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MAJOR SAHELIAN TRADE NETWORKS: PAST AND PRESENT

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Among the many elements influencing the way Sahelian societies manage their environment, economic factors are as important as, for example, demographic ones. In fact, the history of the Sahel reveals that economic determinants have had a direct impact on the functional mechanisms of agrarian systems and therefore on the way in which rural communities use space. The introduction and spread of commercial agriculture (groundnuts and cotton) during the colonial period and then later the emphasis on subsistence crops after the drought of 1973–4, by way of the major rural development projects and hydro-agricultural schemes, brought about specific peasant responses. These responses have illustrated how external economic change can disrupt the relations between local societies and their environment.

We shall consider this aspect in its historical perspective, by showing that these societies have always managed their natural environment, not only in order to reproduce themselves materially and socially, but also to participate in larger trade systems that have extended beyond the African continent for close to a century.

THE SAHEL: AN ANCIENT TRADING REGION

The Sahel has always been a land of long-distance trade. This commerce assured the prosperity of great polities throughout its history. The accounts of the first explorers to penetrate the interior of the continent during the first half of the nineteenth century (Heinrich Barth, René Caillé) reveal a dense traffic of trans-Saharan trade networks, movements towards the coast and large regional networks based on local resource exploitation (Barth, 1965; Caillé, 1980).

Sustained trade has linked the Sahel with North Africa for many centuries. It contributed to the birth of large market cities, such as Kumbi Saleh, Oualata, Jenne, Gao, Tombouctou, Agades, Zinder, Katsina and Kano. It was in these cities, in contact with southern Morocco, Tripoli and sometimes even Egypt, that journeys were broken and goods exchanged. From the

Sahel, camel caravans exported gold, ivory, cotton and ostrich feathers, as well as slaves (until the middle of the eighteenth century). From North Africa or Europe they imported crafts, horses and arms that allowed states to maintain their hegemony and to control these very trade movements. The first of these was most likely the Kingdom of Ghana, which originated in the fourth century as a result of the development of trade between the Sudan and North Africa by way of Western Sahara. Ghana was succeeded by the empires of Mali (thirteenth and fourteenth centuries) and later Gao (fifteenth and sixteenth centuries), the powers of which rested on the gold trade, and then later by the Hausa states, where the merchants were linked to those of the Arab world, and finally by the empire of Bornou for which political and economic expansion originated, in part, from its relations with the Mediterranean (Libya, Egypt) through the Fezzan (Suret-Canale, 1968–72). War and trade were thus often complementary, with the former feeding the latter. Similarly, commerce and Islam were closely linked, with Islam's spread from North Africa following the commercial routes into the Sahel (Meillassoux, 1971).

While trade across the desert was important, other trades were also developing towards the south, including salt, natron, iron, fabrics, leather articles and dried onions. Even dates from the Saharan oases were exchanged for forest products. Thus the Hausa merchants wove dense networks into Gonga and Ashanti (present-day Ghana) where cola nuts were produced (Lovejoy, 1978). Kano was connected to Salaga by a whole network of way-stations and some Hausa traders, such as 'Alhaji' Alhassane dan Tata, the founder of a large merchant dynasty in Kano, even settled in Kumasi for several years. This southward commerce also gave birth to large market towns that acted as contact points for Sahelian and forest states. One of the most important of these was the Salaga (Ghana) market, but Bobo-Dioulasso, Kong, Bouna, Bonduku, Kintampo and others were also notable. The Sahel was therefore bordered to the north by a series of 'Saharan ports' and to the south by a group of contact cities for coastal commerce. Several of these agglomerations (Kano, for example) gave birth to truly urban civilisations with populations reaching several tens of thousands by the beginning of this century.

Concurrent with these long-distance exchanges was a multitude of smaller movements that connected the different Sahelian regions to each other. These internal channels carried a few European goods and mainly local products, such as foodstuffs moving from areas of surplus to areas of shortage, as well as local crafts. Yarse merchants, originally from Yatenga (a major Mossi kingdom), would therefore organise caravans headed for Mali carrying cotton products and returning with salt and also dried fish and mats (Izard, 1971).

Nevertheless, during this period peasant communities generally lived within a subsistence economy based on the exploitation of their immediate natural environment, which met all their needs and assured their material and social reproduction. These populations therefore lived on agriculture and the products of hunting and gathering.

