavers 1993: 180).

<sup>119</sup> Previously, the letters from Muḥammad al-Kanemi did not include the *ḥātām*. His personal correspondence, like the letter to Hugh Clapperton in 1824, also did not include any after that date (Letter 6).

<sup>120</sup> This hypothesis was first put forward by John E. Lavers (Lavers 1971: 47 n. 43, see also Hodgkin 1974: 19); Lavers 1993: 180.

<sup>121</sup> The greyed-out areas of the seal are difficult to read on the original document. The first seal of Abu Bakr Garbai contains several illegible areas, which I have completed according to the legible information and context.

<sup>122</sup> About engraving techniques in Islamic seals, see Sax and Meeks 2011 :186.

<sup>123</sup> Seals of London, NA, FO 93/17/2 and letter 41.

<sup>124</sup> O’Fahey and Abu Salim 1983: 28.

sovereigns have the particularity of having used several seals<sup>125</sup>. ‘Abd al-Raḥman b. Muḥammad also sought a second seal. Following his takeover in November 1853, he asked the Pasha of Tripoli to have a seal engraved in Istanbul<sup>126</sup>, but the latter did not have the chance to use it. A letter from the Governor (*wakil*) of Fezzan to the Pasha of Tripoli, dated 26 January 1855, testifies to the embarrassment of the Governor of Fezzan<sup>127</sup>: having in his possession gifts intended for ‘Abd al-Raḥman, and among them the printed seal, he informs the Pasha that the Borno sovereign was killed by ‘Umar b. Muḥammad, who regained his throne in September 1854<sup>128</sup>! It must be said that the time between the accession to the throne and the delivery of the seal to Fezzan corresponds to the duration of the crossing of the Sahara and the Mediterranean, between Borno and Istanbul<sup>129</sup>.

The printed seals of the Kanemi are in line with the customs of the Islamic world, where many octagonal and rectangular seals are reported<sup>130</sup>. The octagonal shape is rather peculiar in the African context for a ruler: the rulers of Sokoto, Darfur and Wadai, for example, use round shapes for their seals. In the shape of a ring or a stamp<sup>131</sup>, they are composed of the name of the sovereign, a *motto* that emphasizes the sovereign's humility before God, with the use of the term ‘*abduhu* (His servant) before the name of the sovereign<sup>132</sup>. In detail, the writing of the locally produced seals borrows from both *Barnāwī* and *maghribi*, two related writings<sup>133</sup>. The *hamza* of *mā šā’ Allah*, in the form of an E on the seal of Muḥammad al-Kanemi, ‘Umar b. Muḥammad (seal 1) and ‘Abd al-Raḥman b. Muḥammad, is typical of the latter script<sup>134</sup>. The seals are about 3.3 cm long, although the seal of Hāšim b. ‘Umar is larger than the others. The form of the seal and the organization of the text are common to all Kanemi’s *ḥātam*, except for the letter 41.

Thus, although the seals are personal, their manufacture follows several rules that give them their own identity and that persisted over time. However, there are two breaks in the style

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<sup>125</sup> The sultans of Darfur also had several *khātam* (O’Fahey and Abu Salim 1983: 29).

<sup>126</sup> Letter from Mustafa Nuri Pasha of Tripoli to *šayḥ* ‘Abd al-Raḥman of Borno, 1853-1854, in Martin 1962: 366-367.

<sup>127</sup> Gwarzo 1968: 53.

<sup>128</sup> Barth 1857b: 2:670.

<sup>129</sup> Dewièrè *in press*.

<sup>130</sup> Lockhart and Fisher report the existence of rectangular seals in Algiers during the same period (Lockhart and Lovejoy 2005: 441. For a general overview of Islamic octagonal seals, see Porter 2011; Déroche 2005.

<sup>131</sup> Gacek 2009: 243-244.

<sup>132</sup> Gacek 2009: 244. This *motto* is similar to that of the Moroccan sultans at the same period, although their seals are round (Martin 1962: 370), Déroche 2005: 337.

<sup>133</sup> Brigaglia and Nobili 2013: 223.

