

A Very Lively Desert
The Sahara, from Libya to West Africa

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Ghislaine Lydon’s study of the Sahara uncovers the dynamic commercial and trade networks that have always dominated the desert. It offers vivid portraits of the evolution of social and economic institutions, which should put to rest once and for all any ideas that the pre-colonial societies of Africa, north, within or south of the Sahara have ever been stagnant.

Reviewed: Ghislaine Lydon. *On Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks, and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Nineteenth-Century Western Africa*. (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009)

The ongoing battle for Libya has once again turned the Western imagination to the two shores that bath the temperate strip of North Africa, refuge of empires, colonial powers and of late Kings and strongmen. From the north, across the Mediterranean have come the forces of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Arab League, organizations recently marked by a lack of mission and effectiveness, but emboldened in the case of Libya by the rallying cry of “the right to protect.” Even without the full support of their alliance partners the traditional military powers of Europe, Britain and France, with the aid of the United States, were able to assert their continued military relevance, and the monarchical states within the Gulf Cooperation Community were able to assert their control of the Arab political street in order to eliminate their old foe Qadhafi. The old man was the last ghost of Nasser’s generation. Perhaps, the most striking surprise was the improbable emergence of rich, plucky and tiny Qatar as an

African power, willing to back up its cash and the cultural power of al-Jazeera with military adventurism, contributing F-16s to military sorties, dropping arms and deploying the country's special forces on the ground.¹

Once the cries of genocide went up and the city of Benghazi appeared threatened, it appeared natural that the international community would intervene from across the sea to protect the people of Libya. The drama in Libya was easily read as but another episode in the ongoing Arab Spring, and consequentially it was facile to imagine Libyans solely as Arabs, casting the Africans in their midst as outsiders. Untethering Libya from Africa was particularly helpful to those wishing to isolate Qadhafi's regime. While there is perhaps no other area in which Qadhafi had intervened more often since coming to power in 1969, often with disastrous results, he still remained a legitimate and active member of the continent's political order.² Testifying to his continued legitimacy, buttressed in part by his long-standing support of Africa's revolutionary movements, were the gestures of support from states like South Africa, and the occasionally bumbling calls for mediation, cease-fires and solidarity that came at regular intervals from the African Union until Tripoli fell.³

Reclaiming Libya's African Connections

The erasure of Libya's African connections has numerous historical precedents. The famous 19th century French Governor of Senegal Louis Faidherbe, despite his learning and frequent interactions with the peoples of the western Sahara, described the

¹ Qatar is also deeply involved in the conflict in Darfur, sponsoring the Doha talks between the various rebel movements and the Government of Sudan.

² J. Millard Burr and Robert O. Collins. *Africa's Thirty Years' War: Chad, Libya and the Sudan, 1963-1993*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1999.

³ Yoweri Museveni. "The Qaddafi I Know," *Foreign Policy*, March 24, 2011 http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/03/24/the_qaddafi_i_know [retrieved September 19th, 2011]; Harriet Sherwood and Chris McGreal, "Libya: Gaddafi has accepted road map to peace, says Zuma," *The Guardian*, April 10th, 2011: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/apr/10/libya-african-union-gaddafi0-rebels-peace-talks>. [September 19, 2011]; "Libyan Rebels in Tripoli's Central Square," *AlJazeera English*, August 23, 2011: <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/africa/2011/08/201182122425905430.html> [September 19, 2011]

desert as “the big blank space.”⁴ The pervasive if erroneous notion, particularly prevalent in the Anglo-American press, that the southern oases towns of Libya were the last outposts before the onset of an un-crossable wasteland, rather than busy port cities trading with the other shores of the desert, explained the surprise that greeted the discovery of Libya’s vast African population. Decisively correcting the trope of the desert as a vast barrier rather than a living ocean is the first triumph of Ghislaine Lydon’s remarkable first book.

Lydon’s work is both a Braudelian history of the Sahara and a serious contribution to the history of economic institutions borrowing methods from political economists Timur Kuran and Douglas North.⁵ But before getting into her history and economics, Lydon offers a long overdue meditation on the sources and methods necessary for the writing of Saharan history. This book, like a few others before it and hopefully many more after it, goes a long way towards correcting the assumption that medieval and early modern African societies were illiterate, or at the very least that printed sources written by Africans do not remain for those periods.⁶ She acknowledges the success of an older generation of Africanists, often without the skills to navigate texts written in either the Arabic language or in African languages recorded in the Arabic scripts, in refining numerous techniques of oral history. And she recognized the limits of the Arabists who engaged in pure textual analysis. In response, Lydon argues for the writing of African history using a combination of the two techniques. Lydon writes that she “systematically related the spoken to the written word.”⁷

The Desert as a Zone of Cultural Exchange

⁴ General Louis Faidherbe was perhaps the one of the best qualified Europeans of his time to know better having served as a colonial official stationed for years on both sides of that blank space. Ghislaine Lydon, *On Trans-Saharan Trails*, 389.

⁵ The other work that guides much of the attention to social detail throughout Lydon’s book are the multiple volumes of S. D. Goitein’s *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the World as Portrayed by the Cairo Geniza*.

⁶ Here she builds on the pioneering work of scholars such as John Hunwick, who affirmed in 2002, “Africa turns out to have been a highly literate continent.” Hunwick was part of a pioneering group of Arabist that beginning in the 1960s included Humphrey Fisher, Nehemia Levtzion, John Ralph Willis, David Robinson and others such as R. S. O’Fahey.