The large movements that crossed the Sahel were founded on complementarity and were orientated predominantly north–south rather than east–west, with various Sahelian zones offering analogous products. As we have just seen, these economies were not directed inward but instead outwards towards the Arab world as well as to Europe, particularly in zones close to the Atlantic Ocean (Senegal). They were to be profoundly disturbed by the colonial penetration that accelerated after 1875. France initially took possession of the entire fringe bordering the desert and then, progressing from west to east, completed its domination by the turn of the century with the conquest of the region bordering Lake Chad.

THE COLONIAL CONQUEST: A PROFOUND CHANGE IN THE SAHELIAN ECONOMY

Colonisation profoundly altered the very bases of the workings of the Sahelian economies, especially for agriculture, which would henceforth be forced to join the world trade networks. It had two immediate and fundamental consequences: the trans-Saharan trade disappeared, and local monies were replaced by the franc.

For several reasons, by 1900 trade across the desert had effectively ceased. First, conquest of the Saharan and northern Sahelian zones was difficult, especially in Aïr where the Tuareg, under the command of Chief Kaocen, had resisted the French in 1917. Later, caravans became increasingly unwilling to travel between sub-Saharan and North Africa for fear of the frequent attacks carried out by looting bands of Arabs and Toubous. Finally, and undoubtedly the principal reason for the decline in trans-Saharan trade, transportation costs became more expensive by desert than by sea, especially after the French and British colonial administrations developed the port and railway infrastructure in the south (in 1912 the railway reached Kano in British Nigeria). Trans-Saharan trade therefore slowly dried up. What remained were the Tuareg salt caravans that provisioned the distant oases of Bilma and Fachi with millet, pelts and fabrics and returned southward with salt, natron and dates.

In addition, shortly after the political conquest, the franc became widely used. Sahelian populations were forced to abandon the practice of bartering as well as the currencies in use at that time, principally cowries (small shells mainly coming from the Maldives Islands in the Indian Ocean) and the Maria-Theresa Thalers, for French coins. This substitution caused enormous problems, because the amount of coins put into circulation was insufficient (especially those in high demand, such as low-value coins like the 50 centime and 1 franc pieces) and encouraged the development of a

large black market, which operated at the expense of the population whose traditional monies were considerably devalued. Somewhere around 1920 the franc came into general use throughout the Sahel, completing the process of economic domination which was also reflected in the installation of customs barriers at the newly drawn political borders.

Colonisation also led to new forms of trade organisation. Through the major pan-African trading houses, from Dakar to Lake Chad (French West Africa Company, Commercial Society of West Africa, French Niger Company, Maurel and Prom, Personnaz and Gardin, etc.) European commerce progressively strengthened its domination of the Sahel, where the economy became tightly connected to that of Europe. Nevertheless, African merchants were able to maintain control over some sectors of activity that were considered 'traditional' and in which colonial firms had no direct interest (notably in salt, dried fish, livestock and the cola nut). However, the way trade was now organised deprived them of control over the major part of the local trade and placed them in a position of dependence relative to European commerce. Many African merchants simply became intermediaries between the trading houses and their local producers and consumers. This is the group which went into the fields to collect the products destined for export (groundnut, cotton, gum arabic, pelts) and which was responsible for the retailing of products manufactured by European industries (fabrics, hardware, etc.).

Submitting to a new economic order had direct effects on the exploitation of natural resources. While Sahelian agriculture had until then been essentially subsistence in nature, directed towards local self-sufficiency and a medium-range trade, it now served the needs of European industry and this led to the development of groundnut and cotton crops. Trade, and later production incentives, for these two crops (gum arabic was less important and more or less limited to areas bordering the Senegal River) came to be concentrated in several zones which are favourable from the standpoint of nature and accessibility (see Chapter 3). For the groundnut this largely meant the Sérer and Wolof areas of Senegal as well as some parts of the Maradi and Zinder region in Niger. Cotton was concentrated in the central plateau of Upper Volta (future Burkina Faso) and southern Sudan (the future Mali).

