

## **Minerals, Medals, Faith and Slaves: The Trans-Saharan Commodity Trade**

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Why discuss the trans-Saharan trade as part of a workshop dealing with issues of food, cultural contact, and migration? Because the trade itself covers all three points. One of the main trading commodities sent back and forth was salt, one of the basic human needs for survival, a need that outstrips its use as a preservative and a flavor enhancer.

The trans-Saharan trade is also interesting because in a real geographic sense it seems almost counterproductive, given that the trading routes cross some of the most hostile territory on earth. In this talk, I want to discuss the history of the trade, talk about some of the commodities that went back and forth, and also discuss the cultural impact on cultures north and south of the Sahara. In this, I'm going to be aided by Michael Palin, whose most recent travelogue, *Sahara*, just finished airing on the Bravo network and will, presumably, be available for sale in the near future.

Let's begin by taking a look at this map of the vegetative patterns of Africa, which is, of course, a fancy way of saying "let's look at what's growing where, and what's not growing where."

The northernmost section along the Mediterranean Ocean is a region called the Tell. This is primarily fertile land that shares a temperate climate with Mediterranean Europe and is capable of supporting agricultural productivity. In the area of North Africa called the Maghreb (modern day Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and the western section of Libya usually referred to as Tripolitania), the Tell is bordered on the south by a high, arid plateau that is punctuated on the southern end by the peaks of the Atlas mountains. There is a sharp drop both in altitude and in life-supporting conditions from the Atlas into the Sahara desert itself, which is one of the most arid and least hospitable climates on Earth.

On the southern end, there is no sharp definition: the Sahara is bordered on the south by a region of grassy plains called the Sahel (which, in areas, is being overtaken by the Sahara itself in a slow but steady process of desertification).

As recently as Roman times, Herodotus was able to visit North Africa (or so he says) and report that wild beasts ran through the areas in the hinterlands of the Tell, which were apparently still capable of supporting some life. Roman mosaics depict animals that are not found in the regions north of the Sahara today. The Carthaginian general Hannibal, for example, was apparently able to find enough elephants in north Africa with which to raise an army and march into Europe. However, in the past 2,000 years, there has been a clear climate shift that has led to the drying out of the Sahara, the loss of native plants, rivers, marshes, and animal and human life.

There exists a myriad of different theories and observations regarding the prevalence of trans-Saharan trade as it existed from antiquity until the Islamic conquest in the Seventh century CE / First century A.H. The earliest reliable records date from the Roman period, some of which recount legends of earlier times. Timothy Garrand makes the assumption that the earliest trans-Saharan trade involved the importation of gold, and that a study of the presence or absence of gold in North Africa (where it is not to be naturally found in abundance) is an indication that the gold was being imported from outside the region.<sup>1</sup>

Following this theory, the case can be made that trans-Saharan trade was not a significant part of the North African economy in pre-Roman and early Roman times. Herodotus appears to have been well informed about the resources to be found in the Sahara, and recounts what appears to have been the remarkable story of five men who crossed the desert and may have reached a branch of the river Niger.<sup>2</sup> While trans-Saharan travel is evidenced at this point, it does not appear that such travel occurred on a regular basis, nor resulted in the mass influx of gold into the Mediterranean regions.

Trans-Saharan trade did not become feasible until the introduction of the camel as a pack animal.<sup>3</sup> Camels, which originated in North America (but became extinct there in prehistory), were first domesticated in the Middle East around 3,000 BCE and were used as pack animals. Initial experimentation with using the camel to cross a desert as vast enough as the Sahara appears to have taken place around the third or fourth century CE.

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy F. Garrand "Myth and Mythology: The Early Trans-Saharan Gold Trade" *Journal of African History*, 23 (1982), pp. 443-461

<sup>2</sup> Herodotus, *The History* II. 32. Quoted in Garrand, p. 444 Also E.W. Bovill, *The Golden Trade of the Moors*, Princeton: Markus Weiner, 1995, p. 14

<sup>3</sup> See esp. Bovill, *Golden Trade*, pp. 36-39

Accordingly, it is around this time that we can begin to see the introduction of gold into the North African markets as a more readily available commodity. By the end of the fourth century CE, tax codes were revised throughout Roman North Africa to specify that payments must be made in gold, instead of silver, the former unit of currency.<sup>4</sup> Such Roman tax legislation underlines what J. Devisse refers to as the basis for the establishment of the trans-Saharan trade: the need for coinage.<sup>5</sup> The presence of gold coinage minted at Carthage, Lepcis Magna, and other Roman cities in North Africa suggests that there was, at the very least, a reliable if perhaps intermittent supply of gold coming across the Sahara from the south.

