

**An appraisal of frontier relations between the peoples of
North Africa and the Sudanese zone of pre-colonial West
Africa: A historical discourse**

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Abstract

The present paper examines the nature and patterns of interactions between the people of North Africa and the Sudanese zone of West Africa during the pre-colonial period. It reveals the symbiotic relations that shaped their interaction during the period and the factors that facilitated their contact despite the barrier of the Saharan desert. Similarly the paper refutes the claims of some European writers in the colonial period, and shortly, after that, the peoples of the Sudanese zone were incapable of any historical consciousness, nor able to evolve genuine institutions, without the support of the peoples of North Africa and Europeans. The work establishes that despite the impenetrable space of the Saharan desert, the peoples of North Africa and the Sudanese zone were able to mingle, exchange goods, ideas, beliefs and foster mutual relationships that impacted positively on both regions of the continent. The paper reveals that a major factor that has influenced if not, contributed to the belief held by some of these Europeans concerning the history of the Sudanese zone in particular, and Africa South of the Sahara in general is the narrow nature of their sources, which focuses more on secondary sources. The paper concludes that the biased account concerning the Sudanese zone during the period under review has been refuted successfully through broader approaches to the historical study of African history that involves interdisciplinary approach as well as expansion of the sources to include oral sources among others. It utilises the theory of transnationalism to theorise and shed light on the frontier dimension of human movement across borders. The paper also employs secondary sources.



Keywords: Africa, history, interaction, Frontiers, Islam, Trans-Saharan trade

Introduction

The writings of African history especially, Africa south of the Saharan, until the second half of the twentieth century, was at the mercy of Eurocentric scholars. They regarded the enterprise of writing African history as a burden they owed the “Blackman”, or in other words, the “Whiteman’s burden,” because of his inability to initiate change. J.D. Fage captured succinctly the views and perceptions of these Eurocentric scholars some anthropologists, sociologists and historians. According to him, “by this time the mainstream of European scholarship was beginning to take an increasingly unfavourable view of non-European societies, and to assert that they had no history worth studying.”¹ These Europeans denigrate Africans south of the Saharan in general, and West Africans in particular, as incapable of any historical consciousness, nor able to evolve genuine institutions, without the support of external contact across the Sahara desert, the Indian and the Atlantic Ocean –in other words through contact with the Arabs and the Europeans. This was the submission of Okon Uya when he affirmed these Europeans maintained that change came to Africa from the outside through the Berber traders or Arabs, European explorers, traders, missionaries, and later on, administrators and that African history, therefore, had to concern itself with the activities of these “agents of change.”² The distortion of the African past by European anthropologists, philosophers, travelers, adventurers, traders and historians from the colonial era gave credence to the fallacious Hamitic hypothesis and some biased Arabic account of the history of pre-

¹J.D.Fage, “The Development of African Historiography” in *UNESCO General History of Africa: Methodology and African Prehistory* Vol. I, edited by J.K.I. – Zerbo, (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1992), 30

²Okon E. Uya, “Trends and Perspectives in African History” in *Method and Perspective of Studying African History* edited by Erim O. Erim and Okon E. Uya (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co. Ltd, 1984), 1

colonial West Africa, particularly their contact and relations with the Berbers and Arabs from North Africa and the Middle East.

Several accounts of the history of pre-colonial West Africa written by these prejudiced writers reveal an imbalance in the nature and pattern of interaction between the peoples of North Africa (Berbers and Arabs) and that of West Africa (Soninke, Manlike, Kanem-Bornu, Hausa, etc.). They affirmed that the Arabs ushered change to that part of the continent, with little or nothing in return from the peoples of West Africa. This misconception equally, denied the ingenuity of the African people south of the Sahara, as lacking endogenous consciousness of invention culturally, politically, economically and commercially.³

However, in the work of J.C. Anene, he articulated the role of the various form of frontiers in promoting interactions between the several regions of Africa during the pre-colonial era.⁴ Anene's work refuted the erroneous conclusion of the imbalance in the patterns of interaction between the peoples of North Africa and the peoples of West Africa. Likewise, it reveals a symbiotic relationship in the patterns of interaction between the peoples from both regions. This is not to say, there were not periods of conflict or wars.

Based on the foregoing the paper examines the frontier of interaction between the peoples of North Africa and the Sudanese zone of West Africa during the pre-colonial period. In the process, it brings to light the symbiotic relations that characterised their interaction during the period. Similarly, it interrogates the writing of African history and exposes the biased account of Eurocentric scholars that tends to denigrate the continent's glorious past and attributes the development of Africa south of the Sahara to the peoples of North Africa and the Europeans. The paper is divided into several sections.