In a sense, these already densely populated regions created basins of activity favourable to the development of trade. This gave rise to new economic zones and continental exchanges based on the export of products of commercial agriculture and the import of trade goods. In the preceding chapter we saw how some of these zones became strong poles of attraction for migrants. Within this framework, the spatial distribution of precolonial commercial and market centres was profoundly altered. The demise of trans-Saharan trade marked the decline of trade centres along its routes (Oualata, Tombouctou and Gao, for instance), while the colonial economy favoured the development of markets that collected the products of commercial agriculture. Hence, we see the progressive expansion of trade centres such as Kaolack, Louga and Diourbel in Senegal, of Kayes, Sikasso and Koutiala in Sudan, of Bobo-Dioulasso in Upper Volta and of Maradi and Zinder in Niger. Following the principles of the trade system, these areas also became centres of diffusion for imported manufactured goods and retailing became exceptionally active. In this way the partition of Sahelian economic space that we have already described was established with a few poles of production and exchange alternating with vast expanses dedicated almost exclusively to the exportation of labour power.

Until the Second World War, French colonial policy was founded on the principle that the colonial administration's livelihood and investments should be obtained from local resources. After the Brazzaville Conference (1945) a clear policy shift was brought about with the establishment of FIDES (Fonds d'Investissement pour le Développement Économique et Social – Investment Fund for Economic and Social Development), the prohibition of forced labour and the end of the separate administration for the natives. From this point on the mother country increased the transfer of financial aid to its colonies yearly, notably in the Sahelian zones, in order to create the economic infrastructure necessary for the development of its territories, by means of road construction, railways, airports, the development of industry to process local products (oil-works, cotton ginning plants) and hydro-agricultural schemes. Thus, these investments, along with a favourable world market economy, made the 1950s a period of sharp growth for those Sahelian economies that had progressively inserted themselves into the world trade system.

INDEPENDENCE: POLITICAL CHANGE, ECONOMIC CONTINUITY

The creation of a colonial administrative apparatus encouraged the development of an African 'elite' whose role was essentially that of (elementary) teacher, administrative employee and shop clerk. These bureaucrats would found the political parties and unions that, after 1946, would claim the largest share of native participation in business management. Later, they would express the demands for independence. Financial support for this goal came from merchants, whose capital accumulation was now primed and who hoped to profit from the departure of the colonisers and their economic agents.

Nevertheless, the achievement of national independence through an easy transition at the start of the 1960s did not bring about a clear break in these economies. The cotton and groundnut trade remained, although the new administrations took steps to limit earlier abuses and to control the trade better in order to create an economic base for their own development.

Through the creation of nationalised companies,[1] these states maintained an export monopoly on agricultural products, which constituted their only real financial resource (see Grégoire, 1986).

The new geographic polarisations that were created during the colonial period not only survived but actually intensified. There was unprecedented growth in export agriculture in countries such as Senegal, Niger and Upper Volta, which led to the overexploitation of land and contributed to its degradation (see Chapter 5). A value added tax continued to be imposed on peasant labour through groundnut and cotton exports. However, this exaction no longer came from the colonial authority but from those who exercised power in the new independent states. The creation of this nascent class and the maintenance of a continuously growing bureaucracy was also guaranteed by means of a direct tax that, each year, weighed more heavily on rural communities. For example, in 1963 a peasant in Niger had to sell 40 kg of groundnuts at 24 francs per kilogram to pay the tax for one person,[2] whereas by 1970 the peasant would have had to sell 70 kg at 21 francs per kilogram to meet the same obligation (Raynaut, 1977b).

In parallel with the development of this bureaucracy, West African merchants also profited from their countries' independence. In most cases (with the exception of Mali which opted for a socialist-style regime in which the public sector supplanted colonial and private commerce) the new leaders took measures that would support merchant activities, in order to encourage the creation of a national private sector that could compete with European commercial firms. These merchants thereby benefited from banking opportunities and preferential access to state markets. In so doing they strengthened their ties to the political and bureaucratic class, which they backed in exchange for support in business. This collaboration, however, was not always without tension and conflict. On several occasions the two groups openly opposed each other, for example when the authorities considered that businessmen were making excessive profits at the expense of the peasants by commercialising production or by over-speculating on the price of staple products, leading to spectacular inflation that was severely felt in the urban areas. In several countries (especially Senegal and Niger) a co-operative sector was created to protect producers and consumers from the arbitrariness of private merchants. In any case, agriculturalists were quick to realise that state agents charged with 'supporting' them indulged in misappropriation and embezzlement. Losses from this behaviour were no less than those incurred through trading with merchants. Thus they turned back to these merchants, with whom they had long-established ties and a shared system of values, specifically allowing them to obtain credit denied them by the rigidity of the bureaucratic system. This alliance between peasant and merchant explains the collapse of the socialist regime in Mali in 1968 (Amselle and Grégoire, 1987).

