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"Making History" Across the African Divide

The trans-Saharan trade wove ties of blood and culture between the peoples north and south of the desert.

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It was the middle of the caravan season when Baghlīl started out with his team of camels on a voyage from which he would never return. The year was 1265 *Hijri* in the Islamic calendar (1848–9), and by all accounts it was a time of intense warfare aggravated by an outbreak of smallpox that brought about great insecurity on trans-Saharan trails. Baghlīl was a Muslim caravaner of the "Berber"[2] Tikna clan, originally from the Wād Nūn region on the southern desert edge of present-day Morocco. He held residence in the then thriving oasis of Tīshīt, located in the heart of today's Islamic Republic of Mauritania. There he collaborated with other Wād Nūn traders in outfitting camel caravans to transport goods among the markets of Mali, Senegal, and the northwestern shores of the Sahara. When news broke of Baghlīl's passing, one of his partners was chosen to manage his estate and sort out the inheritance, while his Muslim and Jewish "creditors rose to claim their rights," terminate their written contracts, and settle their accounts in various currencies.[3] Soon another Wād Nūn trader residing in Tīshīt lost his life whilst trading in Senegal. In time, a string of misfortunes and deaths would precipitate a long-distance legal battle, fought with pen and paper by Muslim jurists mediating for the inheriting families of these traders on both sides of the Sahara Desert.

[1] Bovill, *Caravans of the Old Sahara*, preface.

[2] The term "Berber" is used throughout this book in quotations to convey that it is a problematic construct. These people refer to themselves collectively as Imazighen (sing. Amazigh), and speak various dialects of "Berber" (Amazigh), including Tashilḥīt, spoken by the Tikna.

[3] Wād Nūn Inheritance Case (1269/1853), Arwīlī family records deposited in the house of Shaykh Ḥammuny, former qāḍī of Shinqīṭi (Mauritania).

Long-distance trade across political, economic, and cultural frontiers has been a common profession the world over. Whether it involved sailing to faraway lands for exotic spices or organizing a camel caravan to trade salt for slaves, such an occupation required a careful combination of resources, skills, stamina, and luck. But what were the logistics of commercial operations across lands not ruled by a unified state or integrated by a common currency? Indeed, how could long-distance traders be successful cross-culturally when the basic conditions of political stability and regional security were lacking? In unpredictable situations like the ones faced by caravaners such as Baghlīl, and given the complicated nature of trans-Saharan trade, what were the strategies devised by these commercial entrepreneurs to circumnavigate the dangerous pitfalls? And how did such strategies – if at all institutionalized – evolve over time in the face of political turmoil and economic change?

Institutions, or "the structure that human beings impose on human interaction," determine economic performance, as asserted in the seminal work of Douglass North.[4] In reflecting on the incentives of individuals to engage in cooperative behavior, North underscores how the presence of formal rules and informal constraints leads to more efficient economic outcomes. An efficient institutional framework is one that reduces the cost of transacting, including access to information and enforcement of contractual agreements. But as Avner Greif admits in his contribution to the field of institutional economic history, institutions are much more than a set of rules.[5] He argues that while the institutions-as-rules framework allows for an understanding of the structures guiding the behavior of economic actors, it does not explain what motivates them to follow "prescriptive rules of behavior."[6] Greif proposes that institutions and institutional elements (rules, norms, and beliefs) become enacted in organizational systems, which in turn generate institutionalized behavior.

When examining how economic actors solved fundamental problems of exchange in early modern trade by establishing organizations such as trade networks and relying on institutions, it appears that Greif and others have taken several factors for granted. The first is the extent to which the acquirement of literacy by economic actors improved the

[4] D. North, "A Revolution in Economics," 37, and *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*.
[5] Greif, "Cultural Beliefs," "Fundamental Problem of Exchange," and *Institutions*.
[6] Greif, *Institutions*, 8, 14.

structures of institutions and associated behavioral norms. At the same time, literacy supported both information flows and internal or private enforcement of norms and agreements, such as contracts. The second factor is the role of religious institutions, in particular those created by Judaism and Islam, with their embedded legal frameworks. Surely these environments provided public institutions motivating compliance with what Greif terms the "regularity of behavior."[7]

This study suggests that access to literacy on the one hand and faith-based institutions on the other provided support, laws, and incentives that structured the organization of early modern trade. Through an analysis of institutional economics that takes into account cultural and religious determinants of individual and collective behavior, I argue that Muslim religious practice, which promoted the acquisition of literacy, provided structure and agency that shaped the activities of trans-Saharan traders. Concomitantly, the application of Islamic legal codes to business behavior enhanced commercial enterprise, as demonstrated in the case of nineteenth-century Muslim Africa. The practice of Islam structured both the organization of long-distance caravan trade and the operation of trade networks. Muslim merchants and traders used their Arabic literacy and access to writing paper to draw contractual agreements and dispatch commercial correspondence, while depending on their mutual trust in God. At the same time, they relied on an Islamic institutional framework defined by local scholars versed in legal doctrine and local customs.

