

Bridges Across the Sahara

Bridges Across the Sahara:
Social, Economic and Cultural Impact
of the Trans-Saharan Trade
during the 19th and 20th Centuries

Edited by

Ali Abdullatif Ahmida

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P U B L I S H I N G

Bridges Across the Sahara: Social, Economic and Cultural Impact of the Trans-Sahara Trade during the 19th and 20th Centuries, Edited by Ali Abdullatif Ahmida

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*for Dr. Mohammed Taher Jerary,
A dear friend who supported my scholarship
from the start.*

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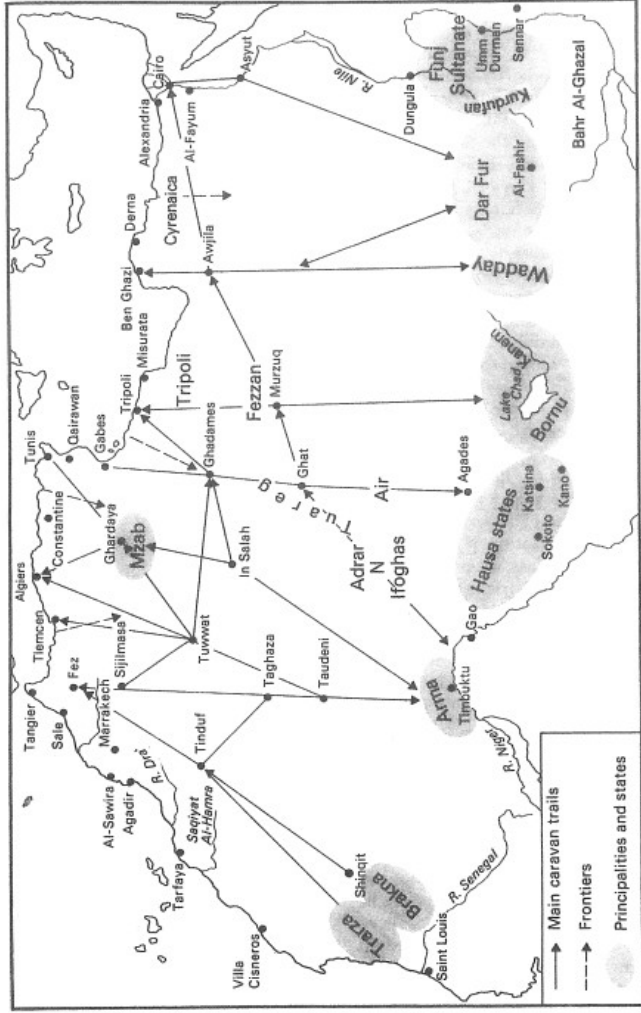
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A NOTE ON THE TRANSLITERATION

The proper names of persons and places spelled according to the Arabic transliteration system followed by the International Journal of Middle East Studies. Turkish names and persons and administrative terms are spelled according to Arabic translation, as most of the sources of this study were written in Arabic. Exceptions to this system of transliteration are commonplace names or proper names that are widely used, such as Fezzan instead of Fazzan and Sebha instead of Sabha.

MAP



Map 1. Trans-Saharan Trade Routes in 19th and Early 20th Centuries

INTRODUCTION

NEITHER A DIVIDE NOR AN EMPTY SPACE: THE SAHARA AS A BRIDGE

ALI ABDULLATIF AHMIDA

Why this book: Its Rationale and Content

The idea behind this edited book project developed as a result of personal and scholarly motives. I was born in central Libya and grew up in the southern Libyan Saharan region of Fezzan. My family had strong ties to both Saharan and Northern Africa. My great grandfather Ali Abdallatif is buried in Zender, Niger. My grandparents lived in exile in northern Chad, and my mother was born in the town of Faya, Chad. My father and his family traveled back and forth to Chad and Niger either for trade or as members of the anti-colonial resistance during first half of the twentieth century. This firsthand experience informed my scholarship on modern Saharan and North African politics and history.

This volume is a follow up to my first edited book, *Beyond Colonialism and Nationalism in the Maghrib: History, Culture, and Politics* (New York: Palgrave Press, 2000), which critically examined the scholarship on the Maghrib, otherwise known as the Arab Muslim North Africa. This new collection applies the same critical analysis to the Sahara and presents an alternative view of the Sahara not as a empty desert but as a bridge between the northern and western regions of Africa.