In spite of several unfavourable climatic episodes (such as the 1967–8 drought), until the 1970s Sahelian economies continued to function along principles almost identical to those of the colonial period. Then, in 1973–4, the Sahelian economies experienced a devastating famine following a terrible drought. By the end of this dramatic period in all these countries, especially in zones of low rainfall (the river valleys of Senegal and Niger, the Sahel of Mali and Niger), the peasantry abandoned commercial agriculture (groundnut and to a lesser degree cotton) for subsistence crops (millet and sorghum) of which there was a severe shortage and which were consequently subject to sharp price increases. To some extent, states encouraged this development in the name of food self-sufficiency, which had become a priority. Yet in this way they lost their principal export resource (Niger, for example, which had produced 260,000 tonnes of groundnuts in 1972, produced only 41,700 tonnes in 1975). The elite and bureaucratic classes could no longer reproduce themselves directly from the profits of commercial agriculture. Drought was perhaps more widely felt by nomadic populations, notably the Berber, Tuareg and Fulani, who lost the majority of their livestock.

Perhaps even more than decolonisation, this new situation marked a decisive turning-point in the economic history of the Sahelian countries. Only Niger managed, temporarily, to hold back its effects through the exploitation of its uranium deposits that would bring considerable financial return for nearly ten years (since then the uranium 'boom' has passed and the country has succumbed to an unprecedented economic crisis).

THE YEARS FOLLOWING THE 1973–4 DROUGHT: PROJECTS AND FOREIGN AID

While the drought sounded the death knell of an important source of revenue for the Sahelian countries, it also marked the appearance of a new, unexpected gift. Western public opinion had discovered the Sahel, and for the first time international aid was mobilised on a massive scale.

By the mid-1970s the Sahel had become inundated by a multitude of development projects, such as the large rural development projects financed through major funding sources like the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) or the European Fund for Development or by bilateral organisations, along with the more limited efforts undertaken by non-governmental organisations. All had the same principal objectives. These were, on the one hand, to develop subsistence agriculture or herding in order to protect the peasantry as much as possible from the effects of drought and, on the other, to guard against the strongly felt threat of desertification. In many cases it eventually became clear that these projects ended most often in failure, and that they contributed more to the development of the cities in which they were headquartered (by favouring the rapid expansion of a local petty bureaucracy necessary for their

administration and by stimulating the activities of the private merchant and industrial sectors) than to the peasantry that was the initial object of their activities. The OACV (Opération Arachide et Cultures Vivrières – Operation Groundnut and Food Crops) in Mali illustrates this point well. Initiated in 1974 with backing from the World Bank and the FAC (Fonds d'Aide et de Coopération – French Fund for Aid and Co-operation), this operation was intended to furnish peasants with inputs and technical support, and to market the groundnuts they had been encouraged to produce. After eight years of operation, an evaluation discovered that the project's beneficiaries had been limited to the Malian government, the organisation's own personnel and a few 'pilot peasants' who, for the most part, were in fact merchants, *marabouts* or well-off peasants with government connections. This case is not exceptional and similar situations have occurred in numerous development projects throughout the Sahel (Amselle and Grégoire, 1987). The project years became a series of disappointments. Yamba Boubakar (Yamba, 1993), for example, described just how disappointing, over the course of 20 years, successive programmes for protecting the environment in Niger had been.

After 1974 the peasant economies, already disorganised by the introduction of export crops during the colonial period, continued to face an intense demand (notably for cereals to feed the urban centres where demographic growth was rapid) without the means necessary to improve production (except in a few particular cases such as Mali's cotton region, for a number of reasons that will be described later in Chapter 5). These economies also continue to be very vulnerable to the climatic uncertainties that constantly threaten to disrupt their food supplies. This was the case in 1984–5 when, in spite of improvements in food aid since 1974, severe famine once again struck the region.

Not only was foreign development assistance incapable of attaining its objectives, it also contributed dramatically to the debt of these Sahelian countries. In most cases, this aid was negotiated in the form of long-term loans, although it is true that a part of this debt has been cancelled by the lenders. Nevertheless, the burden continues to be extremely heavy.