³J. O.Adesina, Archie Mafeje and the Pursuit of Endogeny: Against Alterity and Extroversion. *CODESRIA Africa Development*, vol.33, no.4,(2008): 135

⁴J.C. Anene, *The International Boundaries of Nigeria, 1885 – 1960: The Framework of an Emergent African Nations*. (London: Longman Group Limited, 1970), 5 - 6

Conceptual Clarification

History has revealed that human interactions in all its form remained within and sometimes beyond the defined geographical space of different societies. The geographical space, in other words, can be referred to the following namely border, boundary, frontier and borderland or border region. It is interesting to state that though pre-colonial African societies were not familiar with these concepts; this did not prevent them from demarcating or delineating the extent of their localities. For instance, in pre-colonial Yorubaland, certain features were used for boundary demarcation, which was equally common in other parts of the continent. O. Adejuyigbe shed light on these features. In his words:

Topographical features such as sea, lagoons, lakes, rivers, boulders, hills, mountains and valleys as well as man-made constructions (such as mounds) were evidently in use as markers in areas considered to be the border region between one Yoruba Kingdom and others (1978, 11).⁵

It is imperative to note that the boundary that existed in pre-colonial Africa differs from the nature and patterns of European boundaries that were erected after the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648.⁶

Among these concepts, the paper focuses on the frontier. Like other concepts in border studies, frontier enriches our understanding, analysis and interpretations of the interactions of border communities and states abutting international

⁵O. Adejuyigbe, *Boundary Problems Western Nigeria* (Ife: University of Ife Press, 1978), Chapter I and 2, cited in A.I. Asiwaju, Transfrontier Regionalism: Perspectives on the European Union and Post-Colonial Africa with Reference to Borgu in *The Revival of Regional Integration in Africa* edited by Daniel C. Bach (Ibadan: Institute François de Recherche en Afrique French Institute for Research in Africa, 1999), 11

⁶Jackson A Aluede, Nigeria's Foreign Policy and Trans-Border Crime: A History Analysis of the Nigeria-Benin Border, 1960 – 2013, Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Lagos, Nigeria, (2018). 3

boundaries. Some scholars sometimes use the concept of the frontier to refer to boundary and border region. Frontiers are different from both. In his Inaugural Address at the School of Art, Hackney Technical Institute, Art Training for Industry on the Continent, titled *International Boundaries* Colonel Sir A. Henry McMahon stated the difference between frontier and boundary. According to him, "frontier and boundary do not necessarily mean the same thing – frontier often has a wider and more general meaning than a boundary, and a frontier sometimes refers to a wide tract of the border country, or hinterlands or buffer states, undefined by any external boundary line."⁷

In other words, a frontier is an area between (two territories) without geographical boundaries, referred to as "empty" areas. They are places at the edge of cultural spheres and therefore embody the loci within which cultural contact takes place.⁸ Frontiers come into being as a result of particular historical circumstances or processes and are thus unique social phenomena. In recent times, the geographical boundary of the Arab world between the Middle East and North Africa provides a vivid illustration. North Africa represents or serves as a frontier of Arab culture and civilisation in Africa, since the seventh century, following the Arab invasion starting with Egypt.⁹ In pre-colonial Africa, even though the people were unaware of the concept of the frontier, the features of the frontier were evidence in the interaction of ethnic groups and communities located in border areas.

J.C. Anene identified three types of frontier across Africa among the various ethnic groups during the pre-colonial – frontier of contact, the frontier of separation and frontier of transition. The

⁷A. Henry McMahon, "International Boundaries" *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 84, no. 4330 (1935): 3

⁸Bradley J. Parker, "Toward an Understanding of Borderland Processes" *American Antiquity*, 71, no. 1 (2006): 79

⁹Encyclopaedia Britannica, *The Arabs: People and Power*. (New York: Bantam Edition, 1978), 13 – 15.

paper focuses on the frontier of contact. Frontier of contact refers to were similar and distinct political and cultural ethnic groups occupying adjacent territories collaborated as neighbours¹⁰. These groups despite their differences in language, culture and system of government, and, also, separated by boundary demarcation maintained and sustained socio-cultural, economic and political relations. This form of contact was peculiar among ethnic groups of the same or different cultural disposition. It promoted intra and inter cross-border relations between the Berbers of North Africa, Yoruba, Hausa, Dahomey, and Jolof in West Africa, and the Maasai states of East Africa. Similarly, it fostered cross border relations in the area of trade and commerce, religion and cultural festivities between the Berbers and Arabs from North Africa with the peoples of West Africa, the Yoruba and the Dahomeans and between Buganda's and her neighbours as well as various ethnic groups in the Great Lakes region and their neighbours¹¹.

The frontier of contact between the Berbers or Arabs of North Africa and the Sudanese states of West Africa, during the pre-colonial era, witnessed cross-fertilization of ideas, knowledge and skill, religious proselytization, growth and expansion of trade and commerce among other notable feature, arising from the contact. It must be said that trade, uneven distribution of mineral resources as well as the law of demand and supply influenced greatly the contact between the Arabs and the peoples of West Africa during the pre-colonial period.