The idea for this volume originated when I served as a reviewer for papers submitted for an international conference on the Sahara trade sponsored by the Center of Libyan Studies and the Popular Committee for the Oases of Eastern Libya. The conference took place at the Libyan oasis of Jalu, November 25-30, 2006. In January 2006 I was delighted when the editors of Cambridge Scholars asked me to write a proposal for an edited book based on selected papers presented at the conference. This introduction will spell out the larger theoretical contribution and framework,

historical context, and specific and thematic organization of the book.

In the last three decades a new generation of scholars has challenged mainstream academic scholarship on the Arab, African, and Muslim world. The critics of the field utilize methods and concepts borrowed from Neo-Marxism, feminism, post-modernism, and post-colonialism. This edited book is inspired and influenced by debates within these growing critical perspectives, especially subaltern studies, new Ottoman social history and the debate over orientalism, and postcolonial studies in African studies¹. The collection of essays on the trans-Sahara trade in this book provides both a critique of the hegemony of the image and concept of the Sahara as divide and empty space in African and Middle Eastern Studies, and proposes a new model of Sahara as a bridge.²

The objective of this edited book is to rethink the history of colonial and nationalist categories and analyses of modern Africa through an integration and examination of the African Saharan trade as bridges that link the North, Central, and West regions of Africa. This book has two objectives: First, it offers a critique of the colonial, postcolonial and nationalist historiographies, and also of current scholarship on northern and Saharan Africa. Second, it provides an alternative narrative of the forgotten histories of the Sahara trade as linkages between the North and the South of the Saharan.

Scope of the Study: Theoretical and Historical Context

African societies in the North and the Sahara confronted unequally the contradictions of colonialism, western modernity, and the nation-state – and the collapse of the state, decay, and alienation. This edited collection explores the ambiguities, failure, and silences manufactured by colonial and nationalist scholars, and presents alternative strategies and scholarship to the study of history, culture, and state-society relations in Northern Africa and the Sahara during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The main focus of this book is to examine the historical context and the structure of the political economy of the Sahara trade and to recover the voices and agency of the ordinary people reacting with diverse strategies for survival, to external pressures and opportunities, especially merchants, Sufi orders, peasants, tribesmen, women, slaves, and people with various goals and backgrounds who participated in this international trade.

From the nineteenth into the twentieth century, the study of the history of North Africa, the so-called “Sub-Sahara,” and the larger Maghrib was dominated by colonialism. However since the mid-twentieth century, nationalist movements, which led the fight for independence,

have assumed state power and produced their own nationalist historiography. In short, colonialism and nationalism not only shaped the history and the politics of the region, but also invented their own categories, concepts and theories of legitimating. The production of knowledge is often circumstantial and constrained within a variety of institutional and social boundaries. Modern social science developed in response to European problems and at a point in history when Europe dominated the world, including the Maghrib. It enforced the division of the study of Africa into north and south of the Sahara, assuming the Sahara was a divide and an empty barrier. Thus, it was inevitable that during the age of imperialism and colonialism, Western social science reflected European choices of subject, theories, categories, and epistemology. A case in point is the colonial division of the study of Africa into North and South of the Sahara, which was accepted in modern academic scholarship: North Africa is included in the Middle East Studies Association, while the so called "Sub-Sahara" Africa is within the Association of African Studies. This colonial category has been accepted uncritically by African nationalists and continues to be reproduced at the turn of the twenty-first century.³

Subsequently, an Arab/North African and Sub-Saharan African nationalist historiography has challenged French, Spanish, Italian and British colonialism, but still accepts the pattern set by colonial scholarship, including the definition of the Maghrib, the Sahara as an empty divide, the periodization of history, the model of the nation-state, and the idea of progress. The very meaning of the name, the Maghrib region, is historically constructed, and Libya as a name was invented by the Italian colonial state at the turn of the twentieth century. The nationalist elites of the contemporary Maghrib have followed the pattern set by French colonialism, which reduced and redefined the larger Muslim Maghrib to include only its colonies of Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco. A careful reassessment of regional unity requires a broader analysis of the pre-colonial political traditions.⁴

