Society of Young Nigerian Writers

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History Explorer
Bayajidda (mythology)

Bayajidda (Hausa: Bàyâjiddâ) is a character from the traditional history of the Hausa people of Nigeria and the central figure of the Bayajidda Legend. The various versions of the legend differ on major points, but generally agree that early immigrants came to the western region of Lake Chad from the Near East. Most accounts say that Bayajidda came from Baghdad, traveled across the Sahara, and arrived in the Kanem-Bornu Empire, where he married a local princess. Tensions with her father, the king, forced him to flee; leaving his wife in Hadejia, where she delivered his first son, he made his way to Gaya, where he had the local blacksmiths forge him a knife. With this knife and his sword, Bayajidda proceeded to the final point on his journey, the city of Daura, where he slew a serpent that had been terrorizing the townspeople. In gratitude for this heroic deed Magajiya Daurama, the local queen, married him. He had one child, Bawo, with Daurama, and Bawo's own children are said to have gone on - together with a child of his first wife - to found the seven Hausa states. While some scholars believe that Bayajidda was a historical figure, others hold the view that he did not actually exist, but is instead a personification of a group of immigrant people from a more or less distant region.
Legend's content

1 Migration from Canaan

1.1 The hero's departure from Baghdad and his stay in Borno

1.2 Arrival in Daura and slaying of the serpent

1.3 Relationship with Magajiya Daurama

1.4 Two groups of descendants

2 Social context

2.1 Social embeddedness of the legend

2.2 Re-enactment during the Gani/Mawālūd festival

2.3 Repercussions on other regional traditions

3 Historical meaning

3.1 Ancient history

3.2 Medieval history

3.3 Symbolical history

4 Bibliography

5 Notes and references

6 External links
The palace version of the legend begins with the account of a massive migration of people from Canaan under the leadership of Najib whom the local informants identify with Nimrod. After the crossing of the Sahara the leadership was assumed by successive queens until finally Magajiya Daurama led the people to a well with a snake where the people founded the city of Daura.[1]

The hero's departure from Baghdad and his stay in Borno

According to the legend, Bayajidda was a prince from Baghdad (the capital of Iraq) and son of King Abdullahi, but he was exiled from his home town after Queen Zidam,[2] also known as Zigawa, had conquered the city.[3] Once he left Baghdad, he traveled across Africa with numerous warriors and arrived in Borno.[2]

Once in Borno, tales differ as to what caused tension with the local king. According to one story, Bayajidda realized his forces were stronger than those of the king; because of this, he planned to overthrow him. However, the king heard of the plot and, after consulting with his advisors, gave Bayajidda his daughter, Magaram (also known as Magira), in marriage.[3] Later, when the king attacked and took over several towns, he tricked his new son-in-law into leaving his own men to guard the towns, thereby decreasing the number of men Bayajidda had at his disposal. Bayajidda realized that he was being tricked when he had only his wife and one slave left; during the night, they fled to Garun Gabas, now situated in the Hadeja region.[2] While there, Magaram gave birth to Bayajidda's first child, Biram the eponymous ancestor of the petty kingdom of Gabas-ta-Biram ("east of Biram").[3]
However, according to another version of the story, Bayajidda was welcomed into Borno, married Magaram and became popular among the people. Because of this, the king envied him and plotted against him; upon being informed of this by his wife, he fled Borno with her.

**Arrival in Daura and slaying of the serpent**

Bayajidda left his wife and child in Garun Gabas and continued on to the village of Gaya near Kano - which others believe to be Gaya in modern Niger -, where he had the local blacksmiths make him a knife. He then came to the town of Daura (located in modern day Katsina State), where he entered a house and asked an old woman for water. She informed him that a serpent named Sarki (sarki is the Hausa word for king) guarded the well and that the people were only allowed to draw water once a week. Bayajidda set out for the well and killed the serpent with the sword and beheaded it with the knife the blacksmiths had made for him, after which he drank the water, put the head in a bag, and returned to the old woman's house. (The well where this is said to have happened is nowadays a tourist attraction.)

The next day, the people of Daura gathered at the well, wondering who had killed the snake; Magajiya Daurama, the local queen, offered sovereignty over half the town to whoever could prove that he killed the snake. Several men brought snake heads forth, but the heads did not match the body. The old woman, owner of the house Bayajidda was staying in, informed the queen that her guest had slain it, after which Daurama summoned Bayajidda. Having presented the snake's head, proving to her that he was the one who had slain Sarki, he turned down the offer of half the town, instead requesting her hand in marriage; she married him out of gratitude for slaying the serpent.
**Relationship with Magajiya Daurama**

Because it was against the custom of the people of Daura for their queens to marry, Daurama made a compromise with Bayajidda and said she would only have sexual intercourse with him later; because of this, she gave him a concubine named Bagwariya. (according to the oral palace version of the legend, Daurama gave him Bagwariya because she wanted to break her "queenly vow to remain a virgin," but had to undergo rituals to do so.)