<sup>134</sup> Van der Boogert 1989: 33.

of local seals. The first took place in 1885, with the abandonment of the double frame of the seal for a simple frame. The second occurred at the beginning of the colonial period, when the seals no longer had cartouches, the text being in a single block. This impoverishment of the quality of the seals, as well as the variation of the *motto*, is not directly related to the colonial transition, since it begins with the reign of Hāšim b. ‘Umar. However, the reign of his predecessor, Ibrahim (1884/1885), as well as his own, were marked by a deep economic crisis, which ended with Rabah’s conquest of Borno<sup>135</sup>. Was this crisis accompanied by a drop in the quality of craftsmanship in Kukawa, because of the emigration of workers to Kano and Zaria<sup>136</sup>?

In general, seals mark a founding date in the reign of sovereigns. This most often corresponds to the coming to power of the sovereign<sup>137</sup>. However, it may also mark a major event, such as the manufacture of Muḥammad al-Kanemi’s seal following the death of Sultan Sefuwa Dunama, when Muḥammad was already exercising effective power in Borno. Similarly, ‘Umar al-Kanemi’s second seal<sup>138</sup> marks an important date in his reign, namely the definitive overthrow of the Sefuwa dynasty in 1846, following the attempt by their last sovereign, Ibrāhīm, to regain power with the help of the Sultan of Wadai<sup>139</sup>. The seal, made in 1848/1849, was commissioned by ‘Umar al-Kanemi from a North African craftsman, which explains the discrepancy between the two dates.

It is this seal that ‘Umar b. Muḥammad uses for signing the treaty with the British, represented by Heinrich Barth, in 1852. The writing is in *Maghribi* calligraphy<sup>140</sup> and floral motifs decorate the figurative cartouches. The seal’s origin is obscure, although it most probably comes from North Africa. Beyond its origin, the exceptional use of this seal for a diplomatic treaty suggests that the Shehu may have used various seals depending on the nature of the documents to be validated. Another interpretation is based on the twists and turns of this sovereign’s reign. When he came to power in 1837, ‘Umar used a local seal crafted for the occasion. Following the fall of the last Sefuwa ruler, we saw that ‘Umar had the seal engraved and used later in 1852. However, his overthrow by ‘Abd al-Raḥman, in 1853, may have resulted

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<sup>135</sup> Brenner 1973: 116-117.

<sup>136</sup> Lovejoy 1978: 666-667.

<sup>137</sup> This allows Lavers to accurately date several Kanemi reigns (Lavers 1993: 179).

<sup>138</sup> London, *National Archives*, FO 93/17/1.

<sup>139</sup> Brenner 1973: 64-66.

<sup>140</sup> The dots are always Maghrebian.

in a loss or confiscation of the seal. When he returned in 1854, he would have used his first seal again, until his death<sup>141</sup>.

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<sup>141</sup> Umar uses the 1837 seal for the letters 19 to 28.