Over the years, international aid reached a high level, especially considering that it was often inspired more by greed on the part of the Sahelian states than by necessity. Indeed, there was a great temptation to claim a food shortage solely in order to mobilise external aid, even when such a claim was unjustified by production figures. With the indispensable complicity of donors, which was at times guided by political objectives (in the case of bilateral aid) and at other times guided by the need to justify their existence (in the case of international organisations), 'desertification' and 'drought' too often became convenient pretexts for attracting the interest of potential 'grantors'. It is largely through this largesse that the elite classes would be able to reproduce themselves from this point on, as in Niger where aid replaced the loss of benefits caused by declining uranium production which itself had substituted for groundnuts (Raynaut and Souleymane Abba, 1990). During the ten years from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, at every level of the state and bureaucratic hierarchy aid became a new source of accumulation, captured by politicians and bureaucrats, sometimes in connivance with the national business sector. The recently acquired fortunes of many politicians and administrative agents can be explained by the diversion of funds from development programmes, or by the taking of commissions, or through other corrupt practices.

The granting agencies, themselves subject to the constraints of the world economic crisis, finally realised that their aid was ineffective and that the rush to indebtedness could not continue indefinitely. As a result they modified their policies appreciably and increased their efforts to control how funds were being spent. With this goal in mind, they introduced the notion of 'conditionality'. Henceforth aid would be tied to certain economic stabilisation measures within a framework known as the 'Structural Adjustment Programme' (SAP). These measures were considered imperative for overly indebted Sahelian economies, now deprived of export resources and suffocating from an omnipresent state.

THE 1980S: THE ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CRISIS OF THE MODERN SECTOR

In effect, international organisations (such as the International Monetary Fund) and donor agencies (primarily the World Bank) demanded that the states put their economies in order and improve the efficiency of the public sector and expand the private sector.

As elsewhere in Africa since the mid-1980s, the economic policies of the Sahelian countries have, therefore, been considerably redirected. The goal was to return to a better balance between public and external finances and, at the very least, growth was to keep pace with population.

In order to wipe out the deficits over the past years, the same remedy was administered everywhere in the form of structural adjustment programmes. These advocate, specifically, the opening of the economy and the scaling of internal pricing on the international price system, disengagement of the state, privatisation, general application of the principle of unsubsidised prices and the priority of market forces.

These SAPs reduced state intervention in the economy and introduced an incontestable liberalisation, which benefited the private sector. These policies were reflected in a series of liberalisation and privatisation measures. For instance, with cereal commercialisation, state offices were stripped of their former monopolies. In Niger, SONARA was dissolved and the Office of Food Products lost its monopoly in the cereal trade. Internal commerce underwent a total liberalisation, both in agriculture (more rapidly for millet, maize and sorghum than for rice) and in manufacturing. The Malian (state) Society for Import and Export (SOMIEX) lost its former monopoly and its retail commercial activities when its stores were sold to private merchants. In foreign trade, wider access to international markets was gained, to a greater or lesser extent depending on the country.

A growing number of countries entered into such adjustment agreements because loans by international organisations were subject to the observance of recommendations that reduced the local governments' margin for autonomy, initiative and negotiation (Durufle, 1988). These governments were obliged to follow directives imposed from the outside, and to apply them to populations who had to endure their negative social consequences (closing of public enterprises, personnel cut-backs, the end of automatic administrative hiring for young graduates, etc.).

During this same period, while undergoing economic change, Sahelian countries were engaged, with varying degrees of success, in a process of democratisation largely initiated by their former colonial rulers, who now made aid conditional on the establishment of democracy (as President Mitterrand stated in a speech to the African Presidents Meeting held in La Baule in June 1990).

While Senegal, a pioneer on the continent, had committed itself to political liberalisation well before other countries (Coulon, 1992), other authoritarian military regimes (with the exception of Burkina Faso) began to fall, one after the other. This occurred through popular action as in Mali, Cape Verde (Cahen, 1991) or, as in the case of Niger, through the death of a head of state (Raynaut and Souleymane Abba, 1990). The convening of national conferences, which assembled all the new political forces, sounded the death-knell of single-party regimes and heralded the beginning of multi-party politics (Mali, Niger). These conferences also defined the rules of the new political game (development of constitutions) and designated transitional governments to oversee presidential, legislative and local elections. This process has been completed in Mali, and is ongoing in Niger, where the people voted on a new constitution (December 1992) before electing a new president and representatives (February–March 1993).