The Sahara desert was seldom a barrier separating the northern, middle and western parts of the continent. To the contrary, the desert was and still constitutes a bridge of communication which connects northern Africa, West Africa and the countries in the southern Sahara. This connection was evident in the most important cultural, economic and social relations. Two connecting routes or bridges existed across the Sahara. First, the Hajj Routes from the north west of Africa to the holy places in Arabia. Second, are the trade routes between central and west Africa and the shores of North Africa. These trans-Sahara trade routes

extend from the easter Darb al-Arbacin in Egypt and Sudan to the far west borders of Senegal, Mauritania and Morocco. Hence the ties between the countries in North Africa and Wadai, Bornu, Kanim, Zender, Aer and others existed since pre-historic eras. The origins began before and were enhanced by the Islamic conquests and continued to present day.⁵

Themes and Organization

The book is organized into five themes that address the larger critique of the field through the alternative analysis of the trans-Saharan trade. The sub themes are: The economic and social organization of the Sahara trade (Ahmed Elyas and Ghislaine Lydon); agency, traders, and slaves (John Mason, and Terence Walz); colonialism, nationalism, and gun “smuggling” (Fred Lawson, and Francesco Correale); after colonialism (Meike Meerpohl); and finally, the Saharan imagination, the Sahara from within (Elliott Colla).

The role of the desert trade in bringing about strong political, cultural and social ties between the population in western and middle Africa and those in the north is still obscured by lack of research and records. The effect of trade activities in these regions on the northern and southern parts of the continent have not been approached in depth and from the perspective of linkages and interconnections of the Sahara and the rest of West and Central Africa. Academic effort to explore issues relevant to connecting the past with the present and the northern continent with the southern Sahara are still very limited. There are still areas to be explored with regard to the Sahara trade such as cost of transportation, nature of capital, methods of marketing, means of transport, problems of roads, prices, currencies, and custom duties, among others. The role of the oasis in facilitating transport and communication has not, for example, been clearly demonstrated, but is looked at more closely in this volume by anthropologist John Mason.

In Chapter one, historian Ahmed Elyas sheds light on the means of economic transactions in Saharan Africa, which in the seventh century witnessed a new era of history after the coming of Islam to North Africa. With the settlement of Muslims, trade flourished and became the dominant of the economic driver in the region, leading to the development of transactions from the barter system to the currency system. Decades of caravan trading, or desert trading, boosted the development of and reinforced relations between North Africa, West African regions and Southern Saharan regions. Trade across the Sahara helped foster political systems in North Africa and along the northern borders of the desert, such

as the ancient Egyptian kingdoms and the kingdom of Garama. In addition, the settlements of the Phoenicians, Greeks and Romans further enhanced the trans-Saharan trade.

Historian Ghislaine Lydon discusses in more detail the social implications and logistics of trans-Saharan caravanning along the western Saharan routes, basing her study on an examination of commercial and legal records as well as the oral testimonies of retired caravaners and their descendants. Oral evidence gathered in the late twentieth century documents the internal workings of caravans and sheds light on the identity and itineraries of traders mentioned in the archival record. Historians, however, have paid little notice to the use of written contracts by women. This is partially explained by the androcentric paradigm that dominates the literature, which assumes early modern long-distance trade was an exclusively male occupation. Yet the organization of the caravan trade, from the all-year-round affair of preparing for the caravan season, to holding down the fort during the long absences of the men, involved the participation of entire communities. In fact, when considering the “shore-side” institutions that supported caravanning expeditions, one realizes to what extent caravanning was a family affair. Both oral and written sources document the involvement of families and the multiple levels of women’s participation in the caravanning business, yet there was an overwhelming tendency for oral informants to either underplay or even completely deny the participation of women in trans-Saharan trade.

Anthropologist John Mason examines the interaction between oases and nomads. Oases, such as Augila in the Eastern Sahara, and the nomads traveling between them, have played a key role in the evolution of Saharan communities for more than a millennium.

As early as the ninth century, the Augila people engaged in treaties with the Bani Hilal, and later, in the eleventh century, with the Bani Sulaym, facilitating trade and the movement of pilgrims across the Sahara. From that time on, through the early twentieth century the Bedouin of Cyrenaica migrated annually to Augila in seasons of scarcity to live off the oasis’ dates and foodstuffs in exchange for livestock, cereal, and other items of trade, including slaves. The Bedouin did not “own” the oasis, however, as some historians have contended; the relationship is better characterized as “symbiotic.” Years of contact, including intermarriage, resulted in the “Arabization” of this formerly Berber-speaking enclave. In this respect, the oasis serves as a bridge for socioeconomic, political, cultural and religious purposes, in both north-south as well as east-west directions.