Ruler's name	ḥātam	Date of ḥātam	Dimensions (cm)	Transcription	Translation	Document
Muḥammad al-Amīn al-Kānemi 1809-1837		1819/20	3,8 x 3,7	ما شاء الله كفى بإلله ثقة لعبد محمد الأمين بن محمد الكانمي عام 1235	What Allah wishes is sufficient. Through Allah, reliance on His servant, Muḥammad al-Amīn bin Muḥammad al-Kānīmī, year 1235	Letter 2, 5, 8, 9, 10, 13
'Umar b. Muḥammad 1837-1881		1837	3,7 x 3,7	ما شاء الله كفى بإلله ثقة لعبد عمر بن محمد الأمين الكانمي عام 1253	What Allah wishes is sufficient. Through Allah, reliance on His servant, 'Umar bin Muḥammad al-Amīn al-Kānīmī, year 1253	Letter 19, 20, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28
		1849	n. c.	ما شاء الله كفى بإلله نصرا لعبد عمر بن محمد الأمين الكانمي	What Allah wishes is sufficient. Through Allah victory on His servant, (1265) 'Umar bin Muḥammad al-Amīn al-Kānīmī	Treaty with the King of England, 1852 (Kew, NA, FO 93, 17, 2)
'Abd al-Raḥman b. Muḥammad 1853-1854		1853	4 x 4	ما شاء الله كفى بإلله ثقة لعبد عبد الرحمن ابن محمد الأمين الكانمي عام 0721	What Allah wishes is sufficient. Through Allah reliance on His servant, 'Abd al-Raḥman ibn Muḥammad al-Amīn al-Kānīmī, year 1270	Mahram, n.d. (Aminu, 1981, p. 36), letter 17
Abū Bakr b. 'Umar 1881-1884/5		1881	n. c.	ما شاء الله كفى بإلله ثقة لعبد أبو بكر بن الشيخ عمر الكانمي عام 1299	What Allah wishes is sufficient. Through Allah reliance on His servant, Abū Bakr bin [al-ṣayḥ] 'Umar al-Kānīmī, year 1299	Letter 29
Hāšim b. 'Umar 1885/6-1893		1885	4,5 x 4,5	ما شاء الله كفى بإلله تعالى عبده هاشم بن عمر الكانمي عام 1303	What Allah wishes is sufficient. Through Allah the Exalted. His servant, Hāšim bin 'Umar al-Kānīmī, year 1303	Letter 30, 31
'Umar b. Abū Bakr (Dikwa) 1902-1906		1902	3 x 3	ما شاء الله كفى بإلله عبده عمر بن الشيخ بكر الكانمي عام 1319	What Allah wishes is sufficient. Through Allah, His servant 'Umar bin al-al-ṣayḥ Bakr al-Kānīmī, year 1319	Letter 36
		1903?	3,8 x 3,8	ما شاء الله كفى بإلله عبده عمر بن الشيخ بكر الكانمي عام 1319	What Allah wishes is sufficient. Through Allah, His servant 'Umar bin al-al-ṣayḥ Bakr al-Kānīmī, year 1320	Letter 37
Abū Bakr Garba 1901-1922		1901 ?	n. c.	ما شاء الله كفى بإلله تعالى عبده بكر بن ابراهيم الكانمي عام 1318	What Allah wishes is sufficient. Through Allah the Exalted. [His servant], Bakr bin Ibrahim al-Kānīmī, year [1318]	Letter 35
		1901	3,3 x 3,3	ما شاء الله كفى عبده الشيخ بكر بن الشيخ ابراهيم الكانمي السلطان برنوح عام 1318	What Allah wishes is sufficient. His servant al-ṣayḥ Bakr bin al-ṣayḥ Ibrahim al-Kānīmī, sultan of Barnūh, year 1318	Letter 32, 33, 34, 38, 39, 40
		v. 1906	4,5 x 2,3	إلى أبو بكر بن إبراهيم من محبك غمنا لو غارد	For Abū Bakr b. Ibrāhīm from your beloved Lord Lugaard	Letter 41

Figure 5 al-Kanemi's seals

### C. *The layout of the page*

The care taken in the layout is an essential element in the corpus. Beyond the *hātām* and the calligraphy, the layout is the most visible design element, because it organizes the text on the page. The geographical forms resulting from the filling of the page convey a message to literate and illiterate populations. This message draws on common practices, religious imaginaries and policies that allow the document to be recognized as a letter and as a document issued by an administration. As early as the Middle Ages, letters from the Arab-Muslim world were written on the front of the sheets of paper, the reverse side being reserved for the address<sup>142</sup>. There was often a large margin on the right, the paragraph being located at the bottom left of the sheet; for the rest of the text, the scribe turned the page over and continued diagonally from the first block of text<sup>143</sup>. This organization of the text on the sheet, called by B. Messick “spiral text<sup>144</sup>”, is used in pre-modern Ottoman Empire, Yemen or South-East Asia, as seen before.

