

Note to Editors

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publish as is or don't at all.

Uthman Biri ibn Idris (Nigeria)

DIPLOMATIC NOTE FROM BORNUN TO EGYPT (c. 1391)

In this letter a 14th century African king protests to his co-religionist the king of Egypt concerning the slave raids upon his people by Arabs, and asks for the return of those already captured and sold to Egypt and Syria. Observe that this black king claims Arab ancestry and that this does not save his people, not even his own brother, from being enslaved by Arab fellow muslims.

. . After greetings, we have sent you as ambassador my cousin, Idris ibn Muhammad, because of the calamity we suffered. The Arabs who are called Judham and others have taken captive our free subjects—women and children and old people, and our relatives, and other Muslims. Among these Arabs are polytheists and apostates: they have raided the Muslims and killed a great many of them in a war which broke out between us and our enemies. And on account of this war they have killed our prince, 'Umar ibn Idris, a martyr [for the Faith]—he is our brother, the son of our father, al-Hajj Idris, son of al-Hajj Ibrahim; and we are the sons of Saif ibn Dhi Yazan, the father of our tribe, the Arab, of the family of Quraish, as we have been informed by our learned men.

These Arabs have harmed all our land, the land of Bornu, continually up to the present, and have captured our free subjects and relatives, who are Muslims, and are selling them to the slave-dealers in Egypt and Syria and elsewhere, and some they keep for them-

selves.

Now God has placed in your hands the Government of Egypt, from the Mediterranean to Aswan; and our people have been treated [there] as merchandise. Send messengers to all your lands, to your Amirs, and your Wazirs, and your Qadis, and your Governors, and your men of learning ['ulama'], and the heads of your markets; let them examine, and inquire, and discover. When they have found our people, let them remove them from the hands of those who hold them captive, and put them to the test. And if they say—'We are free men—we are Muslims'—believe them, and do not regard them as liars. But when the matter becomes clear to you, release them, and let them return to their liberty and to Islam. In truth, some of the Arabs in our country have turned to evil ways, and are not living at peace. They are ignorant of God's book, and of the *sunna* of our Prophet, and they continue in their wickedness. But do you fear God, and reverence him, and do not abandon our people, to be bought and sold as slaves. ...

Peace be upon those who follow the Right Way.

(Hodgkin, T., ed *Nigerian Perspectives: an historical anthology*, London: Oxford University Press, 1975, [1960], p.104)