⁷ Lydon. *On Trans-Saharan Trails*, 46.

By retrieving and combining the written and oral records of the western Sahara, Lydon creates a vivid image of the social world from before the Common Era until the end of the nineteenth century. This allows her to show how the emptying of the Sahara, in the minds of outsiders, divided the continent into an Arab and Islamic North African sphere and a black or Bantu Sub-Saharan Africa, which obscured more than it revealed. Peppering her account with rich details, such as descriptions of crocodiles roaming the desert, Lydon painstakingly demonstrates the symbiotic political, cultural and commercial networks that cross the Sahara, showing in vivid details how societies on both shores were influenced by their cultural interactions. She goes on to argue that racial markers such as *bidan* (white) and *sudani* (black) were cultural and political statements of the period in which they were uttered, and that therefore historians distort history if they legitimize the stranger and native paradigm by ascribing authenticity to certain voices while allowing other voices to be marginalized.⁸

Finally turning to her case study amongst the Tikna traders of Wad Nun, Lydon unearths the historical details that are lost without acknowledging the existence of the desert as a zone of cultural exchange.⁹ Lydon describes how ties of blood and culture were inscribed across the desert: *tajin* the Moroccan stir-fry was introduced into the desert and Sahel as well as the habit of tea drinking by traders from Wad Nun. Meanwhile, the Tikna of Wad Nun learned African languages such as Songhay, Bamanakan and Wolof. They adopted Griots, ceremonial umbrellas and woven indigo cloths. Both shores of the Sahara intermarried with one another, partially as a result of slavery, but also in order to create political alliances. From the eleventh century onward, no group was able to exercise unquestioned hegemony over the desert or either of its shores. The caravans of trade drove social change, and many of the practices relevant to understanding the cultures of both shores of the desert can only be understood by being attentive to the long history of borrowing across the Sahara.¹⁰

⁸ Ibid.: 6-7.

⁹ Wad Nun the name for the Tikna homeland was located along the northern edge of the western Sahara. According to today's political map, Wad Nun is located near the southern edge of the border between Morocco and Mauritania.

¹⁰ Ibid.: 396-399.

The Paper Economy of Faith

If there is a drawback to this sorely needed addition to our understanding of the Sahara, it is that the book's ambition sometimes undermines the clarity of its argument. Lydon presents numerous and lively details about the Saharan trade and the life of its traders; however, until the later chapters of the book the reader could be forgiven for wondering about her truly novel and inventive argument concerning the relationship between Islamic law and trade. The delay may cause all but the most intrepid readers to give up on this interesting work before Lydon fully fleshes out her argument. A result that would be unfortunate, as Lydon's theory of "the paper economy of faith" deserves attention.¹¹

Combining the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu and S. D. Goitein, Lydon explains how the widespread adoption of paper and literacy increased the economic efficiency of the trans-Saharan networks of Muslim and Jewish traders. In another insightful digression, Lydon deftly demonstrates the ways in which Muslim traders of the Wad Nun incorporated Jewish traders into their trading networks.¹² However, the essence of Lydon's argument is that literacy and the use of paper contracts allowed both for the increased transmission of information across the desert and for significant advances in addressing the problem of trust. Amongst the faithful, the signing of a contract created a bond that both parties felt had been witnessed by God, even if under Maliki law, the contract could not be directly entered into a court as evidence. Instead, only the oral testimony of witnesses to the signing of an agreement counted as legal evidence. Yet another effect of the adoption of Arabic or the heavily Arabic influenced Hasaniya as lingua franca within the western desert, as well as the adoption of Islamic legal codes to solidify contracts, was that Islamic legal professionals could now be called upon to arbitrate between commercial disputes. The creation of an impartial class of arbitrators facilitated a vast expansion of trade.

¹¹ Ibid.: 3

¹² Ibid.: 182-183.

Lydon shows that during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries, as the availability of paper increased and literacy spread, the caravan trade of Muslims continued to grow throughout the Sahara. However, Lydon also directly addresses the assertion by Timur Kuran that there was a great divergence in the commercial fortunes of Western and Islamic trade networks, and she offers an explanatory hypothesis.¹³ Lydon's hypothesis is that in the Sahara and indeed in much of the Islamic world there existed a "paper economy of faith without a faith in paper."¹⁴ The implication is that while Saharan societies were highly literate and readily embraced the innovations of paper and Islamic legal vocabulary to make their commercial transactions more efficient, the prohibition on entering paper contracts as testimony in commercial disputes unaccompanied by witnesses limited the scope of commercial networks. This was a competitive disadvantage when compared with European commercial networks, which invested paper with the right to speak without corroborating oral testimony. Yet even though Lydon's work stops before the beginning of the twentieth century, she suggests the myriad ways in which the commercial networks she studies adapted to the colonial order and continued to thrive.

Overall, Lydon's work is a welcome addition to the study of the Sahara and reminder of the dynamic commercial and trade networks that have always dominated a desert that has been anything but blank. She also offers vivid portraits of historical change and the evolution of social and economic institutions, which should put to rest once and for all any ideas that the pre-colonial societies of Africa, north, within or south of the Sahara have ever been stagnant.

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¹³ Timur Kuran. "Why the Middle East Is Economically Underdeveloped: Historical Mechanism of Institutional Stagnation." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 18 (2004): 71-90.

¹⁴ Also see Ghislaine Lydon. "A Paper Economy of Faith without Faith in Paper: A Reflection in Islamic Institutional History." *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*. Volume 71., No. 3. (September 2009): 647-659.