The layout of the Borno letters under the Kanemi does not follow this model, although the colophon’s position of the letters 2, 19, 20, 22 and 37 recalls this practice. The texts that make up the Borno letters are short enough not to use such a process. On the contrary, it seems that the dimensions of the writing surface adapt to the length of the text, in order to constitute a single paragraph after the *min fulān*. Its position on the page varies, but we observe two tendencies. From 1823 to 1873, the text generally leaves a greater margin on the right, except for a few letters<sup>145</sup>. From 1877 to 1918, the text is generally centred. Along with the change in the handwriting, this shows the transition between one scribe and another one, identified as Muḥammad al-Sanusi b. Yūsuf al-Qarqari and his son, ‘Abd al-Raḥman<sup>146</sup>. The text is justified on the right and left, so as to give the paragraph a square or rectangular shape. At the end of the main paragraph, the secretary tries to finish the last line in order to respect the justification, either by stretching the final word<sup>147</sup> or by leaving a space between the end of the sentence and the final *salām*<sup>148</sup>. However, during the colonial period, the quality of the script fades, and the last line of some letters is not justified, either on the left or on the right<sup>149</sup>; The letter 37, written

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<sup>142</sup> Petrucci 2008: 45.

<sup>143</sup> Gallop 2007: 42.

<sup>144</sup> Messick 1993: 231.

<sup>145</sup> Letters 5 and 13.

<sup>146</sup> Dewièrè 2019b: 1075-1080.

<sup>147</sup> Letters 2, 8, 9, 23, 29, 31, 33 and 41.

<sup>148</sup> Letters 17, 25, 26 and 28

<sup>149</sup> Letters 32 and 34.

in the context of German colonisation in Dikwa, is also poorly justified, revealing the scarce technique of the scribe.

The measurement of the writing spaces and dimensions of the sheet provides more insight into the political use of the layout by the secretaries of the Borno rulers. Whenever possible, I collected the dimensions of the sheets as well as the text block of the letter. The measures collected make it possible to affirm that a Borno letter generally respected the same proportions. More precisely, the letters were written on three different page formats, the dimensions of which correspond approximately to the sizes of paper used in the Sahel and the Arab world, although there were variations due to crops on the margins of the page. In the terminology of al-Qalqašandī (15th century)<sup>150</sup>, the largest format was the *al-thuluthayn min al-waraq al-Miṣrī* (488 x 325 mm), which corresponds to a sheet of *tre lune* paper from the Italian paper mill Galvani (480 x 340 mm)<sup>151</sup>, the main paper supplier in the central Sahel. Then the leaf was cut in half to form an *al-niṣf* (366 x 244 mm) and finally, the *al-thuluth*, the most common size, that was a half of an *al-niṣf* (244x183 mm). Only two letters from the corpus are written on a whole sheet of paper<sup>152</sup>. Le letter 27, written to the king of Prussia, has a reduced width compared to a regular sheet of paper; the letter 34 was written on an horizontal format, and bears a wax seal: both letters were exceptional in this sense<sup>153</sup>. Eighteen letters are written on the medium format<sup>154</sup>. Among them, several are written on a whole sheet of paper that has been folded in half in order to have four pages, the text being on one page only<sup>155</sup>. Finally, eleven letters are written in the smallest format<sup>156</sup>.

Letter	Date	Leaf (cm)			Text block (cm)					
		L l	L w	L Ratio	Tb l	Tb+h l	Tb w	Tb Ratio	Tb+h Ratio	Tb Ratio corrected
2	1823/12/27	30.7	20.7	1.5	12.5		12.5	1.0		1.0
5	1824a	21.7	15.5	1.4	8.0	11.0	10.4	0.8	1.1	1.1
8	1824/08/11	31.9	20.7	1.5	19.8		13.5	1.5		1.5
9	1824/08/14	31.7	20.0	1.6	11.0	14.1	13.0	0.8	1.1	1.1
10	1825-1835	30.8	22.8	1.4			15.4			
13	1836	33.8	21.0	1.6	19.0		18.0	1.1		1.1
14	1836/02/08	31.9	21.5	1.5	16.6		14.6	1.1		1.1
16	1836	32.8	21.3		15.5		16.5	0.9		0.9
17	1854	28.8	20.5	1.4	8.0	12.5	11.0	0.7	1.1	1.1

<sup>150</sup> This is what Murray Last does when he writes on paper in the Sahel (Last 2008: 153).

<sup>151</sup> Biddle 2017: 34. About the Galvani paper mills, see Fedrigoni 1966.

<sup>152</sup> Letter 27 and 34.