Theoretical Framework: Transnationalism

The theory of transnationalism like many others gained ascendancy in the 1990s utilised by social scientists, and recently, scholars in the humanities such as historians to enlighten, analyse and provide explanations concerning multiple-ties of individuals, group and organisations their activities and their impact on socio-cultural, economic and political phenomena

¹⁰J.C. Anene, *The International Boundaries of Nigeria, 1885 – 1960: The Framework of an Emergent African*, 20 - 24

¹¹A.I. Asiwaju, "The Concept of Frontier in the Setting of States in Pre-colonial Africa" *Présence Africaine*, Nouvelle série, (127/128), (1983): 47

that transcend states borders.¹²The theory is traced to Randolph Bourne during the First World War to shed light on the new wave of immigrants into the United States.¹³Transnationalism as a concept and phenomenon is seen from a different perspective across various disciplines. However, despite this fact; the various definitions agreed that the theory enlightens and provides explanations regarding socio-cultural, economic and political phenomena state frontier or borders. Transnationalism from a historical perspective is understood as transnational history – the study of cross-border flow.¹⁴In summary, historians conceived transnationalism as an inquiry into human movement individually or in groups, ideas, religious and ethnic activities, movement of goods and services, and more across the state's international boundaries.

As the theory of transnationalism continues to expand in scope and reach, historians, likewise have embraced the concept to broaden their analysis of events of the past, examine comparative historical phenomenon as well as enriched, historicised and expand their historical research on broader issues. This process of writing history is known as transnational history. The definition of transnational history shares similarities with the definitions of the social sciences such as political science, anthropology, economics and sociology – which have to do with activities that concern man that flows across state's borders. In the words of Akira Iriye in a reviewed work of the *Journal of Contemporary European History* defines transnationalism as “the movements and forces that cut across national borders.”¹⁵ These forces or movement covers people, ideas, words, capital, might, and institutions.

¹²Sara De Jong, and Petra Dannecker “Connecting and Confronting Transnationalism: Bridging Concepts and Moving Critique” *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, vol. 25, no. 5, (2018): 493, Patricia Clavin ‘Defining Transnationalism’ *Contemporary European History*, vol. 14, No. 4, (2005): 43

¹³Randolph S. Bourne, “U.S. Trans-national America” *The Atlantic* (1916):

¹⁴Erik van der Vleuten, “Toward a Transnational History of Technology: Meanings, Promises, Pitfalls” *Technology and Culture*, vol. 49, no. 4 (2008): 978

¹⁵Akira Iriye *Contemporary European History* vol. 13, no. 2 (2004) 68

The theory of transnationalism, therefore, provides insight into the nature and pattern of frontier relations between the peoples of North Africa and the Sudanese zone of pre-colonial West Africa. It unravels their shared interests and symbiotic relations that shaped their interactions during the period, the nature of pre-colonial Africa's borders as well as their commitment to overcome the barriers of the Saharan desert.

Early Contact between the Arabs and the Peoples of West Africa

Arabic sources provide the earliest account of the contact between the Berbers or Arabs of North Africa and the peoples of the western and central Sudan of West Africa dating back to the eighth century.¹⁶ Some Arabic sources or accounts traced the contact earlier than the eighth century. Leading Arabic geographers, travellers and historians such as Masudi, Ibn Haukal, El-Bekri, El Idrisi, El Omari, Ibn Battuta and Ibn Khaldun through their writings brought to the world, the knowledge of the early history of the peoples of the Sudanese zone, south of the Maghreb.¹⁷ These individuals traced the contact to the trans-Saharan trade linking the peoples of both regions through the exchange of mineral resources and agricultural produce lacking in their respective regions. Likewise, also, the contact was fueled by the attempt of the Berbers and Arabs to spread the religion of Islam to the western and central Sudan of West Africa.

The Berbers, the aborigines of North Africa, lost control of their territory to the invading Arabs from the Middle East in the seventh century.¹⁸ In the process of time, the Berbers were Arabised and Islamised into the Arab world, extending the frontier of Arabic culture, civilisation, learning, ideas and the spread of Islam beyond North Africa to the western and central

¹⁶F.K. Buah., *West Africa since A.D. 1000: Book One, The People*. (London: Macmillan Education Limited, (1973), 36

¹⁷J. .D.Fage, "The Development of African Historiography" in *UNESCO General History of Africa: Methodology and African Prehistory* Vol. I, 31

¹⁸Phillip K. Hitti, *The Arabs: A Short History*. (Chicago: A Gateway Edition, 1966), 57

Sudanic zone of West Africa through various medium. Having being Arabised and Islamised the Berbers are regarded as Arabs, an identity they have come to accept and identify themselves with since the Arab invasion.