Paper obviously was a key transaction cost for trans-Saharan traders, as it was for the Maghribi Jewish merchants studied by Greif and documented by S. D. Goitein's extensive analysis of the Cairo Geniza records.[8] Indeed, without literacy and access to a stable paper supply it is hard to imagine the efficient operation of far-flung trade networks. For both Jews and Muslims, their literacy enhanced network externality, allowing for complex accounting, information flows, and accountability or legal transparency to solve the commitment problem and enforce earthly sanctions. In this sense, then, Muslim caravaners, like their Jewish counterparts who "took a similar attitude toward learning and the learned," depended on a "paper economy of faith," an expression I derive from combining the ideas of Goitein and Pierre Bourdieu.[9]

[7] Ibid., 32–3.

[8] S. D. Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*.

[9] Goitein, *Letters*, 9–10, and *Mediterranean Society*, vol. 1, 240–50; Bourdieu, "Structures, Habitus, Power," 168–9.

This book addresses these broad questions by examining trans-Saharan trade in the nineteenth century. It explores the case of the Wād Nūn trade network, a commercial coalition operated by the Tikna and their allies, namely, Maghribi Jews and members of the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ. These long-distance traders specialized in camel caravanning throughout a large area encompassing what is today Mauritania and the bordering regions of northern Senegal, western Mali, and southern Morocco. The spatial breadth of this study was determined by shifts in the movement of caravans. Its temporal parameters were set by the migration patterns of families between trading posts as they related to both the pursuit of economic gain and interactions with local and colonial polities. This historical investigation is anchored in the life histories of families who, across several generations, engaged in long-distance trade in and across the western Saharan regions of Africa, connecting markets, peoples, and cultures. It relies on a combination of original oral and written sources collected during several years of fieldwork.

This chapter presents an overview of the history of the Saharan region of western Africa that forms the backdrop of this study. It provides an extensive discussion of my methods and sources, followed by a presentation of the layout of the book. I examine the place of the Sahara in world history while describing the ways in which this region has been misperceived by outsiders. In so doing, I reflect on how historians of Africa defined their craft within a tradition of writing that has tended to exclude the Sahara. The largest section of this chapter discusses a methodological approach reliant on a multitude of sources to interpret and write trans-Saharan history.

SAHARAN HISTORY AND ITS MISPERCEPTION

The history of the Sahara is marked by the ebbs and flows of peoples and caravans. In the same way that recent scholars have tackled the concept of liquid continents by historicizing the Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific Oceans, as Fernand Braudel did decades earlier for the Mediterranean, one must think of the Sahara as a dynamic space with a deep history.[10] It was a contact zone where teams of camels transported ideas, cultural practices, peoples, and commodities. Yet the Sahara, representing one-third of the African continental landmass, has remained largely outside the radar of

[10] F. Braudel, *La Méditerranée*; P. Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*; B. Klein and G. Mackenthun, *Sea Changes*.

traditional scholarship, especially in North America where research has been landlocked in the area-studies paradigm. Historically, the Sahara was perceived as a natural barrier dividing the continent. Indeed, this land has rarely attracted scholars of "Sub-Saharan" Africa who prefer to think of themselves as specialists of an Africa located "south of the Sahara." Concurrently, historians of North Africa often ignore the peoples living on the desert edge or in the less populated south. Instead, they tend to focus on the historical relationship with Europe and the Middle East, or emphasize the northern caravan trade, all the while disregarding North Africa's "African" roots. The Sahara, stretching from the Atlantic coast to the Red Sea, therefore remains unappreciated by many historians on either side of the African divide.

Despite perceptions to the contrary, the countries bordering the Sahara are united by a common history. When transcending the notion of a "Saharan frontier" and examining the itineraries of trans-Saharan families, it is easy to see that the history of the desert, just like that of the ocean, is marked by continuous exchanges. I treat West and North Africa as one region with the Sahara sealing the continent rather than dividing it. In this book "western Africa" includes what is typically referred to as West Africa in addition to the Sahara, stretching to its northwestern (southern Morocco, western Sahara, southern Algeria) and central (Niger, southern Libya, Chad) edges.