**Play first video clips (1-5) here.**

With all of this emphasis on gold, was there any other commodity being traded on a widespread basis between North Africa and the sub-Saharan regions? What was the incentive for the sub-Saharan peoples to make the long and difficult trek across the desert?

Gold, throughout history, has been a symbol of power and wealth, and the new Muslim rulers of North Africa were eager to use the available resources toward that aim. The Muslims followed the Roman precedent of considering the minting of coins as a regal prerogative, and the Muslim rulers of North Africa, like the Roman and Byzantine governors before them, monopolized this practice.<sup>6</sup> This practice came to a head under the Fāṭimids, a Shiʿa dynasty who ruled from the Tunisia. The Fāṭimids were among the first Muslim rulers outside of the caliphate (at this point in Baghdad) to demonstrate their own authority through the minting of gold coinage. There were many political reasons for doing so. The ʿAbbāssid coinage itself, minted at Baghdad, was weak, and its standard of ‘fineness’ was somewhat poor, however, the ʿAbbāssid governors of Egypt continued to mint a high quality gold coinage.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, in order to assert themselves as equals to the ʿAbbāsids, the Fāṭimids would need to mint coinage at least as high in quality as that coming from Egypt.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Garrand, p. 447

<sup>5</sup> J. Devisse “Trade and trade routes in West Africa” in UNESCO: *General History of Africa, Vol. III: Africa from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> Century* M. Elfasi, ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, pp. 367-8

<sup>6</sup> Devisse, op. cit., p. 391

<sup>7</sup> Devisse, p. 396 ff.

<sup>8</sup> In 969, the Fāṭimids conquered Egypt and this point became moot.

By the tenth century, the Fāṭimids had developed a reputation for having the finest gold coinage in the Muslim world. Such a reputation had to be lived up to, and accordingly, it should be no surprise that the Fāṭimids also sought out a plentiful and constant supply of gold for their mints. Hence, it was in the Fāṭimids' best interests to not only continue but even expand the trans-Saharan gold trade as it existed at the time, as a substantial reserve of gold had to be built up in order to allow for the minting of such high-quality coinage. The Fāṭimids went to great lengths to organize the annual gold caravans from sub-Saharan Africa. While the Fāṭimids ruled from Ifrīqiya, the town of Tegdaoust (Awdāghust in Arabic), in the Sahara, became a major trading center, as it lay directly on the caravan route. One side effect of this is that most records seem to indicate that it was during this period of the increase in trade that the people in the region of Tegdaoust began a widespread conversion to Islam.

The power and hegemony of the Fāṭimids did not go unnoticed among the other political forces at work in Africa. Around the turn of the first millennium CE, a group known as the Almoravids (Al-Murabitūn in Arabic) came from the region that is now Mauritania to conquer Morocco and Christian Spain. Coming from the sub-Saharan regions themselves, they shifted the balance of power somewhat, and with their knowledge of the resources available south of the Sahara, this invasion probably brought about a dramatic increase in trans-Saharan trade into Morocco and from there into Spain. As the power of the Cordoban court rose, the desire to transfer the gold trade from Ifrīqiya to Spain grew with it. The departure of the Fāṭimids from al-Mahdiyya to their new capitol at al-Qāhira (Cairo) in Egypt left the door open for the Umayyads to transfer the Fāṭimid mints at Sidjilmāsa and Fās to their own control. The mints operated, it seems, without any interruption in the trade from the south, or the demand for a continued supply of gold for the Umayyad coinage.<sup>9</sup>

Gold itself was of little intrinsic value to the people who lived in the regions where it was to be found: this follows upon simple theories of economics. If the supply of gold is greater, then the demand of gold is lower, and thus the price is lower. If all kingdoms south of the Sahara had easy access to gold (and this hypothetical is a gross oversimplification), then gold ceases to become a medium of trade among the sub-

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<sup>9</sup> Devisse, *op.cit.* p. 397

Saharan peoples. No one wants someone else's gold if they have it themselves. Hence, the value of the gold is reliant upon finding a market for it in a place where it is scarce. This, as amply demonstrated above, was accomplished by reaching out to the gold-deprived rulers of North Africa. But why go to such lengths?