Still, the problems of lasting democracy in these Sahelian countries remain. It is certainly reversible, as nearby Togo demonstrates; here the partisans of General Eyadema seem unlikely to step aside for the elected candidates. From a strictly economic viewpoint, many obstacles are likely to appear on the road to democracy. In fact, according to funding sources such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, structural adjustment policies are indispensable for re-establishing a country's budgetary and financial balance and, in certain cases, must be followed with absolute rigour. However, these policies themselves jeopardise the gains of the middle class by reducing the number of civil servants and by freezing salaries and employment in the public sector. A democratically elected regime is hardly in a position to impose such inherently unpopular measures. There is, therefore, a strong temptation to return to an authoritarian power (such as President Sani Abacha in Nigeria), which is deemed more appropriate to respond to the imperative of restoring economic order. In the end, the key issue is one of compatibility between the restoration of economic order, at least in the way it is imposed, and the effective establishment of democracy (Bayart, 1991).

SAHELIAN MERCHANTS: A PERMANENT PRESENCE

In spite of repeated crises and enormous constraints, the economies of the Sahelian countries survive and possess a real dynamism. Alongside the development of 'formal' economies dominated by the state, 'informal' economies have been maintained and even strengthened, animated by groups of African merchants who have always been the principal economic actors of the region. Both in the precolonial era and during the period of colonial trade, commercial exchanges favoured the emergence of merchants of long-distance trade, of whom some of the better known include the Diola, the Hausa, the Yarse and more recently the Berber.

These large merchant communities were Moslem. In fact, Islam was brought to the Sahel by merchants who were in contact with North African Arab traders through the trans-Saharan trade. On the one hand, Islam provided a communal ideological framework which closely followed long-distance trade routes and secured interregional exchanges, and, on the other, helped forge a unique identity (Grégoire, 1993). From Dakar to N'djamena, in order to be recognised as a merchant one must be Moslem and hold the title of 'el haj', a title attributed to those who have made the pilgrimage to Mecca. The acquisition of this title, in fact, confers a symbolic authority and bears witness, moreover, to a professional success and membership of the entrepreneurial elite.

This closeness between commercial and religious spheres is still current today. Merchants encourage Islam's propagation by taking in *marabouts* and well-known "*karamoko*" (schoolmasters), by building Koranic or franco-arabic schools, by constructing mosques and by financing pilgrimages to Mecca for family members and close relatives. These religious investments therefore bring together merchant customs and codes of ethics, and support ties of dependency within merchant networks. By imposing a strict code of conduct and ethics on businessmen, Islam provides a framework and a structure for business. It often acts as a substitute for more modern commercial techniques (contracts, banking regulations, etc.) that are difficult to apply in a milieu where many are still unable to read and write.

Throughout all the different economic changes that the Sahel has experienced, merchant communities not only accumulated wealth through

traditional commerce, but also by acting as intermediaries between commercial houses and the peasantry, thereby constituting a transitional sector between the spheres of local production and the metropole.

In spite of the many obstacles placed in their path (the commercial trade during colonialism that limited their field of action, and later the policies of independent states that at times deliberately constrained their activities in favour of the public sector) these merchants have always been able to adapt to the difficulties imposed upon them. The decline of West African trade, inescapable according to the 'dependency' theorists of the 1970s, did not occur (Grégoire and Labazée, 1993). On the contrary, Sahelian merchant networks proved to be extremely dynamic. A compromise was found between the organisation of the exchanges developed through the ancient trade circuits and the realities of the contemporary economy. The creation of political borders and later the birth of independent states did not fundamentally disturb their affairs, since they knew how to manipulate them so as to turn obstacles into trade stimulants. Disparities in economic policies and monetary regimes between states became, for them, trade opportunities (Raynaut, 1989c).

These trade networks operate largely on the periphery of the states, mitigating the shortcomings of their formal economies. They eventually came to constitute a parallel economy that provides work and the means of subsistence for a very large number of people. They have their own organisation, often with a decision-making centre and remote locations determined by the imperatives of business, and with these different centres linked through family, client/patron ties or even religion. Hence, upon independence, one of the most important traders from Bamako installed

> his younger brother by the same father and mother in Thies in Senegal, his maternal nephew at Sikensi, the area surrounding Dabu (Ivory Coast) and also a brother by the same father at Kayes in the Sudan. The fortune owned by these four relatives was indivisible, and was controlled by the head of the family.
>
> (Lambert and Egg, 1992: 12)

From an economic standpoint, the activities of these West African merchants were quite diverse, consisting of wholesale and retail commerce, import/export, transport, real estate and even industry. These merchants also make agricultural investments and recently, with the help of a salaried labour force and the occasional use of modern agricultural materials, opened large tracts of bushland for the cultivation of subsistence crops. Others own orchards or market gardens on the periphery of large cities (see Chapter 9). Some of these merchants are also accumulating livestock, with consequences for natural resource exploitation that are discussed in the next chapter.