The history of West Africa dating to the pre-colonial period in the words of A.L. Mabogunje is the long story of human movements, incursion, displacements, intermixtures or succession of peoples, and the impact of these on the beliefs, attitudes and social organisation of the various peoples who today inhabit this great area.¹⁹ The geographical location of West Africa, south of Sahara despite the barrier of the largest desert in the world, the Saharan desert did not hinder the movement of the peoples with their neighbours north of the desert. This development affirmed the statement of S. Diarrathat "it is hard to separate African history from its geographical setting."²⁰ The peoples of western and central Sudan of West Africa comprises some of the followings namely the Soninke, Malinke, Bambara, Mossi, Songhai, Kanuri and the Hausa - they evolved the following empires, kingdoms, and states during the period examined ancient Ghana, Malian and Songhai empires, others are Taureg, Kanem-Bornu, and the Hausa states - Kano, Rano, Katsina, Gobir and Sokoto.²¹

Before the contact with the Arabs, the peoples of the western and central Sudan of West Africa had evolved an elaborate state structure that ensured law and order. Likewise, the peoples used oral tradition as part of the sources of history to preserve their history and culture passed from one generation to another.²²

¹⁹A.L. Mabogunje, "The Land and Peoples of West Africa" in *History of West Africa* Vol I edited by J.F. Ade Ajayi and Michael Crowder (London: Longman 1971), 1

²⁰S. Diarra "Historical Geography: Physical Aspects" in *UNESCO General History of Africa: Methodology and African Prehistory* Vol. I edited by J.K.I. - Zerbo (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1992), 316

²¹A.L. Mabogunje, "The Land and Peoples of West Africa" in *History of West Africa* Vol I, 10 - 11

²²J. Vansina, "Oral Tradition and Its Methodology" in *UNESCO General History of Africa: Methodology and African Prehistory* Vol. I *General History of Africa: Methodology and African Prehistory* Vol. I edited by J.K.I. - Zerbo (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1992), 142

Some of these features attracted notable Arab geographers and travellers from the Middle East, some of them documented what they saw and heard about the western and central Sudan of West Africa. Amazingly, however, during the colonial period, some European writers failed to neither recognise nor appreciate the feat recorded by some of these African societies before their contact with the Arabs and Europeans. Instead, they argued that it was the Arabs or the Europeans, and in some cases employed the Hamitic theory to discredit the socio-cultural, economic, political achievement as well as the amazing works of arts of the Africans, south of the Sahara.

Frontier of Contact and the Patterns of Relations

Trade and commerce played a major role in shaping the patterns of relations between the Arabs or the Berbers of North Africa and the peoples of western and central Sudan of West Africa during the pre-colonial era. The uneven distribution of mineral resources by nature and the law of demand and supply in many ways made trade and commerce inevitable despite the barrier of the Sahara desert separating both regions. Following the establishment of contact between both regions around the fifth century A.D., described by Nehemia Levtzion, “as the pressure of nomads on sedentary peoples”,²³ Trade and commerce took the contact to another level in the process resulting in the contact of cultures, exchange of ideas, the mingling of peoples as well as the outbreak of wars.²⁴ Several factors fueled trade and commerce between the Arabs and the peoples of the Sudanese zone of West Africa. Among the factors was the demand and supply of certain commodities from North Africa and the Middle East and among the Sudanese states of West Africa. In the Arab or Muslim world, gold was in high demand because its monetary system depended on it.²⁵

²³Nehemia Levtzion, “The Early States of the Western Sudan to 1500” in *History of West Africa* Vol I edited by J.F. Ade Ajayi and Michael Crowder (London: Longman, 1971), 116

²⁴Kenneth O. Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta 1830 – 1885: An Introduction to the Economic and Political History of Nigeria*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 5

²⁵Nehemia Levtzion, “The Early States of the Western Sudan to 1500” 120

Fortunately, for the Arabs and Berbers, Arabic scholars, traders and travellers had informed the world of the rich deposit of gold in the Sudanese states. The information propelled the traffic in the trade by barter in gold and other commodities between traders from the Arabs world, particularly from North Africa with traders from the Sudanese zone of West Africa. Likewise, also, the demand for salt produced in North Africa, by the peoples of the Sudanese zone promoted the exchange of both commodities and others through the trans-Saharan trade. The use of the beast of burden, particularly the camel introduced to North Africa by the Romans aided trade and commerce through the trans-Saharan trade. It is imperative to state that in all the levels in the patterns of relations or interactions between the Arabs of North Africa and the peoples of the western and central Sudan of West Africa during the pre-colonial era, the nature of relations was equal. There was no record of a master-servant relation as was the case, between Africa and Europe from the late eighteenth century.