The answer is salt. Salt is more than a preservative for meats, more than one of the most basic condiments used to give food flavor. Salt is intrinsically important to human survival – it is impossible for human beings to survive without it. In hot climates, humans and livestock both need more salt because they must replace what is lost in sweating.

This basic need for the commodity gave salt a near-legendary status in some cultures, particularly as protection against evil. In traditional Japanese theater, salt is sprinkled on stage before a performance to protect the actors from evil spirits. In Haiti, salt is the only way to break the spell and revive a zombie. Many Jews and Muslims believe that salt protects against the evil eye. In medieval Europe, children were salted either by putting salt on their tongues or submerging them in saltwater, a practice that was banned by the Pope in 1408.

The need to import salt into the sub-Saharan region was crucial, as it could not be found there naturally. Salt was traditionally made in the fringe desert regions of North Africa, which necessitated crossing the Sahara. Later, supplies were found in the desert regions of the Sahara which had to be mined out of the rock. The resultant rock salt, however, turned out to be very transportable.

In the regions of the Sahel, salt was traded for locally produced grains (millet and sorghum), and beans and cotton (esp. indigo). In the grasslands, it was traded for gold that was then taken across the Sahara, where it could be sold for a higher cost than purchased. Later in history, salt also became a key component of the slave trade throughout the region of the Sūdān.<sup>10</sup>

“In the interior of west Africa, the medieval search for salt acquired an importance which has been likened only to the European quest for gold.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> E. Ann McDougall “The Sahara Reconsidered: Pastoralism, Politics and Salt from the Ninth Through the Twelfth Centuries” *African Economic History* 12, 1983, p. 275, citing herself, “The Ijil Salt Industry: Its role in the Pre-Colonial Economy of the Western Sudan” (Ph.D. thesis: University of Birmingham, 1980) pp. 169-99.

<sup>11</sup> McDougall, op.cit., p. 274

Interestingly enough, the two searches were intrinsically related to each other.

As the trade proliferated, centers for trade in the desert began to grow, notably cities such as Djenne and Timbuktu, which both became centers of learning and the seats of governments at various points throughout the middle ages. The cities were well established by the time that the noted traveler Ibn Battuta crossed the Sahara with a salt caravan in 1352, toward the end of his travels. He made several pithy observations on the trade and its way stations, notably among them the city of Taghaza, a mining center in the desert in which the local architecture was constructed entirely of rock salt.

### **Play caravan clips.**

As a result, the kingdoms established in the Sahel became wealthy and powerful. Around the same time that the Islamic kingdoms of North Africa were established, the kingdom of Ghana was formed in the Sahel. The formation of kingdoms was a direct result of the trade, as it encouraged strong military figures to form a monopoly over the trade routes and trade centers. The king of Ghana benefited directly from the passage of salt through his territories: a tax of one dinar was levied on each donkey load of salt that entered, and two on each that left.<sup>12</sup> The value of salt, additionally, can be seen in the example of Gao, where it was used as currency, and formed a significant part of the royal treasury.<sup>13</sup> The power of salt in the political economy was also illustrated quite clearly in other ways. J. Devisse argues that not only was salt critical to the prosperity of Awdāghust in the eleventh and twelfth centuries CE, but that the disruption of the salt trade led directly to the town's decline.<sup>14</sup>

The arrival of Islam into North Africa in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries CE also appears to have been of import in the further development of trade and establishment of permanent trade routes from Mediterranean Africa into the Sahel and sub-Sahel regions. It has been theorized that Islam spread beyond the Sahara along trade routes. This remains a theory, however, since the actual origins of Islam in the sub-Saharan regions are not well documented. What is better documented is the Muslim response to establishing trade links with the sub-Saharan lands, called Bilād al-Sūdān in Arabic.

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<sup>12</sup> McDougall, p. 275, citing al-Bakri, *Corpus*, p. 81

<sup>13</sup> McDougall, p. 275, citing al-Bakri, *op. cit.*, p. 87 and Muhallabi, trans. in Joseph Cuoq, *Recueil de sources arabes concernant l'Afrique occidentale du VIIe au XVI siècle* (Paris, 1975) pp. 77-78.

