

# Review of Be-Rammaj Miaro-II. *Histoires des Saras du Tchad*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 16<sup>th</sup> January 2025 by

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This volume is actually organized into two books written by several contributors under the leadership of Dr. Be-Rammaj Miaro-II, who wrote the preface, the introduction, and 5 chapters of Book I. The second book is authored by Madjadoum and Bandjim Kette Boy (chapter 6), Colonel Kagbe Rhessa Nguema (Chapter 7), Arap Joseph and Paul Rarikingar (chapter 8), and Sargent Roussel and Philippe Natoyoum (chapter 9), ending with a substantive conclusion and an extensive bibliography--altogether 187 pages--written in French. Several aspects of the two combined books, easily attract the attention of Chadian experts, scholars, and the curious others, who wish to hear more about the authors' points of view regarding this large north-central African country, located between the Sahara and the tropical rainforest in the south. Here reside the celebrated Sara (the French, in contrast to Anglophone writers and researchers, use the word in the plural as *les Saras*), presently numbering close to 6 million or 33% of the Chadian population, the largest among the country's 200 ethnic groups (pp. 15-17). The Sara were once labelled as *la belle race* (the beautiful people) by some of the earliest European explorers in the *Mission Maistre* (1892-1893) due to their apparent beautiful and strong physical appearance.

For this reviewer, who has made Chad, particularly the Sara, the base of his academic life after publishing several books--propped up by a number of his articles and chapters in peer-reviewed journals and chapters on Africa--a major attraction of the book is that it was written by Chadians, with the exception of one French officer, a rare occurrence for such a neglected country on the African continent. Indeed, the present book provides more and new historical nuances and inspires confidence as it adds to the apparent fairness of the narrative, when compared to what has been written by the early French colonizers and later scholars. At the time, many of the writers had to use non-well-educated translators and were very subjective as they included their own ethnocentric views. This aspect of the book is further enhanced by the fact that it is anthropologic, historical, linguistic, political in content and vividly clarifies the nature of the linguistic, religious, and the day-to-day activities of the Sara, especially during the pre-colonial period, in contrast to what became part of the colonial apparatus and "the new social rearrangement" designed to extract the resources and exploiting the hard-working but peaceful Chad's southern people who called themselves Sara.

Miario-II's and his colleague Chadians' contribution to our accurate understanding of Chad is particularly impressive, given the various types of information they provide related to the pre-

1960 period, backed up by extensive and inquisitive interviews and diligent consultation of the data from primary sources archived in the INTSH (*Institut National Tchadien pour Les Sciences Humaines*) (1960 and early 1970s), as well as the careful use of the accounts of some well-meaning European and non-European explorers and visitors who actually lived close to or witnessed Sara life and were fascinated by it. Described in the book(s), quite in detail at times, is the Sara tight social structure, the origins and the relations between and among the various villages and kingdoms, which, prior to colonization, lived in relative peace, before they were antagonistically manipulated by outside forces. One learns from the book the extremely well-organized patrilineal succession path to power, to prestige and to inheritance, and the Sara resistance to Arabization and Islamization, to colonization, and to slavery initiated from their northern neighbors. Here one learns the true meaning of the secret *yondo* societies (both the old *Ndo-tol* and the most recently-introduced *Ndo-tegne*) held every seven years for the youngsters, male and female. Professor Miaro-II and colleagues tell us about their own villages, such as Bebo-Pen, the original place of the main contributor, while providing, all along, detailed lines of power allocation, the important role of the priest, the source of power of the healers, diviners, warriors, fishermen, and hunters, which one does not easily find in most discussion of historical and oral accounts. Here one encounters the long lists of famous people and the genealogy of the venerated elders and rulers, including those most often described as village chiefs or *chefs de village and cantons* in Sara districts created by the French at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The prominent issue of Sara religion and beliefs in spirits or intermediaries before the one God they profess—one who created the universe and manifests his will through the Sun and the Moon—clearly debunks the Western myth and stereotype that all non-Muslim and non-Christian Africans are polytheistic. I consider this work not just important for those who are Chadians but also for the scholars, particularly historians, anthropologists, educators, and political scientists, as it contains revisionist aspects that scholars in general ignore or misinterpret. Such is the case with slavery incursions and devastations, known as *razzias*, perpetrated annually by the Baguirmians (non-Sara Muslim northern neighbors) in Southern Chad, often known by the French administrators as *le Chad utile* (useful Chad) due to its abundant resources and rains compared to the rest of the colony. For example, many scholars claim that slave capturing incursions were always forcibly done by the Baguirmians and that Sara leaders opposed them. Perhaps doubting the veracity or the reasons given for the incursions, Colonel Rhessa thus tells his friend Miaro-II:

You, Mr. Miaro-II, do your research from written sources but I use oral methodology [*like a griot in Africa does—reviewer's words*] to gather information from the elders...I must say that there is a great deal of misinformation about our country, which does not help us. For example, many written documents, when mentioning Southern Chad, portray it as the old land of slaves—when nothing can be farther from the truth (pp. 131-133).

Further in his comments, Rhessa notes that:

En fait, ce qu'on appelle *razzias* au Sud pour avoir des esclaves n'est pas ce qui se passait en realite. Les Baguirmiens, par exemple, allaient voir des chefs des communeautés du Sud

pour avoir des cereales et dautres biens de consommation. Grands cultivateurs, les populations du Sud avaient beaucoup de mil. Elles donnaient ce qu'elles avaient a leurs visiteurs. Mais il fallait transporter ces vivres au Baguirmi. On mobilisait alors des jeunes gens, filles et garcons, pour transporter les vivres en question. Arrives a Massenia, les Mbangs faisaient tout pour que les jeunes ne retournent pas chex eux! C'est ce que faisaient les Baguirmiens qui avaient des relations avancees avec les Goulays. Quelle trahison! (p. 132).

In sum, *Histoires des Saras du Tchad* must be heralded as a serious academic enterprise and a needed volume to bring Chad to its pristine value as a treasured tool for a serious revision of the study of African continent that combines the best acceptable methodologies, based on primary and secondary sources, including individual and focus groups interviews, and others written and unwritten, seen and unseen, by many yet. In my view, this is a well-written work by Africans and Chadians in pure French language, combining history, anthropology, politics, and Sara educational goals and practices that force educators and writers to revise their theories and generalizations and have their work appreciated, respected, and objectively presented in the literature narratives. This book(s) debunks several myths and stereotypes still widespread among the so-called experts on Africa. As for me, I wish Dr. Miaro-II and his colleagues' work had been published before I had even written my first article and dissertation on the country and its people, particularly the Sara, who allowed me to complete my research, provided me with a free decent place to live in its capital city of Fort-Lamy, now N'Djamena, for five months.

Finally, I wish to thank Chad for assisting me with a free vehicle that took me to Sara country during the early 1970s to complete my dissertation on its people, the Sara, allowing me, as well, to use freely the archives at the INTSH, at the Musee du Tchad, and inspiring me to spend much time at the Biblioteque Nationale de Paris. Eventually, I even had the privileged opportunity to meet with the Prime Minister of Chad at this home. Therefore, in view of the importance of this volume, spearheaded by Dr. Be-Rammaj Miaro-II, valued son of the Chadian soil, and his dedicated colleagues, I would advise any scholar writing on Chad to purchase and read this book, published by one of the best known and cherished publishers in Africa and the Francophone world, namely, L'Harmattan, well known for its invaluable and much needed series *Etudes Africaines* (*African Studies*).