Historian Terence Walz analyzes the agency and the voices of slaves,

who were an important part of the Saharan economy and trade transactions. Walz's chapter focuses on the lives of four slaves from Bilad as-Sudan who were enslaved and then won redemption in Egypt and the Sudan through different strategies and circumstances. His work is part of an ongoing investigation into the "silences of the slaves" and aims to show how slaves not only adapted to the extraordinary dramatic circumstances of their lives but also forged life-paths that would not have been possible had they remained in their native lands. A closer examination of the lives of slaves in the Sahara illuminates the networks crisscrossing and shaping the desert, as well as the role that the slave trade, and the slaves -- as missionaries, soldiers or servants -- themselves had in fostering economic and social ties in the region.

When the French, Italian and British colonial States began to control political boundaries during early decades of the twentieth century, weapon smuggling flourished especially when anti-colonial movements needed guns and supplies. In this context one has to understand the politics of both colonial competition and various anti-colonial resistance movements. Trade routes morphed into battle lines, and became the means by which colonialists tried to weaken the resistance. Political scientist Fred Lawson examines the politics and conflict over Jaghbug, and historian Francesco Correale addresses the history of smuggling in a new commodity: weapons.

Lawson argues that conventional views of the Italian offensive ignore the ways in which developments in the far-flung trading network that linked the oases of Kufra, Jalu, al-Jaghbug and Siwa shaped not only trends in popular resistance to foreign domination but also Italian attempts to disrupt the underlying economic and social structures that supported the resistance. It is only by situating Italy's campaign to sever the long-standing connection between eastern Libya and western

Egypt in the context of changes in trans-Saharan commerce that one can begin to understand the impact of European imperialism in eastern and southern Libya. Exploring this important episode at the twilight of the caravan trade thus elucidates key aspects of regional politics that continue to puzzle outside observers. The trade routes of gun smuggling and the resistance is the topic next chapter.

Correale contends the use of the word "smuggling" revealed a political colonial significance. The purchase of weapons by Saharan inhabitants violated the rules of a state that was not recognized by the colonized populations. Their resistance, the jihad, became a real conflict when, after August 1914, weaponry supplies to Sahara populations started to come not only by the means already described, but also by caravans from

the German and Ottoman governments, accompanied by military instructors. Between 1914 and 1918, the colonial war that the Europeans carried on for twenty years in Western Sahara became part of the Great War. Supplies of men, rifles, guns, explosives and ammunition that the Ottomans and Germans sent to the forces of the resistance against the French globalized a conflict that also seemed to have maintained a regional dimension. This conflict was characterized by the growing visibility of local chiefs and populations who wanted to safeguard their independence and defend the Dar al-Islam. The visibility of the chiefs and local people was directly proportional to the number, and power, of weapons in their possession. The colonial system was put in a critical situation and, despite the battles on the European fronts, it hardly managed to establish itself in these Saharan spaces. Thus understanding “smuggling” in this context requires a grasp of the military and symbolic conflict between Ottoman and colonialist states on one hand, and the local communities and their various alliances on the other.

Yet change came with the end of colonialism and the emergence of the postcolonial nation-states in the Sahara and the Maghrib. In addition, the modern technology of transportation such as ships, cars, trains, and airplanes led to the decline of the use of camels as a mean of transportation for the caravan trade. Thus, the era after colonialism brought change and new realities to the economy and culture of the old trans-Saharan trade. In short, the new states with marked and controlled boundaries and the introduction of new technologies of communication and transportation changed the nature of the trade and use of camels from a means of transportation to new uses.

Anthropologist Meike Meerpohl argues that the most visible change of the historic trans-Saharan trade routes is the transition of the camel’s status. Whereas for many centuries the desert trade relied on the camel as beast of burden, functioning as “ship of the desert,” in the beginning of the twenty-first century, the camel has been substituted by motorized vehicles and has acquired the status of a trade good itself. As “meat freighter of the desert” it now transports itself across the desert, satisfying the demand of Libyan markets for camel meat. Shortages, surpluses and demands of goods are still the reason for trans-Saharan trade, as was the case in former years, but the camel has made a remarkable transition from a means of transportation to a trade commodity. As a result, the camel continues to fill the gap between today’s demands and surpluses between the Mediterranean coastal areas and inner-African regions, still functioning as a bridge across the desert, but in a different sense than it once did.