<sup>14</sup> J. Devisse, "La Question d'Audagust" in Robert and Devisse, *Tegdaoust I*, (Paris, 1970) pp. 109-46. It should be noted that McDougall disagrees with this hypothesis, largely because it contradicts her doctoral thesis.

The arrival of Islam into the North African region brought about a new way of thinking, particularly with regards to dealing with and traveling between Islamic lands (dār al-Islām) and non-Muslim lands (dār al-kufr). This brought about the formation of a new political economy in the Saharan region. During the formative years of Islamic North Africa, political relations were often based on warfare, particularly between the non-Muslim peoples of the desert and the Muslims who had taken control of the Mediterranean coast. Initially, Muslims efforts in North Africa were concentrated in the waging of a jihād against the Byzantines and Berbers in the region. Once the Byzantines had been dealt with and the Berbers accepted Islam, a period of relative stability ensued, and the economy was allowed to flourish on its own. The pacification of the Berbers allowed the new Islamic state of Ifriqīya to be established as a major trading center.<sup>15</sup> Located on the Mediterranean, as well as on the major east-west routes across North Africa, Ifriqīya and its rulers were in an ideal position to head the North African economy.

At this point it may be useful to consider the cultural effects that the establishment and expansion of trans-Saharan trade had both upon the peoples north and south of the Sahara. It has long been argued that Islam was introduced to the Saharan and sub-Saharan regions through the growth of this trade, and it has already been mentioned that the population of the area surrounding Awdāghust quickly became Muslim after the town became a major stop on the trade routes. The similar conversion of at least certain elements of the population of other such trading centers is also well documented by Arab historians. It should be pointed out here, however, that widespread and complete conversion of certain sub-Saharan population did not occur for many centuries, and that in some cases Islam co-existed with the indigenous faiths to varying degrees of success and harmony until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries CE.

The cultural effects of this trade are also to be seen in the physical archaeological evidence that has been left behind. J. Devisse reiterates his point, stated earlier, that foodstuffs were not a primary commodity exchanged on the trans-Saharan route, and this can be seen through a lack of evidence to support any substantial shift in diet on either side of the Sahara. There is also little evidence to support the idea that certain

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<sup>15</sup> See Michael Brett, "Ifriqiya as a Market for Saharan Trade From the Tenth to the Twelfth Century A.D." *Journal of African History*, X, 3, (1969) pp. 347-364

technologies, such as those used in the firing and manufacture of pottery, were imported from north-to-south, as the archaeological evidence suggests that such technology was already in use in the sub-Saharan regions.<sup>16</sup>

There is substantial evidence, however, to suggest that the trans-Saharan trade and subsequent Islamicization of the sub-Saharan and Saharan regions brought about change in the spatial representation of culture, primarily through architectural expression and urban planning. Rather, as the contact between north and south increased, certain artistic and architectural covenants were adopted that show a sudden and clear shift in technique and design. This was not a replacement of the pre-existing Sudanese style of art and architecture, but rather an amalgamation of old and new.<sup>17</sup>

This shift can be seen clearly through physical evidence to be found at Awdāghust (Tegdaoust)<sup>18</sup> as well as at Timbuktu (Tombouctou).<sup>19</sup> In both cases, sections of the city that can be identified as dating from the ninth or tenth century CE have more simple layouts in a grid pattern than earlier sections of the city. Mosques are prominently situated. Houses shift to the courtyard design that is familiar in other places throughout the Islamic world.

The argument can be made that certain technologies may have crossed the desert from south to north as well. Traditional Saharan and Sahelian architecture consisted of primarily molded mud brick architecture, and the incorporation of molded mud-brick into certain structures in north Africa that date from around the same time as the new constructions at Awdāghust and Timbuktu suggest that the technique may have Saharan or Sahelian origins.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, he states, painted patterns have been found in Almoravid-era excavations at Marrakesh and Chichāwa in Morocco that have also been found at Awdāghust. This may suggest that, in addition to the readily apparent influence of north African architecture on the Saharan and sub-Saharan architecture, there may have been a similar effect by south on north.

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<sup>16</sup> Devisse, pp. 428-29

<sup>17</sup> Prussin, Chapter 4.