Saharans: Betwixt and Between

The notion of an Africa divided by the vast Sahara Desert was not a product of the post–World War II geo-politics that led to the area-studies paradigm. Rather, it has antecedents in a long-drawn history of "otherings" rooted in antiquity. Herodotus spoke of the northern desert edge as "the wild beast region," while characterizing the area to the south as "the ridge of sand."[11] Although located beyond the Pillars of Hercules, and therefore outside the range of Herodotus' descriptions of the eastern region, the western Sahara was the land of Hanno's legendary or mythical voyage.[12] Whether or not it was the quest for gold that may have precipitated Hanno's *Periplus* in the fifth century B.C.E., the lure of that

[11] Herodotus, *Histories* I, 67; IV, 181–5.

[12] M. Posnansky, "Introduction," 548. See R. Mauny, "La navigation sur les côtes," 99–101; R. C. C. Law, "The Garamantes," 188–9; T. Garrard, "Myth and Metrology," 444–6; J. T. Swanson, "Myth of Trans-Saharan Trade," 596.

precious metal and the desire for slaves propelled Jews and later Muslims, to follow trans-Saharan trade routes into the western African interior.

Muslim geographers named the region *al-Ṣaḥrā'*, Arabic for "the Desert," also referred to as *al-Ṣaḥrā' al-Kubrā* (or "the Great Desert"). They viewed it as an intermediate zone beyond which was the *Bilād al-Sūdān* or "Land of the Blacks." In an attempt to describe an area they barely understood, these early writers used this expression to discriminate between Africans so as to set apart "Blacks" from "Arabs" and "Berbers" of Muslim North Africa, recently incorporated into the abode of Islam (*Dār al-Islām*). The limits of an imaginary *Bilād al-Sūdān* were redefined when a series of North African migrations, which began in earnest in the eleventh century, displaced many Saharan dwellers forced to migrate toward the southern desert edge. Ironically, some of these groups began identifying themselves as "Whites" (*Bīḍān*) and speaking of a "Land of the Whites" (*Ṭrāb al-Bīḍān*) united by the use of a common language, the Arabic-based *Ḥasānīya*.[13] In the fifteenth century, Portuguese maritime explorers, vying for African gold, heralded a new age of imperialism. European explorers, and later colonial rulers, would reinvent Africa on their own terms by also applying a color line to their racial mappings of the continent.

Africans as well as foreigners have long discussed the Sahara as betwixt and between. In fact, the most celebrated Mauritanian author of the late nineteenth century, Aḥmad al-Amīn al-Shinqīṭī, weighed in on a long-standing debate about whether his place of origin, "the country of Shinqīṭi" (*Bilād Shinqīṭ*), was part of "Black Africa" (*Sūdān*) or northwest Africa (*Maghrib*).[14] So eager was this author to prove that this Saharan region did not belong to "the Land of the Blacks," as was the prevailing opinion in Mecca, that this controversy may well have inspired him to write his anthology in the first place. So he pondered:

> Is Shinqīṭi part of the Sūdān or the Maghrib? Shinqīṭi is part of the Maghrib . . . and this is well known to the people of Shinqīṭi and the people of the Maghrib. But several Easterners dispute this, claiming instead that it is part of

[13] Hereafter Hasaniya. The expression *Ṭrāb al-Bīḍān* and the *Bīḍān* ethnonym are problematic. Yet the region where Hasaniya is the lingua franca continues to be relevant as a culturally homogenous space. Terms such as *Sūdān* or *Bīḍān*, submits J. Hunwick (*Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, 2, n. 3), are "referents of cultural practices rather than of skin colours."

[14] Al-Shinqīṭī, *Al-Wasīṭ fī Tarājim Udabā' Shinqīṭ*.

the Sūdān. Even some people of Shinqīṭi believe this. . . . So I told them that they are from the extreme southern part of the Maghrib (*aqṣā' al-maghrib*).[15]

Al-Shinqīṭī refers to the case of an eighteenth-century pilgrim from Shinqīṭi who, in order to prove this very point, sought several fatwas, or legal opinions, including an acknowledgment issued by the Sultan of Morocco. Tragically, the pilgrim died before making his case in Mecca. Moreover, al-Shinqīṭī claims that another scholar who held the opposite view, namely, that the people of Shinqīṭi were from the Sūdān, had misquoted one of his sources.[16] But judging from the mockery with which his arguments were received, al-Shinqīṭī does not seem to have succeeded in convincing his audience. That such debates were taking place, however, is indicative of Saharans' ongoing crisis of identity as Africans caught between two shores. At the same time, they reflect the shifting borders of the *Bilād al-Sūdān* both in the minds of Muslims and in the physical distancing caused by desertification.