<sup>153</sup> For the letter 34, see Dewière 2019b: 1063-1064.

<sup>154</sup> Letters 2, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 16, 19, 20, 22, 23, 32, 33, 34, 36, 37, 38 and 39. The dimension is 300/359 x 190/236 mm.

<sup>155</sup> This is the case for letters 2, 8, 9, 25, 26 and 36.

<sup>156</sup> Letters 5, 17, 24, 25, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 40 and 41. The dimension is 154/288 x 154/210 mm.

19	1855/05/06	31.0	19.5	1.6	12.5		12.2	1.0		1.0
20	1855/05/06	30.0	19.0	1.6	13.5		11.8	1.1		1.1
22	1858-1859	34.5	23.4	1.5	17.0		16.2	1.0		1.0
23	1870/07/26	34.5	23.6	1.5	8.2	20.2	16.6	0.5	1.2	1.2
24	1870/07/30	20.3	27.9	0.7	6.6		24.7	0.3		0.3
25	1872/02/20	21.5	15.7	1.4	7.3	13.1	12.2	0.6	1.1	1.1
26	1873/01/30	42.0	23.5	1.8	7.5	21.5	19.0	0.4	1.1	1.1
27	1873/01/30	25.1	21.0	1.2	8.0	13.0	15.2	0.5	0.9	0.9
28	1877-1881	21.6	15.9	1.4	9.5		10.3	0.9		0.9
29	1881/12/12							0.6	1.0	1.0
30	1885-1893	22.8	16.5	1.4	9.8		11.5	0.9		0.9
31	1891/10/17	15.4	15.4	1.0	4.7	10.1	10.3	0.5	1.0	1.0
32	1901/09/04a	34.0	22.0	1.5	17.7		16.3	1.1		1.1
33	1901/09/04b	23.2	33.8	0.7	11.5		23.5	0.5		0.5
34	1901/09/09	34.0	45.0	0.8	22.0		33.5	0.7		0.7
35	1901/10/17							1.1		1.1
36	1902/04/02	35.9	23.5	1.5	20.5		15.5	1.3		1.3
37	1906/06	32.1	21.5	1.5	15.3		16.6	0.9		0.9
38	1914/10/03	33.1	23.5	1.4	18.0		16.0	1.1		1.1
39	1914/11/18	32.4	21.1	1.5	14.5		14.5	1.0		1.0
40	1918/11/19	20.8	16.2	1.3	9.0	13.5	12.0	0.8	1.1	1.1
41	1918/12/10	20.7	16.2	1.3	10.0		10.0	1.0		1.0
	<b>Average</b>	28.9	21.7	1.4	12.6	14.3	15.3	0.9	1.1	1.0
	<b>median</b>	31.0	21.0	1.4	12.0	13.1	14.6	0.9	1.1	1.1

Figure 6 Dimensions of official letters and their text blocks<sup>157</sup>

The repartition in time of the letters according to their paper format is rather significative of the economic and political difficulties that the Kanemi faced in the last twenty years of their rule. Between 1870 and 1891, almost all letters are written in small format, or smaller format than the previous period. This choice does not depend on the content of the letter nor the recipient; and only the King of Prussia has the privilege of a large format. Does it reveal a shortage of paper or the impoverishment of Borno court?

With three exceptions, the letter format is vertical. Letters 24, 33 and 34 are in a horizontal format and the letter 31 is in a square format. Putting aside the letter 24, who characteristics makes it an exception in the corpus<sup>158</sup>, these formats were used between 1891 and 1901. Again, these letters were written in the last years of the Kanemi reign, and in the first years of French occupation of Borno; it reveals more the difficulties of the administration at that period than any transformation or exception in the norms of writing of the dynasty. Besides these exceptions, the ratio between length and width is between 1.2 and 1.6 (see Figure 6). Such

<sup>157</sup> For the dimensions of the sheet, I took into consideration the writing page, not the entire sheet. In grey, the data are calculated from other measurements and are therefore approximate. In several letters of the colonial period, the text block is irregular. In this case, I took the average between the largest and the smallest dimensions. For example, the text block of the letter 37 has a Tb l between 14 and 16.6 = 15.3.