<sup>18</sup> See Devisse p. 431

<sup>19</sup> See Prussin pp. 141-154

<sup>20</sup> Devisse p. 431

We can say with some certainty that the kingdom of Mali, which succeeded Ghana as the dominant power in the Sahel around the 11<sup>th</sup> century CE, was Islamized by the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. In 1324 the King (mansa) of Mali, Mansa Musa, made the pilgrimage to Mecca and had achieved a sort of celebrity status unseen in the world at the time. He traveled with an entourage of wives, servants, courtiers, and slaves numbering in the thousands, and with an army of hundreds of camels carrying raw gold. His piety caused something of a stir in Cairo as he refused to kiss the ground in front of the sultan, a major social gaffe, because he said he would only bow before God. His wealth is still the stuff of legend. His party spent so liberally in the markets (and were taken advantage of so successfully) that the influx of gold left by the royal party depressed the Egyptian economy for several years. Mali became an important part of the Islamic world, evidenced by the fact that Ibn Battuta made a separate journey to Mali after he had returned from his celebrated travels throughout most of the rest of the Islamic world.

Certainly, the intellectual contact between north and sub-Saharan Africa was not limited to an outflowing from north to south. By the mid-fourteenth century CE, Timbuktu had been established as a great place of Islamic learning and scholarship and the intellectual output from its mosques and universities rivaled that of other major Islamic centers of learning such as Cairo and Damascus. In the late sixteenth century CE, the armies of the Sharif of Morocco were sent to invade the Bilād al-Sūdān, and among their conquests in the sub-Saharan region was Timbuktu. The entire upper class was removed from Timbuktu to Fās (among them the respected scholar Ahmād Bābā), where they were held captive. Two years after being brought to Morocco, they were released but not allowed to leave the country; instead they were to continue their intellectual output under the patronage of the Sharif of Morocco. After the death of the caliph al-Mansūr the captives were finally allowed to return to Timbuktu, however, the invasion cut short the city's tenure as a great city of learning.

**Play last video clips of Timbuktu and Djenne.**

Perhaps one of the most significant effects of the trans-Saharan trade was the establishment and proliferation of the trade in human beings: the slave trade. It is somewhat difficult to pinpoint the exact time when the trans-Saharan slave trade began in earnest. We can observe through the trace evidence that the trade was already well in

place by the tenth century, CE. At that time, the Arab geographer Ibn Hawqal described the country of the Maghrib as “chiefly remarkable for black slaves...<sup>21</sup>”

While the exact time frame may be somewhat difficult to pinpoint, it is much easier to examine the reasons for the slave trade. Islam, as a religion, presupposes the existence of slavery. The Qurʾān itself says nothing of the process or reasons for enslavement, but rather presupposes the existence of slavery and contains a number of verses which encourage both kind treatment of slaves as well as manumission of slaves as a humane act.<sup>22</sup> Islam also forbids the enslavement of Muslims by Muslims: “According to the strict letter of the law, a person could only be enslaved if he/she were a non-Muslim whose people had no pact (ʿahd) with the Muslims and had been taken captive in a jihād launched after a rejection of the summons to Islam.<sup>23</sup>” In practice, however, anyone who was non-Muslim who lived in the territories outside of dar al-Islām was considered to be of the class of people who could be enslaved.<sup>24</sup> By the nineteenth century, it is observed that the Moroccan historian al-Nāṣirī issued a polemic against those who believed that “merely to be black and come from sub-Saharan Africa was a sufficient reason for enslavement.<sup>25</sup>” This shows two things at once: firstly, there were those who obviously sought to profit from the slave trade and therefore sought to open the class of “enslavable people” to include as many potential slaves as possible; and there were those who did not believe that slavery should exist at all. (Al Nāṣirī’s polemic argued that the main reason for enslavement – “being captured in a jihād which has the object of making the word of God supreme and bringing man to his religion” – did not exist anymore, and that slavery was therefore no longer an acceptable practice<sup>26</sup>).

On the subject of the trade from south to north, it can be seen that by the eighteenth and nineteenth century, at which point European observers were commenting regularly on the import of slaves from sub-Saharan Africa into North Africa, there were

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<sup>21</sup> Ibn Hawqal, *The Oriental Geography of Ibn Hawqal* trans. W. Oulsey, London, 1800, p. 16

<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Savage “Black Africans in the Mediterranean” in Savage, ed., *The Human Commodity: Perspectives on the Trans-Saharan Slave Trade*, London: Frank Cass, 1992, p. 6; citing the Qurʾān 4:36.

