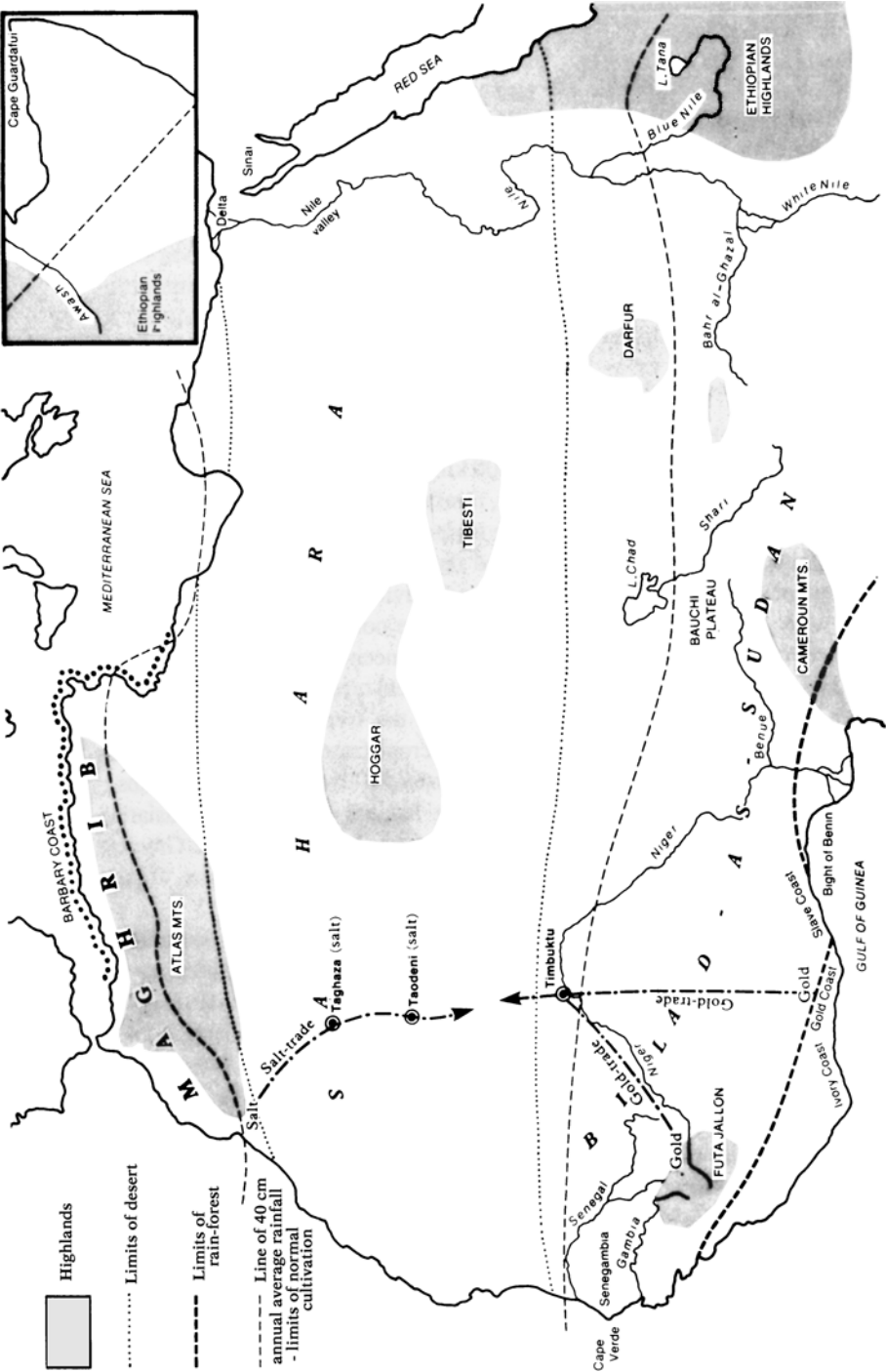


ONE. Africa North of the Equator

The Sahara and Islam: The Bonds Unifying Northern Africa

The geography of the northern half of Africa is dominated by the Sahara desert. Throughout its vast area, 2,800 km (1,700 miles) from north to south and nearly 8,000 km (5,000 miles) from east to west, rainfall is less than 13 cm (5 inches) a year. Except around a few oases where underground supplies of water reach the surface, agriculture is impossible, and the desert's only inhabitants have been nomadic herdsmen, breeding camels and moving their animals seasonally from one light grazing ground to another. To the north of the desert lies the temperate Mediterranean coastland – its rainfall concentrated between January and March, with wheat and barley as its main cereal crops and sheep, the main stock of its highland pastures. Southward are the tropics, the land of the summer rains, favouring a different set of food crops from those grown around the Mediterranean. In the desert and northward live Berbers and Arabs, fair-skinned peoples speaking languages of the Afroasiatic family. South of the desert begins the 'land of the blacks' – to the Greeks; 'Ethiopia', to the Berbers, 'Akal n'Iguinawen' (Guinea); and to the Arabs, 'Bilad as-Sudan'.