For centuries, the Sahara Desert has captured the Western imagination. It conjures visions of torrid heat waves rising over an endless sea of burning sand dunes where only nomads on spiteful camels dared to tread. So it is not surprising that, given its inaccessibility, the Sahara was the last portion of the African continent to be carved up by European conquest. But for the most part, this region was less affected by colonial rule than were other more accessible and more abundant regions of Africa.

Saharan Sun and Sand

The Sahara's reputation as an unbearably scorching and desolate wasteland is certainly justified in terms of climate. It is here that the hottest temperatures in the world have been recorded, reaching above 50°C (130°F). Depending on the time of year, night temperatures drop dramatically, sometimes to the point of freezing. Seasons also vary according to location. On the desert shores the rainy season (*lekhrīf*) is from about May to August. Then the low-pressure clouds of the Inter-Tropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ) rise toward the Tropic of Cancer and westerly winds bring rain from the Atlantic Ocean. The rainy season is followed by spring-like conditions (*tiviski*) when grasses grow for herds to graze. In

[15] Ibid., 422–3.

[16] S. Reichmuth ("Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī (1732–91) and the Africans: Islamic Discourse," 129–30) found reference to this debate in an eighteenth-century biography by a Muslim from India.

the ITCZ's northern limits, engulfing the western Saharan interior, the rainy season is predictably shorter with sparse and sporadic rainfall ranging from 25 to 127 mm (1 to 5 inches) per annum. When it does rain in the Sahara it tends to be torrential, causing destructive flash floods.[17] The northeast trade winds, known as the *Harmattan*, blow over the desert in the dry season between December and February, covering the cities of Africa and beyond with a fine layer of red dust.

Far from being a mere "sandbox," the desert is actually a very heterogeneous zone.[18] There are not only dunes (*iguīdi*) and fields of sand (*ergs*) separated by inter-dunal depressions, but also mountains, undulating foothills, steppes, gravel and stony plains (*reg*), plateaus (*tassili*), and flat bedrock (*hammada*). Once lush and sustaining a diverse ecosystem and human environment, the Sahara experienced irreversible desertification from 3000 B.C.E.[19] Even in more recent times, the changes in vegetation have significantly altered the landscape and transformed Saharan lifestyles. Today, date palms, once a staple and important Saharan export item, are dying out, while many of the oases of the interior are turning into ghost towns. The Sahara is the northern limit of western Africa's malaria zone and the southern barrier to the tsetse fly, bearer of sleeping sickness (trypanosomiasis), all determinants of human and animal transhumance.

Elephants, giraffes, and lions were once common on the desert edge. When Muslim geographers and travelers described the region starting in the eighth century, they noted buffalos and tortoises that no longer inhabit the Sahara. Even in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Saharan environment was less arid than it is now. Oral informants described fauna and flora from the first half of the twentieth century that have vanished from the landscape.[20] The addax, leopard, ostrich, and horned oryx have practically disappeared. The ostrich was

[17] A flash flood in 1999 nearly destroyed the desert oasis town of Tīshīt, causing many of its inhabitants to relocate. More recently, in 2003, torrential rains caused the destruction of 180 mud houses in the historic Malian city of Timbuktu.

[18] The prevailing image of the Sahara as a sandbox is something I. W. Zartman (*Sahara: Bridge or Barrier?* 541) decried decades ago. In the 1920s, French colonial ethnographer M. Delafosse ("Les relations du Maroc avec le Soudan," 153) remarked on this same misperception.

[19] J. L. A. Webb, *Desert Frontier*, 3–11.