<sup>23</sup> Savage, “Black Africans...” p. 7

<sup>24</sup> Non-Muslims who lived within dar al-Islam were usually granted protected dhimmi status, and were thus also outside of the class of people who could be enslaved, although this is a generalization and was not the strict rule by any means. Places where Muslims did not constitute the overwhelming majority of the populace, such as sub-Saharan Africa, were areas where this was usually not the case.

<sup>25</sup> Savage, “Black Africans...” p. 7

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.* p. 7

three primary geographic trade routes. The first extended from south eastern and east Africa through the Omani held port of Zanzibar up the coast of Africa to Yemen and the Persian Gulf, then either into Persia, across the Indian Ocean, or up the Red Sea to the Hijaz. The second extended from the headland regions of the White Nile River and generally followed the river north into Egypt. The third primary route extended from points in West Africa in the Niger River basin and points south through the desert into Morocco and Tunisia. Additionally, in West Africa, there was an additional trade operated by both Muslims and non-Muslims that brought slaves to the Atlantic Coast for export to the Americas.

Returning for a moment to the historical evidence, we can once again attempt to trace how and when the trans-Saharan slave trade began to develop as a major industry. As mentioned earlier, the trade of gold and salt in and across the Saharan had led to the development of major trade centers in the desert, such as Awdāghust, which was firmly established by the tenth century. Over the next two centuries, it appears that slaves were added to the goods being channeled through Awdāghust.<sup>27</sup> In the fifteenth century, the Portuguese explorer Alvise da CadaMosto reported that Awdāghust had declined in favor of a number of other trading and agricultural centers along the desert edge. The arrival of the Portuguese as trading partners had shifted the salt and gold trade to include a new east-west trade destined for the Portuguese port of Arguin on the Atlantic Coast. This network brought in a new commodity, horses, which were traded for slaves.

As pertains to the trans-Saharan trade, the salt-for-slaves equation continued to provide the main impetus for economic activity. Accounts of the trade markets reveal that slaves were considered to be the equivalent of their worth in salt: “The salt was transported in bars ... the bars were ... cut according to the contour of the foot of the slave to be traded, the piece taken from the bar representing the price of the slave. It was said that a slave sold himself by the measure of his foot.<sup>28</sup>” The main slave-purchase markets were to be found at Timbuktu, Morocco and Saint Louis, the French port in what is now Senegal.

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<sup>27</sup> E. Ann McDougall, “Salt, Saharans and the Trans-Saharan Slave Trade: Nineteenth Century Developments” in Savage, *The Human Commodity*, p. 61

<sup>28</sup> Ahmed Lamine Ech Chenguiti, *El Wasīt*, Études Mauritaniennes, 5, Saint Louis, 1953, 115-6. Cited in McDougall, p. 71

It was, ironically, the French attempt to force the end of the slave trade that resulted in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century shift in the trade routes. By finding a new supply for salt outside of North Africa, the French hoped to cause the collapse of the salt-for-slaves trade in Africa and thus bring about the end of the institution of slavery in Africa. However, the trade had been firmly in place before the arrival of the Europeans, and their attempt to exit the trade made little difference. New routes were found into Egypt, Dongola and Equitoriana where the slave market, though officially banned by the British, still proliferated.<sup>29</sup> A number of slaves were also acquired by the desert tribes of the Sahara, who depended on them to perform menial tasks, such as those related to domestic work and agricultural production.<sup>30</sup>

Toward the beginning of the twentieth century, the demand for slaves came to an end. This came about largely not because of the French suspension of the salt-for-slaves trade, but rather due to the decline of the largest slave markets that made the trans-Saharan slave trade profitable in the first place. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire took steps to abolish slavery in its territories, which, though limited in scope, did stem the demand for slaves coming from North African ports. With Europe and the Americas abolishing the institution of slavery and banning the slave trade, the slave routes to the coast were no longer profitable and were dropped. Slavery within the Islamic countries of North Africa was heavily discouraged by external forces: by the end of the nineteenth century, almost the entire Mediterranean coast of Africa was under either British or French control. The class system that supported slavery itself waned and adapted under European control, and the trade had slowed to a trickle by the dawn of the twentieth century, and ended altogether soon afterwards.<sup>31</sup> Slavery as an institution continues to exist today in rural parts of Mauritania and other isolated areas of Saharan Africa, although it is not officially sanctioned by any government.