The desert has always been a formidable obstacle to human communication, but for two thousand years at least – since the introduction of the horse and the camel made travel easier – people have persevered in overcoming its difficulties. Before the days of the motorcar and the aeroplane, it took two months or more to cross. Nevertheless,



1. Northern Africa: geographical features and vegetation.

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people did cross it, not merely in isolated journeys of exploration, but, regularly, year after year, in the course of trade, education, and pilgrimage. The essential intermediaries in this traffic were the pastoral nomads of the desert itself. They bred the camels, trained them for carrying, and accompanied and protected the caravans on their journeys. They also controlled what was, until the twentieth-century discoveries of oil and natural gas, the one great natural resource of the Sahara, which was the salt deposited in almost inexhaustible quantities by the evaporation of ancient lake basins situated in the very middle of the desert, dating from prehistoric periods of much greater rainfall. The salt was in high demand to the north, and more especially to the south of the desert. The nomads brought in slaves to mine it and supplied the all-important camels to transport it in bulk. Given the salt caravans, which by the nineteenth century were employing hundreds of thousands of camels to carry tens of thousands of tons of salt, the exchange of many other commodities from north and south of the desert becomes much easier to understand. The gold from the tributary valleys of the upper Niger, the upper Volta, and the Akan forest was an early and important element in the trans-Saharan trade. Slaves, captured all along the southern edges of the Sudanic belt, accompanied nearly every northward-moving caravan. And, as time went on, leather goods and cotton textiles manufactured in the Sudan were carried northwards in considerable quantity. The staples of the southward traffic were the woollen textiles of North Africa; the cottons and muslins of the Middle East; and the weapons, armour, and other hardware of southern Europe.

Therefore, long before any sailing ship from Europe reached the Atlantic coast of West Africa, the Sudanic lands to the south of the Sahara were in touch with those of the Mediterranean not only by exchanging produce but also by the sharing of skills and ideas. Whereas the Latin Christianity of the Roman provinces never crossed the Sahara, Greek-speaking missionaries, both Orthodox and Monophysite, converted the Nubian kingdoms on the upper Nile and the kingdom of Aksum in northern Ethiopia. In the west, Islam first spread through the conquest of Egypt and North Africa in the seventh century, and then moved on across the desert with little delay. By the ninth century, the nomads of the central and western Sahara were converting to Islam. By the eleventh century, at least, the new

faith was beginning to penetrate the Negro kingdoms to the south of the desert, where it appealed first and foremost to those who travelled beyond their own communities and language areas as participants in an already active system of regional and interregional trade. To them, Islam offered wider intellectual and spiritual horizons and membership in a universal brotherhood which looked after its members in very practical ways. Between the eleventh and eighteenth centuries, at least, the townsfolk of the Sudanic countries learned to be Muslims like the Arabs and the Berbers to the north. Their learned and pious men studied Arabic, the language of the Holy Koran, and a few made the pilgrimage to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, passing through the great cities of Egypt and North Africa on the way. The rulers and the rich men on both sides of the desert worshipped the One God, read the same books, and discussed the same things.

It would, of course, be a great mistake to imagine that all the civilisations of the Sudanic belt of Africa were due to contact with the world of Islam. We now know that a pattern of urban life in walled towns existed in widely scattered parts of West Africa long before the spread of Islam, and that the characteristic political formation of small 'city states' grouped in clusters – each cluster speaking a common language and observing common customs – must have been a development indigenous to the region. The periodic and sporadic incorporation of city-states into larger political hierarchies, described by outsiders as kingdoms or empires, is likewise to be seen as a response to various local factors, including differences of economic opportunity and military power and the ambitions of individual rulers, and not as the transfer of political ideas from the north of the desert to the south. Nevertheless, the growing presence of Islam and the proximity of the Islamic heartlands as the most obvious point of reference in the outside world did help to provide a certain element of unity to the northern half of Africa, extending from the Mediterranean almost to the Atlantic coast of West Africa. Within all this vast area, despite multitudinous differences of language and culture, interregional trade and travel were practised by a small number of people and, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, nearly all of these were Muslims, so that there was a certain pool of common ideas in circulation from one end of it to the other.