While imaging and understanding the Sahara as a bridge is a step

forward in understanding Africa as a whole, it is important to view the Sahara from within from a literary and cultural perspective. Literary critic Elliott Colla concludes the book by introducing and examining the Sahara desert as a literary link between these new narratives of the desert. His chapter will explore the kind of atlas of the Sahara offered by the internationally acclaimed Libyan writer Ibrahim al-Koni, as well as speculate on the significance that al-Koni's fictional maps might have for thinking about the novel as a literary form.

This edited collection models and sets a future agenda for research that can enhance a critical understanding of the trans-Saharan trade by continuing to question colonial and nationalist categories and myths, such as the Sahara as a divide and empty space, and by continuing to recover the interconnections, linkages and agency of diverse groups and voices that establish the Sahara as a bridge.

Notes

¹ For a summary of these critical debates see my introduction to my edited book *Beyond Colonialism and Nationalism: History, Culture and Politics* (New York, NY: Palgrave Press 2000), my forthcoming essay, "Beyond Oriental, Colonial, and Nationalist Models: A Critical Mapping of North African Studies" *Third World Quarterly*, Spring 2009, Rita Abrahamsen, "African Studies and Postcolonial Challenge" *African Affairs* 102 (2003) pp 189-210, and Peter Gran, *Beyond Eurocentrism: A New View of Modern World History*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996, Pp. 1-23, and 224-249 Mahmood Mamdani, *Teaching Africa: The curriculum debate at UCT*, Cape Town, South Africa: University of Cape Town, 1998, and Claude Ake, *Social Science as Imperialism. The Theory of Political Development*. New York: Ibadan Univ. p, 2000.

² Among the best new scholarship on linkages and interconnection among societies see Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982; Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony* New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1989; Ali A. Mazrui, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage*, Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1986, and Martin Bernal, "On Black Athena: an Interview by Michael Eric Dyson" *Z Magazine*, (January 1992), pp. 56-60.

³ The African Studies Association focuses mainly on sub-Saharan Africa. Yet in November 1992, the Saharan Studies Association was formed at the annual conference in Seattle. A historic panel entitled, "The Missing Link: the Sahara and African Studies." The panelists agreed that the division of African into North and sub-Saharan divide is a colonial legacy.

⁴ See the pioneering scholarship which views Africa as an interconnected continent such as Cheik Anta Diop, *The African Origins of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, Chicago IL: Lawrence Hill Books, 1974, and his other book *Precolonial Black Africa*, Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hills Books, 1987; V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press; Bogumil Jewgiewicki and David Newbury eds., *African Histriographics*, Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1986; and Steven Feierman, "African History and the Dissolution of World History" in Robert H. Bates el. al, eds., *Africa and the Disciplines*, Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993, pp 167-212); Basil Davidson, *In Search of Africa*, New York: NY: Times Books, 1994, and Abdalhamid al-Haramah ed, *Amal Nadwa al-Tawasal al-Thaqafi Bayna 'Aqtar al-Maghrib al- Arabi: Tanaqulat al- Ulama wa al-Kutub* [The papers of a panel on cultural connections among Maghribi Arab countries: The Travels of Scholars and Books] Tipoiili, Libya: The Islamic Call Society Press, 1998, and Yusuf Fadl Hasan and Paul Doornbos eds., *The Central Bilad al-Sudan Kharlum*: El Tauaddon Press, 1977 and Nehemia Leutzion and Jay Spaulding, eds., *Medieval West Africa: Views from Arab Scholars and Merchants*, Princeton, N.J.: Markus Weiner Publications, 2003.

⁵ On the West and North African Muslim Hajj {Pilgrimage} routes across the Sahara to the holy places in Arabia see Ibn Fadlulah al-'Umari, *Masalik al-Absar*, 3rd Volume : Frankfurt: Frankfurt University Press, 1988, pp.42-47, Ali Fahmi Khushaim, Ed., *Al-Hajiyya: Min Thalath Rihlat fi al- Bilad al-Libiyya*, {Pilgrimage Travels: Three trips through Libya} Tripoli: Majma' al Lughah al-'Arabiyya, 2008, and 'Umar al-Nagar, *The Pilgrimage Traditions in West Africa*, Khartoum: Khartoum University Press, 1972, and Samira Fahmi 'Umar, 'Imarat al- Hajj Fi Misr al-Uthmaniyya, 1517-1798, [The Hajj Mission in Ottoman Egypt] Cairo: Al-Hay'a al-'amma Lil Kitab, 2001. For a critique of the concept of the Sahara as a divide and empty space, see: J.M. Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World*, New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 1993; Adu Boahen, *African Perspectives on Colonialism*, Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1987; Jeremy Black, *Maps and History: Constructing Images of the Past*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997, pp.187-192; Ali A. Mazrui, *The Africans*, Ibid., pp.28-29; R.I. Lawless, "The Concept of Tell and Sahara in the Maghrib: A Reappraisal", *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 57 (November 1972), pp125-137; and Charles Kurzman "Cross-regional approaches to Middle East Studies: Constructing and Deconstructing a Region", *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 41:1 (June 2007), pp24-29.