The European influence did much toward ending the traditional ways of conducting business. As the Europeans firmly established their hold over more and more parts of the interior of Africa, they were able to more firmly control both local policies as

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<sup>29</sup> See Terence Walz, "Black Slavery in Egypt During the Nineteenth Century as Reflected in the Mahkama Archives of Cairo" in John Ralph Willis, ed., *Slaves and Slavery in Muslim Africa: The Servile Estate*, London: Frank Cass, 1985., pp. 137-160 and Gabriel Baer, "Slavery in Nineteenth Century Egypt" *Journal of African History*, VIII, 3 (1967), pp. 417-441

<sup>30</sup> McDougall, "Salt and Saharans ..." pp. 72-76

<sup>31</sup> See Baer, "Slavery in Nineteenth Century Egypt."

well as the local economy. However, they were unable to reproduce the traditional power structures that had maintained the stable and secure environment for traders, and inadvertently made it easier for nomadic tribes to raid caravans as they crossed the Sahara. With the atmosphere of uncertainty and danger, the caravans quickly became too risky and other, more efficient and less costly (both in terms of monetary value as well as human life) means to conduct business were sought.

The introduction of railways was one such method of conducting business in a more reliable way. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Egypt had one of the most extensive railway systems of any country in the world, and both the French and British were quick to lay out trunk rail lines in West Africa to ease trade between the ports and the interior.<sup>32</sup> From these ports, new steamship lines connected Africa to Europe and the rest of the world. As Bovill observes, “The trans-Saharan route between Timbuktu and Morocco was certainly much shorter in simple mileage than the route from Timbuktu to Saint Louis and from Saint Louis by sea to the ports of Morocco, but the new route was infinitely safer and eventually probably even cheaper and swifter.<sup>33</sup>” New commodities were introduced via these new methods of transportation that quickly supplanted the traditional commodities that had heretofore sustained the trans-Saharan trade and the economy on both sides of the desert. Finally, the introduction of the motor car in the mid-twentieth century, and its successor, the tractor-trailer, as well as the airplane, have sounded the end of the old caravan routes across the desert.

Contact between two different cultures is usually a process of give-and-take, one which involves the transfer of ideas and certain cultural norms not in one direction, from conqueror to conquered, but in both directions, characteristic of a symbiotic relationship. In the two millennia since our best estimation that the caravans began to cross the Sahara, we can trace a number of ways in which the cultures of the north and the south were effected by each other. We can establish with an almost absolute degree of certainty that the flow of information was not unilateral but rather bilateral, and we can base this conclusion on the evidence already presented.

The Islamic religion was brought into sub-Saharan Africa, and took hold in a number of sub-Saharan territories, but religious leaders were forced to address for the

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<sup>32</sup> Bovill, *The Golden Trade*, p. 249

<sup>33</sup> Bovill, *The Golden Trade*, pp. 249-50

first time the problem of a territory which was not clearly defined *dār al-Islām*. This opened the way for new processes in jurisprudence, as well as new ways of thinking about the world and the place of Muslims and non-Muslims within it. Once the religion took hold, however, the intellectual output from the sub-Saharan regions, particularly from the great university and mosque at Timbuktu, rivaled that of its northern counterparts. These bilateral effects can be seen in other areas including art, architecture and urban planning.

As is to be expected, the cultural and economic ties of the past have had a significant effect in shaping the contemporary cultural and economic landscape of the region. Islam continues to be one of the chief religions of West Africa and the intellectual thought regarding the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims has taken a center stage in Islamic thought worldwide. The traditional art and architecture of the past has been supplanted in some areas by new ideas brought in from Europe, not necessarily replacing the old ways, but supplementing them, as was the case when the cultural contact between north and south began to reach higher levels. The process continues, although with new and different players, to reflect the constant change and interaction with different groups.

The relationship, then, between North Africa and the *Bilād al-Sūdān* can be characterized as one in which, despite initial appearances, there was not one cultural “victor” to suggest that one culture was supplanted completely by another. Rather, the economic relations between North Africa and the *Bilād al-Sūdān* led to the slow acquisition by both sides of social and cultural influences which were then incorporated and have become ingrained in their respective cultural frameworks.