<sup>158</sup> See Dewière 2019b: 1061.

regularity is no coincidence, especially since it is also found when analysing the measurements of the body of the text, the main paragraph that makes up the letter.

While the text blocks (Tb) adapt to the format of the sheet of paper, the analysis of the ratio between width and length shows that the secretaries are working on forming a square block of text in many letters. Thus, the Tb of fifteenth official letters has a length/width ratio ranging from 0.9 to 1.1<sup>159</sup>. Better still, for ten other letters, the dimensions of the writing surface that unite the *ḥamdala* with the CdT also form a square<sup>160</sup>. In total, the text of twenty-five over thirty-one official letters<sup>161</sup>, or 80% of them, reproduces in one way or another the square form, colonial and pre-colonial period combined. To adapt to the length of the text, the scribe did not enlarge the size of the characters or reduced the length of the lines by less than 10 cm: if necessary, he formed the square by integrating the *ḥamdala* and the space left empty between it and the text block.

The square is a central form in the aesthetics of writing, in Islamic esoteric sciences and in political communication, these three aspects were closely linked in the writings of power. In Islam, copyists were particularly sensitive to respecting the ratios and balances of the sheet and the layout of the text<sup>162</sup>, and the ratios found in the corpus studied tend to prove that this sensitivity was also relevant to the Kanemi court. The square also refers to the magic square, a central element of popular culture that regularly appears in the manuscripts<sup>163</sup>. Known as *budūḥ*, the magic square contained magic scriptures and was used as a talisman<sup>164</sup>. Its use was widespread in Sahelian societies, Islamised or not<sup>165</sup>. The diplomatic letter, as an artefact used to protect its owner during his journey, symbolically fulfilled the same role as a talisman, and the presence of the square should reinforce this impression, especially in the eyes of non-literate people. Finally, the square is a geometric figure found in the Kanemi's communication: the square is the shape of their *ḥātām*, but also the shape of the two main districts of Kukawa,

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<sup>159</sup> See the grey line of the graph (Figure 6).

<sup>160</sup> See the orange line of the graph (Figure 6).

<sup>161</sup> Four letters deviate significantly. The first, 1824-08-11, is characterized by the unusual length of the text, that the scribe could not embed in a square without altering the other standards. The other three are in breach of the norms of the Borno administration, either because their author was a foreigner, such as the letter 24, or because the administration temporarily disappeared, such as the letters 33 and 34. For the letter 10, it is impossible calculate the dimensions of the paper and the text block.

<sup>162</sup> Déroche 2005: 169.

<sup>163</sup> Gacek 2009: 150.

<sup>164</sup> Macdonald, "Budūḥ", *EI*<sup>2</sup>. Many examples of the use of the square as a talisman have been studied by Hamès: 2007.

<sup>165</sup> Piga 2005: 265.

between 1812 and 1893<sup>166</sup>. Taking up M. Foucault's thought, B. Messick affirms that the "poetics of written space then can be extended to general domains of spatial organization: towns, architecture, and the space of the state<sup>167</sup>", and which constitutes the space of knowledge. Here, with the square, we witness the application of the same principles of power by the Borno rulers throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The rules that organise the layout of the official letters are not only followed by the royal scribes. They irradiate the lower levels of the Kanemi's political structure, and most likely influence neighbouring states or smaller emirates. In Borno, the square format, as well as the *ḥamdala* and the space between the *ḥamdala*, the *min fulān* and the text block, are reproduced in the letter written by the Borno ambassador Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir during the previously mentioned mission in Alexandria. On British request, he wrote a letter while he was in Egypt, on an English consular paper<sup>168</sup>. While the handwriting is not the same than in the official letters of that period<sup>169</sup>, the *ḥamdala* is identical. As there is no seal, the space left between the *ḥamdala* and the text block is only of eight millimetres. As in the official letters, the text block is in a shape of a square of 78 x 80 mm.