In spite of their incursions into the area of production, interest by the merchant class in agriculture and herding is largely focused on commercialisation. Their role in livestock commerce is long-standing (Hill, 1966; Bellot, 1982a). However, the liberalisation measures taken over the last several years have been quite beneficial to them, and their range of trade goods now combines local products (millet, sorghum and maize) with imported cereals (rice, wheat). Their networks extend from the small village market to the supra-national economic sphere that includes both Sahelian and coastal countries, and at times extends to other continents where, for example, cereals are traded with multinationals (Grégoire and Labazée, 1993).

Unlike the formal state, which must affirm its sovereignty by defending the principle of an inviolable national border, these businessmen are used to transgressing political entities; they profit from inequalities in regional development and differences in legislation and money. It is they, in the end, who have created areas of homogeneous trade in the Sahel and who are the principals in the present regional economic integration, in spite of the economic and financial crises that exist throughout these modern states.

CURRENT MAJOR TRADE ZONES

Based on the history of present economic conditions of the Sahel, a structuring of Sahelian space from a trade standpoint has been elaborated, taking many factors into account. From this structure, different zones emerge in which can be heard the echoes of the past – distribution of cultural areas and settlements as well as geographic factors such as the presence of labour pools, metropolitan areas, ports and coastal influences.

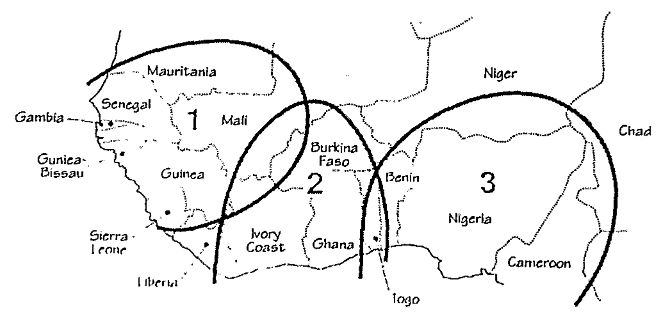
The Sahel is not therefore a single, unique and homogeneous space, but is instead divided into several economically distinct sub-spaces, all of which are now open to the world market and affected by the movement of products across them. Within these sub-spaces, the principles of trade are intimately linked to the role of the merchants and are essentially part of the 'informal' economy, even though national policies also participate through interactions among states.

There are thus three major and clearly demarcated trade zones (Figure 4.1), each with its own particularities, as we shall demonstrate.[3]

The western sub-space

The western sub-space covers approximately the Senegal, Gambia and Upper Niger River basins and is somewhat unique from the standpoint of history and religion. Hence, Islam is omnipresent from Nouakchott to Dakar and has grown in the Guinean zone with the expansion of the Moslem merchant networks.

From an agricultural standpoint, these countries are similar, having



1 western economic sub-space
2 central economic sub-space
3 eastern economic sub-space

original artwork: Charles Cheung
computer graphics: Phil Bradley

Figure 4.1 Sub-regional economies of the western Sahel

experienced the same problem, i.e., extreme variations in production due to a climatic instability that threatens the security of the food supply of their people. For example, in Mali the cereal harvest was half as high in 1985 (the year of the last drought) as in 1989.

A more detailed analysis of the available data enables us to distinguish four large agricultural production zones within this western sub-space:

1 The Senegal valley, which produces mostly paddy rice (the Richard Toll schemes), in addition to millet and sorghum.
2 The zones of Western Senegal (the former groundnut basin) and the Gambia, which produce mostly millet and sorghum, but also maize.
3 The Casamance valley, which produces mostly paddy rice.
4 Southern Mali and the Bend of the Niger, which may be considered the granary for this sub-space (responsible for 50 per cent of millet and sorghum production, 60 per cent of the maize and 20 per cent of the paddy rice).