Following trade and commerce in the pattern of relations between the peoples of North Africa and the Sudanese zone of West Africa was the concept of 'controlled relationship' during the pre-colonial period. The concept reveals the parity in the conduct of relations between different cultures or civilisations following the establishment of contact. According to Pekka Masonen, a controlled relationship was used to explain European encounter with China in the early period of their contact, whereby foreign traders were forced to obey the rules set by the Chinese government which decided unilaterally on the location of the trade, the number of traders, as well as type and character of the goods.²⁶ The failure of the Europeans to comply with sure directives means they would not be allowed to trade in China. This was, however, before the outbreak of the First Opium War in 1839, when the Chinese empire was powerful enough to reject all military threats from some European naval powers.²⁷

²⁶Pekka Masonen, "Trans-Saharan Trade and the West African Discovery of the Mediterranean World" in *Ethnic encounter and culture change* edited by Sabour and Vikør (London: Bergen Press 1997), 116 - 142

²⁷Ibid.

Arabic scholar's account of the contact between the Arabs and the peoples of the western and central Sudan of West Africa revealed a controlled relationship in all levels of their relations and interactions. In the area of trade, the Arabs or Berber traders adhered to the term of trade between them and the indigenous peoples. They comply with the toll obligation initiated by the various rulers of the Sudanese states aimed at generating revenue for their states. Furthermore, the Arabs maintained cordial relations with the peoples of the Sudanese zone in the various cities where they settled namely Kumbi, Gao, Jenne, Timbuktu, Kano and others, by obeying the laws governing the peoples. There was no account of racial discrimination between the Arabs and the local peoples or abuse against the Arabs. What existed was mutual respect between the Arabs and the indigenous peoples of the Sudanese zone. The existence of controlled relations encouraged cultural exchange and exchange of ideas, during the pre-colonial period. This development partly resulted in the success of trade and commerce as well as the spread of Islam by the Arabs in the Sudanese zone of West Africa.

The spread of religion, particularly the Islamic religion equally shaped the pattern of relations between the Arabs and the peoples of the western and central Sudan of West Africa, during the pre-colonial period. Before the coming of the Arabs in West Africa, the peoples of the western and central Sudan maintained their traditional religion. But with the establishment of contact with North Africa, the Islamic religion gradually made an inroad into the region through the activities of the Berbers and Arabs. The introduction of Islam by the Arabs in West Africa and its acceptance by the peoples of the western and central impacted positively in their interaction culturally and socially. With Islam came Arabic literacy in the Sudanese zone - that is formal education.²⁸ The Islamic religion equally led to cultural exchange as well as the exchange of ideas among the peoples north and south of Sahara. Several Islamic cultures with respect to dressing

²⁸M. El Fasi, and I. Hrbek, "Stages in the Development of Islam and its Dissemination in Africa" in *UNESCO General History of Africa III: Africa from the Seventh to the Eleventh Century* M. El Fasi and I. Hrbek (London: Heinemann Publishers, 1992), 67 – 81

and ways of living were imbibed by the peoples of the western and central Sudan who had accepted the new religion. Some of the Sudanese rulers who accepted Islam, such as Mansa Musa, Mansa Sulaiman, Askia Muhammed and others, and in line with the Islamic injunction embarked on the holy pilgrimage to Mecca through North Africa. On their return, these rulers came with learned Arabic scholars, clerics and architects with the knowledge to transform their major towns.²⁹

Diplomatic relations is another pattern that shaped relations between the Arabs, their rulers and the rulers and peoples of the Sudanese zone of West Africa. It is instructive to state that, if diplomatic relations had not existed between the rulers and the peoples of both sides of the Sahara desert, trade and other activities that the contact created would not have been possible. Although the state system had not evolved during the contact between the Arabs and the peoples of the western and central Sudan, during the pre-colonial period, the leaders thought it wise to establish formal diplomatic relations to promote cordial relations. There existed several accounts of diplomatic relations between the rulers of the western and central Sudan and those from North Africa, cemented during periods of pilgrimage and the delegation of representatives to their respective courts.³⁰ The diplomatic relations enabled the rulers of the Sudanese zone to acquire weapons of war. Similarly, the diplomatic relations equally enabled the rulers to seek ways to protect the commercial interest of their respective citizens involved in trade and commerce in their respective territories. This was exemplified in the thirteenth century, when the governor of Sijilmasa, which was the most important terminus of the trans-Saharan caravan routes in southern Morocco, sent a letter to the king of Ghana who was by then the most powerful ruler in the Sudanese zone of West Africa. The letter reads:

We are neighbours in benevolence even if we
differ in religion; we agree on right conduct and
are one in leniency towards our subjects. It goes

²⁹Abdullah Smith, "The Early States of the Central Sudan" in *History of West Africa* Vol. I edited by J.F. Ade Ajayi and Michael Crowder (London: Longman 1971), 191 -193