This example reveals a phenomenon remarkably described by Paul Bertrand, in the context of the normalisation of ordinary writings in Mediaeval Europe. The visual characteristics and validation marks that were elaborated and systematized in the ruler's written communication became norms that lasted for a century. This horizontal continuity was followed by a top-down adoption of these norms at a local or lower level. As Bertrand said, the validation signs are adopted by the institutions as markers. They create trust and their users, literate or not, find back a "known melody". The lower lords and court members try then to reproduce these norms, and we observe a diffusion of these in space and time<sup>170</sup>. This phenomenon favours the documentary uniformization in central Sahel; an uniformization that we can observe in Sokoto and Bagirmi, for example.

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<sup>166</sup> We know three maps of Kukawa, before it was destroyed and abandoned in 1893. The first was drawn by Major Denham in 1823 (Denham, Clapperton and Oudney 1826: 1:135), the second by H. Barth in 1851 (Barth 1857b: 2:304) and the last by G. Nachtigal in 1873 (Nachtigal 1974 1:613).

<sup>167</sup> Messick 1993: 231.

<sup>168</sup> London, National Archives, FO 78/285, f. 95.

<sup>169</sup> See Dewière 2019b: 1066.

<sup>170</sup> Bertrand 2015: 364.

### **Conclusions: towards a history of administrations in precolonial Sahel**

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and during the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a written identity specific to Borno and closely associated with the Kanemi's discourses of power. This identity was fully integrated in the canons of Arabic epistolary writing, though creating an original visual identity of power. This identity survived to the many political changes that occurred during this troubled century. Between 1823 and 1893, there are seven changes at the head of Borno, either by natural death or after a political crisis. After the destruction of the Kanemi administration by the invasion of Rabiḥ<sup>171</sup>, the exiled members of the dynasty were reinstalled by French, and then British and German administrations, as native authorities in their colonial empires. During this period, there is an incredible continuity in the writing practices of power, transcending the changes of rulers and the scribes at their service.

In detail, we can observe three phases in the constitution of these standards and their implementation. The first phase corresponds to the installation in power of Muḥammad al-Kanemi, in parallel with the erasure and then the disappearance of the Sefuwa dynasty. At that time, there was a major change in the style of administrative documents, which embraced new design standards and language elements. These new standards were first inspired by Muḥammad al-Kanemi's personal letter-writing practices. Once his power was definitively installed in 1819/20, his letters adopted a set of visual signs through *regalia* and a resolutely new document layout. These official letters were no longer written by him, but they were the work of scribes whose practices reveal a continuity with the Sefuwa dynasty, through their know-how and their technical and administrative skills. This continuity, which accompanies the movement of intellectual and religious elites from the Sefuwa court to the Kanemi court, is symbolized by the rallying of Yūsuf b. 'Abd al-Raḥman al-Qarqari, a descendent of the illustrious 16<sup>th</sup> century scholar Aḥmad b. Furtū, to Muḥammad al-Kanemi<sup>172</sup>. During the colonial period, the writers of the Kanemi letters drew inspiration from past rules to write in the colonial context. While the stated rules were applied with much more freedom than before, the spirit of the rule was used until 1918 to correspond to the graphic identity of the pre-colonial era.

The scribes in charge of writing these letters were professional writers, who took up the scriptural particularities of the sovereign and integrated them into a standard format, reinforced by validation marks such as the *ḥātām*, charging them with a strong magico-religious

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<sup>171</sup> Bivar 1959: 335.

<sup>172</sup> See Dewièrè 2019b.

symbolism. Consequently, the redaction of Kanemi letters followed several rules of composition and layout, which varied only at the margins, and created, in seventy years, a powerful written identity. These forms of standardization, in Paul Bertrand's words, "can be generalized not to this or that prince of the dynasty, but to the institution itself<sup>173</sup>". The external and internal signs of the letters, which are similar to norms both in their frequency and in their quality of execution<sup>174</sup>, fall within the scope of this institution of writing: the administration of the Borno State.

During this period, we can speak of a golden age of the Kanemi administration in terms of writing practices<sup>175</sup>. It is easy to define a standard letter coming from Borno and to identify a set of standards that were faithfully respected. The letters written after the colonial conquest are also affected by the deep crisis that ravaged the central Sahel during the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>176</sup>. However, here again, deviations from the norm, although clearly showing a decline in the technical writing skills of their authors, remain visually marginal. For two decades, the time of colonization overlapped with that of the pre-colonial administration, and the latter took about fifteen years to begin its acculturation and the loss of its visual identity. We are therefore faced here with a strong administrative memory, remobilized by the Kanemi during their reinstallation within the colonial administration.