Bagwariya had a son fathered by Bayajidda and she named him *Karap da Gari*, or *Karbagari* which means "he snatched the town" in Hausa. This worried Daurama, and when she had a son of her own (also fathered by Bayajidda), she named him *Bawo* which means "give it back".\[6\]

**Two groups of descendants**

Throughout his life, Bayajidda is said to have fathered three children with three different women.\[7\] Bawo fathered six of his own sons, whose names were Daura, Gobir, Kano, Katsina, Rano, and Zaria (also known as Zazzau).\[8\] Together with Biram, the son of Magaram, these seven went on to rule the seven "legitimate" Hausa states, the Hausa Bakwai.\[9\] (Some versions of the tale leave Bawo and Magaram out entirely, with Biram, Daura, Gobir, Kano, Katsina, Rano, and Zaria being the sons of Bayajidda and Daurama). Karbagari's descendants, meanwhile, founded the seven "illegitimate" states, the Banza Bakwai.

**Social context**

**Social embeddedness of the legend**
The different figures of the Bayajidda narrative were embodied by precise officials of the former Daura kingdom: the king represented Bayajidda, the official queen mother Magajiya Daurama and the official royal sister Bagwariya.

**Re-enactment during the Gani/Mawlūd festival**

Formerly the celebrations of the *Mawlūd* or *Gani* festival consisted in the re-enactments of the major details of the legend: departure from Canaan, slaying of the snake in the well and marriage between the hero and the queen.[10] The royal sword and the knife are still believed to have been those ones used for the slaying of the dragon and the cutting of its head.[11]

**Repercussions on other regional traditions**

The Bayajidda legend is widely known at the courts of the "Seven Hausa" kings where it is considered to correspond to the oldest known history of Hausaland. As already observed by the traveller Heinrich Barth the basic division between the Seven Hausa and the Seven Banza is used among the Songhay to distinguish between the northern *hausa* and the southern *gurma* side of the River Niger.[12]

**Historical meaning**

There are a variety of views on the Bayajidda story, with differing opinions on the meaning and historicity of the tale. Some scholars suppose that Bayajidda is an historical person, the founder of the Seven Hausa states, and contemporary Hausa royals - especially those in Daura and Abuja (Zazzau) - trace their lineage to and draw their authority from him (see Kano Chronicle). By contrast, others claim that Bayajidda never existed.[13]
Ancient history

Dierk Lange, a German professor, contends that the story parallels the biblical story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar. He compares Bayajidda to Abraham (while also noting the similarity between Biram and Abraham's names), Magaram/Magajia to Sarah, and Bagwariya to Hagar, and says that the *Hausa Bakwai* are cognate to the Israelite, while the *Banza Bakwai* correlate with the Ishmaelites/Arabs. According to this theory, the legend was introduced to Hausaland together with the corresponding social institutions of the Canaanite state during the first millennium BCE by ancient Near Eastern immigrants influenced by Israelite traditions.[14]

Medieval history

W. K. R. Hallam argues that Bayajidda represents a "folk personification" of the supporters of Abu Yazid, (a the tenth-century Kharijite Berber rebel), whose followers fled southwards from North Africa after Yazid's defeat by and death at the hands of Fatimids.[15] According to this theory, the Hausa states would have been founded by Kharijite refugees in the tenth century CE. Elizabeth Isichei, in her work *A History of African Societies to 1870*, suggests that Bayajidda's stay in Borno prior to arriving in Hausaland is "perhaps a folk memory of origins on the Borno borderland, or a reflection of Borno political and cultural dominance."[16]

Symbolical history

One view is that the story of the marriage of Bayajidda and Daurama symbolizes the merger of Arab and Berber tribes in North and West Africa.[17]
Biblical Anthropologist, Alice C. Linsley, maintains that Bayajidda's closest biblical counterpart is Cain [1]. Cain is said to have fled from his father, married a princess whom he met at a well, and was involved with metalworkers. Most of the heroes of Genesis met their wives at sacred wells or springs. Abraham married Keturah at the Well of Sheba (Beersheva). Issac (Yitzak) found a wife at a well in Aram. Moses encountered his wife at a well sacred to the Midianites and won her hand after he delivered the women and flocks from Egyptian raiders.

The antiquity of the Hausa origins account is believed to be attested by the role which water plays in the story. In the ancient world shrines were built along rivers and at wells or springs from West Central Africa to the Indus River Valley. Serpents inhabited these places and were both venerated and feared. In Sanskrit serpent is naaga, in Hebrew nahash, and in Hausa the serpent is naja.

In his 1989 book An Imperial Twilight, Gawain Bell suggests that the marriage of Bayajidda and Daurama signals a "change from a matriarchal to a patriarchal system."[18] (Prior to the arrival of Bayajidda, the Daura monarchy would have been exclusively female.)

Bibliography


**Notes and references**


11. ^ For a photo of the king Bashir with the two weapons see Dierk Lange, "Das kanaanäisch-israelitische Neujahrsfest bei den Hausa", in: M. Kropp and A. Wagner (eds.), *Schnittpunkt Ugarit*, Frankfurt/M, 1999, p. 140.