³⁰Ibid.

without saying that justice is an essential quality of kings in conducting sound policy; tyranny is the preoccupation of ignorant and evil minds. We have heard about the imprisonment of poor traders and their being prevented from going freely about their business. The coming to and fro of merchants to a country is of benefit to its inhabitants and help to keep it populous. If we wished we would imprison the people of that region who happen to be in our territory but we do not think it right to do that. We ought not to "forbid immorality while practicing it ourselves". Peace be upon you.³¹

The last among the patterns of relations between the Arabs and the peoples of western and central Sudan of West was the conduct of war. War was instrumental in the rise and fall of several states in the western and central Sudan in the pre-colonial era. It is interesting to state that the fall of two major empires in the Sudanese zone of West Africa was orchestrated by invasion from the Arabs of North Africa. The fall of the ancient empires of Ghana and Songhay in 1076 – 7 and 1591, respectively was owed to the Almoravid movement and the Moroccan invasion. Different reasons fueled the invasion of both Sudanese states during the pre-colonial era. The Almoravid invasion of ancient Ghana was driven by the puritanical Islamic ideology of a group led by Ibn Yâsîn, to spread their Islamic faith across the Sahara.³² The Moroccan invasion of Songhay the last of the empires to emerge in the Sudanese zone of West Africa was attacked for military and commercial reasons, by Sultan Al-Mansur to gain control of the gold trade and its route under the control of Songhay as well as nibbled Songhai power in western Sudan.³³

³¹BaselDavidson, *The Growth of African Civilisation: A History of West Africa 1000 – 1800*(London; Longman Group Ltd, 1965), 81

³²I. Hrbek and J. Devisse, "The Almoravids" in *UNESCO General History of Africa III: Africa from the Seventh to the Eleventh Century* edited by M. El Fasi and I. Hrbek London: Heinemann Publishers, 1992), 336 - 366

³³BaselDavidson, *The Growth of African Civilisation: A History of West Africa 1000 – 1800*, 84

Symbiotic Relations between the Arabs and the Peoples of Western and Central Sudan of West Africa

The analysis of the pattern of relations between the Arabs and the peoples of western and central Sudan of West Africa except for the conduct of war reveals collaborative relations aimed at mitigating the uneven distribution of mineral resources by nature as well as exploiting the benefit occasion by the contact of the peoples from both regions. The frontier of contact reveals a symbiotic interaction contrary to the views of some scholars that the relations were one-sided, and were dominated by the Arabs, with little or no contributions by the peoples of the western and central Sudan. A fact that is yet to be accepted is that the success of the ... trans-Saharan trade, for example, was not possible without the active participation of West Africans who understood perfectly well, how to utilize the new opportunities offered by the commercial contacts to the Islamic world – yet, in the authorized African historiography, this point is usually passed over with few words only.³⁴ However, from the patterns of relations discussed above, the following symbiotic relations were established by the Arabs and peoples of the western and central Sudan of West Africa during the period under review.

First, the exchange of goods by both parties across the Saharan desert was mutual or based on mutual consent. There was no account of the use of force by any parties involved in the exchange of the item of trade. Salt, cloth, beads and cowries, copper and brass vessels, and, increasingly, horses, swords, paper and Arabic books were brought to the Sudanese zone by the Arabs from North Africa and the Middle East in exchange for gold (especially on the Western routes), slaves (predominant further east), civet and ambergris, pepper, wax and honey, ivory

³⁴Pekka Masonen, “Trans-Saharan Trade and the West African Discovery of the Mediterranean World”, 127

and ebony, and, increasingly again, leather goods and textiles came from the western and central Sudan of West Africa.³⁵

In the city of Gao, in the Songhay empire, traders were able to exchange Saharan salt for gourds, mat, wax, honey, iron goods and cloth produced in the south along the River Niger in the town of Kukyia, regarded by many as the cradle of the first Songhay dynasty. Given the growing presence of Islamic traders in Gao through trade, the locus of political power moved here from Kukyia in around the 10th century; separate towns were established by the late 10th century for Muslims and non-Muslims on either side of the Niger, a practice which also appears to have shaped the urban and religious architecture of Djenné and Ghāna at the same time.³⁶ The development reveals a symbiotic relation in trade and commerce in which both parties benefited from the exchange of goods, during the pre-colonial period.

The various role played by the caravan guard from both sides of the Saharan desert was a demonstration of the symbiotic relations of the Arabs and the peoples of Sudanese to ensure the success of their trading and commercial activities. The Arabs caravan guard and their counterparts from the Sudanese zone of West Africa complimented each other to ensure the free movement of goods along the various trade route of the trans-Saharan trade.³⁷ The Arab caravan guards provide services for Arabs and Sudanese traders; as well as they served as a guard to leaders of the Sudanese zone on pilgrimage to Mecca. On the other hand, the Sudanese guard served as a guard to Arabs traders, travellers and scholars that are seeking direction within the Sudanese zone of West Africa. The caravan guards from both sides of the Sahara desert wade-off bandit gang or group along the trade route that attempts to rob traders moving in their caravans.