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It is debatable just where the southern frontier of northern Africa lay at different times in history. Until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, it probably included little more than the open grasslands, forming a belt 500 or 600 km (300 or 400 miles) wide to the south of the desert margin, from the Senegal to Lake Chad and eastwards through Darfur and Kordofan to the Ethiopian highlands. Throughout this region, beasts of burden, especially donkeys, could circulate, and troops of armed horsemen could control and levy tribute upon the populations of quite large states. To the south again lay the woodland belt, thickening progressively into dense equatorial rain forest. Here, because of tsetse fly in the woodlands and lack of forage in the forest, all goods had to be carried by canoes or porters, and soldiers fought on foot. Markets and states were smaller, and there were few towns large enough for Islamic religion and learning to gain a foothold. Nevertheless, by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, some interregional trade was beginning to penetrate even these southern lands. Gold was found in the Akan forest, and kola, the one luxury stimulant permitted by Islam, was grown exclusively within the forest belt. When the Portuguese discovered the West African coast, they found that the trading frontier of the Mande traders from the Niger bend had already reached the coastline of modern Ghana. During the three centuries that followed, the European traders operating from the Atlantic beaches pushed the frontiers of interregional trade northwards again, but only by a matter of 300 to 500 km (200 to 300 miles). By 1800, there was still far more of West Africa which looked northwards for its contacts with the outside world than southwards to the seaborne trade with Europe. And, of course, throughout the whole vast region to the east of Lake Chad, there remained no other source of outside contacts but the northern one.

Countries of the Mediterranean Coast

By the end of the eighteenth century, people in the Muslim world as a whole had lost much of the energy and sense of purpose that had driven them to produce such a brilliant culture in the early centuries of Islam. They failed to keep abreast of the new inventions and techniques being discovered in western Europe, particularly in military

affairs and transport – such as the improvements made to sailing ships. This failure to make progress affected all parts of Africa considered in this chapter in one way or another. It applied especially to the lands north of the Sahara, from Egypt in the east to Mauritania in the west. Since the sixteenth century, all these countries, except Morocco, had formed a part of the Turkish Ottoman empire, with its capital at Istanbul. By the eighteenth century, Ottoman power had declined considerably from the peak reached two centuries earlier. Provincial rulers now acted almost independently of the Ottoman sultan, and even tribute payments had become fairly nominal. While the situation varied in detail from one country to another, the ruling elite in all of them was composed of the descendants of the original Turkish garrisons, who augmented their numbers in each generation and their sense of separateness from the local people by recruiting slave soldiers from the northern confines of the Ottoman empire in southern Russia and the Caucasus. It was in supplying these recruits that the Ottoman sultans came nearest to ruling their North African possessions.

It was in Egypt that the system of military rule had its deepest roots. When they conquered the sultanate in 1517, the Ottomans took over an institution which had been operating since the thirteenth century; the elite cavalry soldiers, imported as slaves but then educated and trained to occupy a highly privileged status, were known as *mamluks*. At the end of their professional service, they were freed and generously pensioned. Their children, however, were forbidden to enter the army. The commanders of the mamluks, the *amirs*, directed the military and civil services of the state, and each amir on his appointment imported a fresh supply of mamluks to be his bodyguard or ‘household’. Much of the cultivable land of the country was divided into fiefs for the support of the military elite, and for the peasant millions of Egypt who toiled and were taxed Mamluk rule was a harsh one. But it supported a leisured and educated class which made Cairo, at least, a centre of luxury and learning as outstanding as any in the Muslim world.

To the west of Egypt, the countries of Tripoli, Tunis, Algeria, and Morocco were known collectively to the Arabs as *al-Maghrib* (the West). Here, in contrast with Egypt, the authority of governments rarely extended far beyond the main cities. In the hinterlands lived

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fiercely independent nomadic tribes – both Berbers and bedouin Arabs. They could only be rather loosely controlled by playing off one against the other. In Tripoli, the Ottoman government had been represented since 1711 by the local Karamanli family, which had concentrated its efforts mainly on developing the trans-Saharan trade from Bornu and the Hausa states. By this route came a steady supply of Sudanese slaves, who were distributed by the merchants of Tripoli to Istanbul, Damascus, Cairo, and all over the western part of the Muslim world. Tripoli was likewise a distributing centre for the splendid leatherwork of the Hausa cities, already well known in western Europe as ‘Morocco leather’. Tripoli’s exports southwards consisted mainly of arms, armour, and Arab horses. They also included mercenary soldiers trained in the use of firearms, who joined the bodyguards of the Sudanese rulers.