[20] For example, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa reported apricot, pear, apple, and peach trees in the region south of Walāta that are no longer found. N. Levtzion and J. F. P. Hopkins, *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources* [hereafter *Corpus*], 286. Elder informants described the former presence of lions in the region of Tīshīt as well as large herds of gazelles.

driven to near extinction in the region by systematic hunting for its precious feathers sold on European markets. Fennec foxes, striped hyenas, and jackals will soon join dama gazelles on the endangered species list. Yet, as a land that never ceases to surprise, the Sahara is still home to the crocodile (*Crocodylus niloticus*) that survives in the deep caves of southeastern Mauritania.[21]

Caravans of Gold

Two events occurring in the common era would profoundly influence the history of Saharan societies. The first was the introduction of camels sometime after the first century, and the second was the spread of Islam from the eighth century onward. The adoption of the "ship of the desert" revolutionized the nature of long-distance transportation in terms of organization, endurance, and volume while stimulating nomadic and pastoral lifestyles in the region. Adherence to Islam and its code of law favored the development of both scholarly and commercial networks that linked Muslims across the desert to the world beyond. In time, a political economy of violence, patronage, and protection was negotiated among nomadic herders, semi-nomadic oasis residents in charge of organizing camel caravans, and sedentary farmers.

The pursuit of gold and other goods encouraged waves of migrations of North Africans and other groups into desert oases. The area presently divided among Mali, Mauritania, and Senegal was central to the great empires of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay that flourished from the eighth to the sixteenth century. The eleventh-century Almoravid jihad marked the first attempt at a large-scale Islamic reform in the region. To be sure, these Muslims who formed a coalition from the western to the northern desert edges were interested in controlling a share of the gold trade as much as in proselytizing and spreading the Mālikī legal doctrine. From then on, trans-Saharan trade thrived, with salt mined from Saharan deposits enduring as the single most important trade item. More nomads coming from the north, such as the *Banū Hilāl* from the eleventh century, and the *Banū Maʿqīl* several centuries later, migrated to the region, upsetting settlement and trade patterns.[22] These warrior groups, locally referred to as *ʿarab*, brought

[21] T. Monod, "Remarques biologiques sur le Sahara"; T. Shine et al., "Rediscovery of Relict Populations of the Nile Crocodile," 260.

[22] *Corpus*, 338–9; T. Cleaveland, *Becoming Walāta*, 44; H. T. Norris, "Legacy of the Banu Hassan," 21–5.

with them the use of an Arabic dialect that became infused with "Berber," Wolof, and other African languages to form Hasaniya.

By the middle of the fourteenth century, the famous pilgrimage to Mecca by the emperor of Mali, Kankan Mansa Mūsā, alerted the wider Muslim world to the gold riches of western Africa and attracted many more foreigners to the area. In the late sixteenth century, after fending off a Portuguese invasion of his kingdom, the Moroccan Sultan Aḥmad al-Manṣūr attempted to control trans-Saharan trade routes by securing the principal salt mine of Taghāza. He then sent a contingent armed with Spanish muskets to conquer the Songhay Empire and its main cities of Gao and Timbuktu. Because of a number of factors, including distance, Morocco's effective control was short-lived, although for centuries the Sultan, acting as "Commander of the Faithful," would exert nominal authority over the region.

Southwestern Social Order

A social order was negotiated among southwestern Saharans by the end of the seventeenth century after the Islamic reform movement of Nāṣir al-Dīn. In the course of this struggle the warrior groups ultimately were victorious, assuming greater control of the region. Eventually, they came to found the nomadic emirates of Trārza, Brākna, Tagānit (Idawʿīsh), and much later Ādrār. By the early eighteenth century, Hasaniya was supplanting the local "Berber" language (*Znāga*), and gaining ground as a lingua franca from Timbuktu (Mali) in the East to Ndar (Senegal) in the West and into the Wād Nūn region on the northern desert edge (Map 1).

The region of the western Sahara, stretching south of the Wād Nūn to the Senegal River, was now dominated by Saharans of mixed ancestry who chose as their identity marker the above-mentioned ethnonym Bīḍān.[23] The Bīḍān tended to split vocationally into two groups: the people of the sword, or *ḥasānī* (also known as *ʿarab*), and the people of the book, referred to as *zwāyā*. Descendants of North African and other migrants, the ḥasānī thrived on arms-bearing and military prowess. They derived their livelihood from exacting protection fees from the zwāyā and other tributary groups and levying tolls on those who crossed their territory, especially caravan leaders.[24] The more numerous zwāyā, or clerical clans, were semi-sedentary by the late seventeenth century. Their

[23] The use of the term "ethnonym" is borrowed from J.-L. Amselle, "Ethnies et espaces."
[24] A. W. Ould Cheikh, "Nomadisme," 369.