³⁵K. P. Moseley, Caravel and Caravan: West Africa and the World-Economies, ca. 900-1900 AD *Review* vol.15, no.3, (1992): 528.

³⁶T.Green, African Kingdoms: A Guide to the Kingdoms of Songhay, Kongo, Benin, Oyo and Dahomey c. 1400 – c. 1800 www.ocr.org.uk (accessed 23 July, 2020)

³⁷E.W. Bovill, *The Golden Trade of the Moors* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), 235.

Symbiotic relations between the Arabs and the peoples of the Sudanese zone of West Africa during the pre-colonial era were equally established through import and export trade of certain commodities. For instance, the city of Kano was renowned as the centre of a rich agricultural district that produced all the food its teeming population required and a considerable surplus for export. The city owed its prosperity chiefly to the industry and extraordinary skill of its Hausa craftsmen, especially the weaver and dyer and leather wares, which are exported in high demand in North Africa, part of Europe and the Middle East.³⁸ Similarly, the Arab traders through trade import certain items of trade from the Middle East to the Sudanese zone of West Africa, namely cloth, beads and Arabic literature.

The Writing of West Africa History in the Colonial and Post-colonial Era

The writing of African history, particularly, the history of West Africa has passed through different epoch, namely the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods. Arabic geographers and historians from the Middle East and North Africa namely Al Bakri, Al Masudi, Al Battuta Al Idrisi and Ibn Khaldun and others wrote the early history of the Sudanese zone, referred to by them as Bilad al-Sudan (land of the blacks). Some of them visited the Sudanese zone, while others did not. Muslim scholars from the Sudanese zone equally wrote on the history of the western and central Sudan, during the pre-colonial period such as Abderrahmen Al-Sadi and Muhmud Kati of Songhay.³⁹ It is instructive to note that the writing of African history, during the period particularly, the history of the western and central Sudan had some flaws dominated by the personal influence of some of the writers majorly their disposition to Islam. Islamic rulers and societies were extolled, this however, was not the case of those that embraced traditional African religion. This notwithstanding,

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Walter I. Ofonagoro, "Reappraisals in History: The West Africa Context" in *Method and Perspective of Studying African History* Erim O. Erim and Okon E. Uya (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co. Ltd, 1984), 23

the Arabic sources remain a veritable source in the reconstruction of the African past before the coming of the Europeans.

In the colonial period, the writing of the history of the western and central of West Africa was dominated by Eurocentric writers and in the postcolonial era, by African and Africanist historians. The writing of West Africa's history during these epochs was not without shortcomings. However, the shortcomings of the colonial and postcolonial periods of the history of the continent written by some European writers deserved attention. It was during both periods that the erroneous and unjust account of the past of West Africa, as a people without a history, and whose history is tied to the contact and activities with the Europeans and Arabs was established. The writings or comments of some renowned European scholars on the history of West Africa in particular and Africa, in general, will be examined. German philosopher George Hegel made the following statement concerning Africans in the nineteenth century.

It is manifest that the want of self-control distinguished the character of the Negroes. This condition is capable of no development or culture, and as we have seen them at this day, such have they always been. At this point, we leave Africa, not even to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit.⁴⁰

In the postcolonial era, Oxford renowned historian Hume Trevor-Roper made the following biased and unjust account of the history of Africa in 1963. In his words:

Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present, there is none; there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness And darkness is not a subject of history.⁴¹

⁴⁰Okon E. Uya, "Trends and Perspectives in African History" 1 - 2

⁴¹J.D.Fage, "The Development of African Historiography", 30

The above remarks on the history of Africa, particularly that of West Africa presents a reductionist account of the people in all facet of human endeavour. This account of the history of Africa, concerning West Africa, contradicts the account of the Arabs concerning the western and central Sudan. Similarly, the various empires and kingdoms that emerged in the Sudanese zone had evolved elaborate state structure and governance, before the advent of the Arabs. This fallacious account of the African past has been debunked by some African and Africanist historians in the postcolonial era in their works or publications.⁴²In the same vein, African and Africanist historians revealed to the world the pivotal role of oral tradition as a source of African history as well as a compendium of African history passed from one generation to another. They concluded that the reconstruction of African history without oral tradition as one of the sources is incomplete. The erroneous belief that the contact between the Arabs and the peoples of the western and central Sudan was lopsided and dominated by the Arabs, denied the historical development of the peoples of the Sudanese zone of West Africa.