Tripoli, however, had no monopoly of the trans-Saharan trade. Probably, the largest hub of the desert traffic was at the oasis of Ghadames, where the borders of Tunisia, Algeria, and Libya now meet. Here, caravan routes from the central and western Sudan converged, and Ghadames merchants were well known in Hausaland and Timbuktu alike. From Ghadames, some of the Sudan trade was carried to Tunis and Algiers. These were busy ports from which merchants could more easily reach the markets of western Europe than from Tripoli. The rulers (*beys*) of Tunis had been drawn since 1705 from the local Hussainid family, whose armed forces protected a large settled population from the attacks of the nomad Berbers of the eastern Atlas. These peasant farmers of the Tunisian plain were some of the greatest wheat producers of the whole Mediterranean basin. In the coastal towns, a sophisticated middle class of merchants and officials, enjoying a long tradition of Islamic civilisation and learning, ran a more orderly system of government than was possible in any other Maghrib country.

The Ottoman rulers of Algiers were known as *deys*. Unlike the rulership of Tunis, this office had not fallen into the hands of a single family, to be passed down from father to son. It was filled on the death of the reigning dey by election from among a group of merchants and soldiers who were the most influential men in the city. The merchants, called *corsairs* by Europeans (from an Italian word meaning ‘to chase’), traded by sea with the European

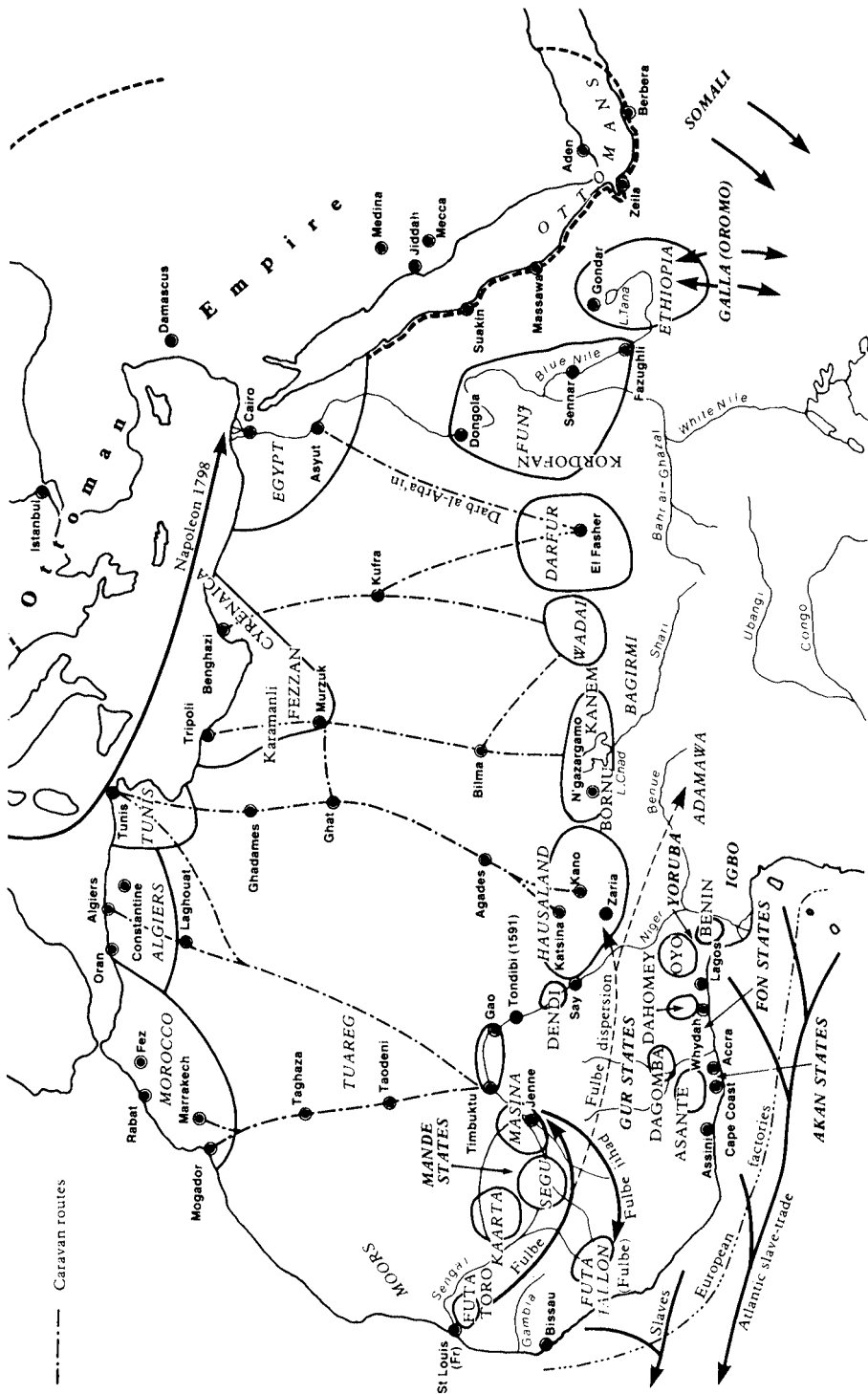
countries, using galleys rowed by Christian slaves. Legitimate trade was sometimes combined with acts of piracy against European shipping and coastlines, for which they became infamous. During the seventeenth century, Algiers had been one of the most attractive cities of the Mediterranean. Dr Shaw, an English traveller in the early eighteenth century, commented favourably on its surroundings:

