

The Hot Zone



Of Local Interest

On Gaoui

Text & photos by J. Serpa



If you have read CLO's *Welcome to N'djamena*, you will know that Gaoui is "a Kotoko village renowned for its fine pottery museum and pottery sales." But who are this Kotoko people? And what else do we know about Gaoui?

To answer the first question, we have to go back to the Sao, one of the first peoples who are documented to have lived in

the area around Lake Chad and along the banks of the lower Chari and Logone rivers. Exactly who they really were and when did they get here is a matter of lively debate. Most historians believe that they came from somewhere in the Nile valley, but they disagree on which end – some argue that they come from Egypt, others say that they came from the upper Nile region. And then there are those who argue that they may be descendants of the Berbers. As far as dates, things are not much better, with some historians saying that the Sao may have reached Chad as early as 3000 BC. What we know for sure is that the oldest artifacts attributed to this civilization – pottery and tools made of bone or stone – have been dated to be from *circa* 1000 BC. Whatever their origins, the Sao thrived in their new land, living in small villages typical of the smaller political units of the animist "Sudanic" civilization.

How do we go from the Sao to the Kotoko? In a process that started around the 7th or 8th century AD and that would take nearly 700 years, the Sao disappeared completely, absorbed by their two powerful neighboring kingdoms - the Kanem and the Kotoko.

The Kotoko kingdom was a monarchy in what is today northern Cameroon and Nigeria and southwestern Chad. It was originally created around the 15th century from the merger of various smaller kingdoms, such as Kousseri, Logone-Birni, and Makari. It then grew by assimilating several neighboring peoples, reached its peak around the 16th and 17th centuries, and then ... began to disappear as an independent entity, absorbed by more powerful neighboring kingdoms (first the Bagirmi, later on the Bornu.) By the 19th century, the Kotoko kingdom had been completely subsumed into the Bornu Empire. (Not too long afterwards, the Bornu rulers divided their territory into a northern and a southern half, allowing Logone-Birni in the south to maintain some degree of autonomy under its chief.) Eventually, the whole of the Bornu Empire would end up being divided by the European colonial powers.

In spite of the dramatic changes in their administrative structure – from being an independent kingdom to being part of the Bornu Empire, soon to be followed by being part of various European colonies (and eventually various countries) – the Kotoko people managed to survive to this day. Today, they live mostly in small settlements around the southern side of Lake Chad and along the

banks of the lower Chari and Logone rivers. They distinguish themselves by, among other things, having kept alive one of the traditional trademark skills of the Sao civilization, namely pottery making. As a matter of fact, today, the Kotoko (as well as the neighboring Kanuri) consider the Sao to be their forefathers.

And what about our second question? What else do we know about the village? A few less-scholarly sources state that Gaoui may have been one of the most important towns of the Sao. A few of them, namely Wikipedia, go as far as stating that Gaoui may have been the capital city of that civilization. Perhaps! But there are no doubts that, much later, in the 1820s, Gaoui played a pivotal role during the wars between the Bornu, in those years led by the Sheikh al-Kanemi, and the Bagirmi. In 1936, on an article published on the *Journal of the Royal African Society* (and cited on Reyna's *Wars Without End*), F. Rodd wrote that, at Gaoui,

"Red hot arrows were fired over their walls. In one instance when a breach had been made a sudden blaze of straw and wood prevented any attack being made and on the fires subsiding the besiegers to their dismay found the breach had been repaired. At night however the town surrendered and dreadful scenes of slaughter and worse than slaughter commenced."

Still according to Reyna, the fall of Gaoui seems to have altered Bagirmi's strategy in this war, towards one that favored flight rather than direct confrontation. As previously mentioned, not much later, the whole area would be under the control of the Bornu Empire.

The days of being in history's limelight are long gone! Today, Gaoui is a small, sleepy village, with perhaps two or three dozen houses in traditional Kotoko architecture, one mosque, one school, one museum, and little else. Walk around town. You will be invited to walk into a few houses by people selling you the locally-made pottery. On the opposite side of the little village, most likely you will be able to come across women actually making the pottery. You will also be able to see the community fire pit where the pottery is "cooked". Back in the center of town, do visit the museum. Located in the old palace of the Sultan, the museum is rather small but quite interesting (and as a note of curiosity, it was rehabilitated between late 2003 and early 2004 with funds provided partially by the US Embassy.) You will not come across anything spectacular or quite dramatic in Gaoui, but at the end of the day, you will not regret having spent one or two hours visiting this little village.