A major weakness in the account of these European scholars on the history of West Africa in particular and Africa, in general, is their dependence on European written sources. This was the view of the renowned British historian, A.P. Newton when he affirmed that "Africa had no history before the comings of the Europeans".⁴³Newton like many of his colleagues in the citadel of learning rejected an African history because it was not built on the altar or foundation of secondary sources, similar to the pattern of European historical development. It is equally important to state that the European scholars in their writing of the history of West Africa in particular and Africa in general, did not consult the Arab sources, which provided the sources on the early history of western and central Sudan. Some of these European scholars were ignorant of oral tradition in the reconstruction or writing of the African past.

⁴²JamesNgozi Obiegbu, "Historiography and the Training of Historians" in *Issues in Historiography* edited by O.O Olubomehin, (Ibadan: College Press & Press Publishers Ltd, 2001),6

⁴³J.D.Fage, "The Development of African Historiography", 32

They failed to realize that the sources used in the reconstruction of the past shaped the conclusion about the past. Their sole dependence on European written sources without any recourse to oral sources has deprived them of writing a complete and objective history of the Africa past, particularly West Africa. That is, the European written sources, believe that only the history of trade, slavery, and relations between Europeans and African kingdoms matters in pre-colonial West African history; oral tradition sources point rather to the importance of kingship, religion, dependence on powerful figures, commerce and migration. Jan Vansina in his analysis of oral tradition shed light on the importance of oral tradition as history and sources of the history of pre-colonial illiterate African societies. In his words:

The African civilizations in the Sahara and south of the desert were to a great extent civilizations of the spoken word, even where the written word existed, as it did in West Africa from the sixteenth century onwards, because only very few people knew how to write and the role of the written word was often marginal to the essential preoccupations of a society.⁴⁴

However, by bringing both sources together, a balanced view of the West African past can emerge; but by using only one type of source, a skewed perspective on that past is more likely.⁴⁵ This explains why they failed to see the symbiotic relations in the contact between the Arabs and the peoples of the Sudanese zone.

Similarly, as part of the effort to strengthen their resolve that Africa lacked a past and that her history is that of European activities in the continent, the Hamitic theory was propounded to give bite to this erroneous belief shared by some Eurocentric scholars. C.G. Seligman in his *Race of Africa*, published in 1930, affirmed that "...the civilisations of Africa are the civilisation of the Hamites, its history the record of these peoples and of their interaction with the two other African stocks, the Negro and the Bushman."⁴⁶ The theory is a bias theory of race that fails to

⁴⁴J. Vansina, "Oral Tradition and Its Methodology," 142

⁴⁵T.Green, African Kingdoms: (accessed 23 July, 2020)

⁴⁶James .Ngozi Obiegbu, "Historiography and the Training of Historians" 7

recognise the effort of Africans and their contributions to world civilisation. It argued that the black race was incapable of change or innovation in his environment until the arrival of the Arabs from across the Saharan desert and the European from across the Atlantic Ocean. And that the change and development witnessed in the western and central before the fifteenth century was linked to Hamites from North Africa and the Arab world. Furthermore, they affirmed that the relationship that emanated from the contact between the Arabs and the peoples of Africa was an imbalance; in the sense that little or nothing came from the peoples of the western and central Sudan, except their item of trade. As a result, there was no form of symbiotic relations or interaction emanating from the frontier of contact. The Hamitic theory or hypotheses has been rejected by African and Africanist historians as well as scholars from other disciplines through the interdisciplinary approach to the study of history and Africa's past. Some of these disciplines in the humanities, social sciences and sciences have strengthened the rigour of analysis and likewise enriched the sources in the analysis and interpretation as well as the reconstruction of the past.⁴⁷

Conclusion

Historians and scholars from other disciplines have interpreted differently the contact between Africa and the Arabs as well as the Europeans. Some of the interpretations have failed to provide an objective assessment of the contact. Instead, a biased assessment has prevailed to the detriment of Africa, depicting them as a people lacking any historical consciousness of their own until the advent of the Arabs and the Europeans. This view on Africa was established in the colonial era, by racist and biased European scholars who see African history, as the activities of Europeans in Africa. It has been proven that their arrival at such a conclusion was due to their sole dependence on written sources, with total neglect of the place of oral tradition or sources. However, thanks to the works of African and Africanist

⁴⁷O.A. Adeboye, "Interdisciplinary Approach to Scholarship in History" in *Issues in Historiography* edited by O.O Olubomehin (Ibadan: College Press & Press Publishers Ltd, 2001), 14

historians the erroneous conclusion of African history has been refuted. J.C. Anene frontier of contact has equally proved wrong the false claims between the Arabs and the peoples of the Sudanese zone of West Africa, during the pre-colonial era. The frontier of contact reveals a balance interaction where both parties were at an advantage in their relations. In all, there is a need for African historians in the contemporary era, to reappraise the writing of West Africa history, particularly those that concern controversial issues.

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