The hills and vallies round about Algiers are all over beautiful with gardens and country seats, whither the inhabitants of better fashion retire during the heats of the summer season. They are little white houses, shaded with a variety of fruit trees and ever-greens, which, besides the shade and retirement, afford a gay and delightful prospect towards the sea. The gardens are all of them well stocked with melons, fruit and pot-herbs of all kinds. The natives of Algiers live extremely happy, for though the government is despotic, it is not so in reality.¹

Even at the time of its surrender to the French in 1830, Algiers was described as ‘perhaps the best regulated city in the world’. The French conquerors found that the majority of the Algerines were better educated than the majority of the local Frenchmen. And this was after half a century of grave political disorders, due to revolts among the Arab and Berber tribes who roamed over the high plateaux of the interior behind the coastal plains. These tribes were led by *marabouts*, the Muslim holy men, who carried their attacks to the very outskirts of the cities on the Mediterranean shore.

Morocco had never been a part of the Ottoman dominions, and its armies were composed mostly of black slaves from the Sudan, of whom by the mid-eighteenth century there were said to be some 150,000 – half of them housed in a specially constructed military town, and the rest dispersed in forts guarding the central lowlands of the country from the incursions of the Berber nomads of the Atlas. The extent of territory paying tribute into the sultan’s treasury had greatly diminished since the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, when for a few years the kingdom had stretched right across the desert to Timbuktu. Now, as in Algeria, tribal groups from the High Atlas and the desert fringes were apt to raid the settled areas and extort their own tribute from the peasants of the plains, and the

¹ T. Shaw, *Travels and Observations Relating to the Several Parts of Barbary and the Levant* (Oxford, 1738), p. 71.



2. Northern Africa in 1800.

armies of the sultan were powerless to prevent them. Nevertheless, Morocco was still the terminus of a considerable trade with the south. The salt trade conducted by the desert Berbers from near its southern borders still attracted much of the gold of the upper Senegal–Niger region, despite the attempts of the French at St Louis to obtain it. Slaves from the Niger bend still went northwards to Morocco in considerable numbers. Despite the opening of the sea routes, a great many European manufactures, especially English cotton goods, were distributed over West Africa by Moroccan merchants who bought them at Mogador on the Atlantic coast of southern Morocco. Arabic-speaking Moors lived all over the western fringes of the Sahara as far south as the banks of the Senegal. Their holy men practised the characteristic Maghribi forms of devotion, becoming followers of such religious orders as the Ramaniyya, which was founded in 1770 in Kabylia (Algeria), and the Tijaniyya, established in 1781 by Sidi Ahmad Tijani at Ain Mahdi, near Laghouat, on the desert fringe of Algeria. Tijani's teaching was accepted at the great Moroccan university at Fez, and his order prospered in Mauritania and among the Tuareg tribesmen of the central Sahara.

States of the Sudan Region

Most of the larger states existing to the south of the Sahara were affected in some degree by the stagnation of the Islamic world as a whole. Generally, there was less security for traders and pilgrims than there had been and, in consequence, less wealth, less learning, and less religion. Among the states most affected was Ethiopia, which, though Christian in religion, lay close to the Arabian heartlands of Islam and suffered severely from the decline in the trade of the Red Sea. More seriously still, Ethiopia had been suffering since the sixteenth century from the progressive infiltration and settlement of its southern and eastern provinces by its Oromo neighbours. The Christian monarchy had responded to the situation by moving its headquarters away from its traditional medieval bases in Shoa (the region around modern Addis Ababa) to the region north of Lake Tana, where it finally established a fixed capital at Gondar. But this attempt at regroupment had not been successful. The Oromo pressure continued, and the new frontiers could only be defended by