The history of letters is the history of a writing practice, a material practice and a social practice<sup>177</sup>. The analysis of Bornoan diplomatic letters shows that it is also a political practice, expanding alongside the development of an administration linked not only to a particular sovereign, but to state formation. Of course, the letters in the corpus are not exhaustive. Letters remain to be found, especially regarding the periods of political transition, such as the first years of Muḥammad al-Kanemi's activity, between 1808 and 1819<sup>178</sup>. Similarly, I have not found any original letters from the Sefuwa, nor from the Sudanese adventurer Rabah and his son, although they had a regular epistolary activity during their presence in Borno (1893-1902)<sup>179</sup>. It would

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<sup>173</sup> Bertrand 2015: 364.

<sup>174</sup> Bocquentin 2010: 159.

<sup>175</sup> We don't know enough about the Sefuwa administrative practices to generalize this assumption to the whole history of Borno.

<sup>176</sup> "Devastated areas, burned villages, refugee populations in the forests, decimated livestock, destroyed harvests, it is in a bloodless and largely disorganized region that France decides to take a stand" (Lefebvre 2014: 61).

<sup>177</sup> Petrucci 2008: VIII.

<sup>178</sup> A letter from al-Kanemi to Goni Mukhtar, the leader of the jihadist forces in Borno, dated 13 May 1808, is kept at the University of Ibadan Library (Ms 82/237) (Brenner 1973: 39-41).

<sup>179</sup> There are translations of these letters in the British national archives, as well as references to these exchanges (London, FO 2/118, f. 88-89, 119; FO 2/675, f. 7-8). The original letters could be preserved locally. See also Adeleye 1970: 403.

be interesting to compare the standards used to write their letters with those of the Kanemi. Finally, the analysis of letters written after 1918 on behalf of the Shehu could provide further information on the adoption of British letter-writing practices. To that extent, the last letter reveals the bornoan acculturation process: the *nisba* al-Kanemi is no longer used, the seal is of British origin and the date is in the Christian calendar. It is likely that after Shehu Garbai's death, in 1922, the acculturation process accelerated and that communication between Borno authorities and British colonial officers were no longer based on Arabic written letters.

The study of the forms of political communication of an Islamic states of the Sahel, fuelled by the critical turn engaged by the historiography of writing and reading, therefore makes it possible, in the words of J.-F. Schaub<sup>180</sup>, to open a debate on the history of the materiality of political cultures of this region before colonization. This debate is even more necessary as the Borno administration is only one producer of written documents among others. The Sokoto Caliphate, of which there are reportedly still available more than eight hundred internal and external letters of communication, as well as the Sultanate of Darfur, are other particularly significant examples, if we restrict ourselves to the south of the Sahara. Authenticating their normative and graphic models, based on the methodology applied to the Borno letters, would open the door to stimulating comparisons with North African administrative production, such as pre-colonial Morocco, or Ottoman Egypt and Libya<sup>181</sup>. Such study is only a part of a bigger work that would consider what the authors of such letters wrote, in the context of diplomatic relations with African and European rulers. The articulation between the visual aspect of the letter and the content would provide then a greater understanding of the functioning of Sahelian States in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and Borno's place in the 19<sup>th</sup> century of Africa. Above all, the enhancement of a corpus that has been largely neglected in literacy studies in Africa opens up many fields of research, such as the economies of writing, the processes of falsification or material and immaterial circulation in relation to documentary writing. Finally, it is an original entry point into the functioning of Sahelian Islamic states in pre-modern times, and into the way in which their actors faced colonization.

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<sup>180</sup> Schaub 2001: 983.

<sup>181</sup> Speaking about the documentary production of sahelian administrations, R. S. O'Fahey wrote that "over time, a distinctive diplomatic was evolved in which learned or literary borrowings appear together with echoes of Ottoman or Mamluk practices" (O'Fahey 1979: 263).

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