PART I:

**THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL
ORGANIZATION OF THE SAHARA TRADE**

CHAPTER ONE

TRANS-SAHARAN TRADE IN ARABIC SOURCES UNTIL THE 16TH CENTURY: A STUDY OF MEANS OF TRANSACTIONS

AHMED ELYAS

Abstract

Sub-Saharan Africa witnessed a new era of its history after the arrival of Islam to North Africa in the seventh century CE. With the settlement of Muslims, trade flourished and became the dominant economic factor in the region. Trade activities led to the development of transaction systems, from the barter system to the currency system. The aim of this study is to shed light on these means of transactions in sub-Saharan Africa, including money orders, as known to early Arab geographers up to the sixteenth century CE.

Introduction

Trade activities across the Sahara Desert date back to several centuries before Christ. Trade was one of the main factors that led to the development of the social and political organizations of the people who resided in the great Saharan Desert and along its northern and southern borders. (Keep in mind that climate conditions during that time were humid, unlike the region's present day dryness). With the development of trade activities, the people of the Sahara and its northern and southern borders developed their means and methods of trade transactions.

Trade activities across the Sahara started a new era in history; it developed political systems in North Africa and along the northern borders of the Sahara, such as the ancient Egyptian kingdoms and the kingdom of Garama. In addition, the settlements of the Phoenicians, Greeks and Romans further enhanced the trans-Saharan trade.

However, the greatest developments of the trans-Saharan trade occurred after the settlement of Muslims in North Africa in the seventh century CE. The Muslim invasion in these lands was different from previous invasions, which had been mainly concentrated in coastal areas. Due to the fact that the Romans and Byzantines, for example, did not venture deeper into the land, it was difficult for them to know the people and lives they led in the Sahara. The Muslims, however, were accustomed to the Saharan environment as it was similar to their own, and so they succeeded in penetrating these areas.

It is no surprise, then, that when the Muslim armies planned to occupy Egypt, they had more distant areas in mind, including both the coastal areas as well as the desert.¹ “Ōqbah Ibn NĒfi”, one of the famous Muslim leaders, invaded Fezzan in 666 CE, before moving on to Garama². After that, he ventured farther south into the desert, a fifteen-day journey, until he reached KawĒr state,³ whose capital he also occupied, by following old routes that connected Fezzan to the Niger River and Lake Chad areas.⁴

Muslim trade activities began after the end of the Byzantine rule in the area and the local acceptance of Islam. The tribe of Lamtūna was the first in these areas to embrace Islam right after the conquest of Andalusia.⁵ Trans-Saharan trade activities started soon after the expansion of Islam, mainly because the northern Saharan region, whose inhabitants already had trading experiences, became part of the Muslim territories where trade activities flourished. These activities were concentrated along three main desert routes in the eastern, western and middle areas of the Sahara.⁶

There were several factors that facilitated the caravans crossing the desert. The eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea is curved, forming the Gulf of Sedra, which shortens the distance between the coast and the savanna region in the south. In addition, the Fezzan and KawĒr oases presented natural resting and supplying points for those traveling toward the Lake Chad basin.⁷

The Ahaggar Mountains lies in middle of the central desert between the Atlas Mountains in the north and the savanna in the south. These mountains were linked to many oases in the north, such as the Tadmakht and the Tuat oases, creating a green belt in the middle of the desert. In the southern part of Ahaggar, the Adrār formed a gateway linking the area to the Niger River Valley.⁸

In the west, the desert curvature of the Atlas Mountains toward the southwest and the existence of some streams that flowed into the Atlantic Ocean resulted in easy access to the Senegal River basin. In this area, the residents of the desert were mixed with the people of southern Sahara, and founded the Ghana kingdom during the fourth century CE.⁹