While millet and sorghum remain the staple foods of the population, especially in rural areas, it is important to note the significant increase of imported products (rice but also wheat) during the last 20 or so years. In fact, rice is preferred by urban consumers (especially in Dakar) both for its price and for the ease with which it can be prepared, compared with traditional grains. Major re-exportation movements have developed from

Mauritania, the Gambia and the two Guineas, towards Senegal and Mali, because rice imported from Asia is less expensive than that produced locally. Large merchants have a greater interest in the trading of imported grains than in local cereals. Formerly the indispensable vectors for trade of complementary local products, they became the instruments for a more outward orientation.

Inherited colonial borders and state policies take a heavy toll on trade in this zone. In particular we may cite the existence of different currencies in the Gambia and Mauritania, countries for which only the CFA franc can be used as payment in the international markets.

A phenomenon of widespread extension, which is particularly applicable to the area and type of exchanges of goods just described, should be noted here. Until its recent devaluation (12 January 1994), the long-lasting overvaluation of the CFA franc compromised the competitiveness of countries like Senegal, Burkina Faso and Niger with respect to countries like Gambia, Ghana and especially Nigeria which had weak currencies. The markets of the former were inundated by diverse products imported, often fraudulently, from (and produced by) these latter countries. The result was the strangulation of their own industry (textiles, for example) and a lack of markets for certain of their own agricultural products (notably rice).

Added to the economic situation just discussed is an inadequate communication infrastructure, major demographic disparities between coastal and interior regions and economic policies that are divergent, if not openly contradictory (especially in relation to the commerce in rice).

Finally, although the human geography of this sub-space suggests a long-standing economic and commercial integration; on the contrary the current political and economic map suggests evidence of fragmentation.

The central sub-space

Beginning at the edge of the desert in the north, crossing the Sahel and ending at the limit of the northern savanna of the Ivory Coast, the central sub-space stretches from Mali to Burkina Faso. Settlements are quite diverse and composed of nomadic and sedentary groups.

From the standpoint of land use, this zone is somewhat homogeneous. In the northern sector a pastoral zone is exploited by the Fulani and Tuareg, while further south agriculture begins to dominate, first with the subsistence crops of millet and sorghum on the Mossi plateau and then with cotton in the south-west of Burkina Faso (see Chapter 6). There are also development projects along the waterways: Mali's l'Office du Niger hydro-agricultural schemes in the Kou valleys in Burkina Faso.

As far as trade is concerned, this zone has always been crossed by many movements of various goods, with Sahelian products exchanged for those from coastal countries. These transactions were carried out by Diola

merchants, who adapted so well to trade commerce during the colonial period and to the demands of contemporary business that they continue, through highly structured and extended networks, to dominate regional commerce, notably between Bamako and Abidjan. From an economic standpoint, these Diolan expatriates give this sub-space a certain homogeneity. We can distinguish two principal centres of concentrated activity:

- The first is located in the border zones, comprising the cities of Sikasso, Koutiala and Bougouni in Mali, Bobo-Dioulasso and Banfora in Burkina Faso, Korhogo and Odienne in the Ivory Coast and Kankan in Guinea. It was created by a diversity of goods and exchange circuits, by their varying volume (neighbourhood commerce, long-distance movements) and by the diversity of those who take part in the commerce of the frontier (Grégoire and Labazée, 1993).
- A second centre emerges around the Mossi plateau, the Ouagadougou region and south-eastern Mali. It acts as a corridor for Malian products, such as livestock, destined for coastal countries (Ghana, Ivory Coast). Cereals such as millet, sorghum and maize are also traded and exported from Ouahigouya to Mopti by way of the Bwa country.

In this central sub-space, Burkina Faso acts as the gateway between north and south. There also exists a dynamic internal commerce in Burkina, where deficits in cereals in the northern regions are met by surpluses from the south-west.

The eastern sub-space

This sub-space consists of Niger, a Sahelian country forming a hinge between Saharan and black Africa with a long tradition of trade. It is composed of populations that have a long secular history of living together and of commerce (Hausa, Djerma, Fulani, Kanoury, Tuareg and Toubou), although some are focused towards North Africa and others towards Nigeria.

The dependence of Niger's economy on its powerful neighbour to the south is evident and so strong that they appear to have achieved a certain economic integration, founded on their official trade, but also, and above all, on their parallel networks. The dynamism of their trade relations is a response to two sets of factors:

- Structural factors include the dependence of Niger (being landlocked) on the south for its provisioning (manufactured products, energy, etc.) and the agropastoral complementarity of the two countries (traditionally, Niger exports livestock and imports cereals from Nigeria), their difference in size (Niger has less than 8 million inhabitants while Nigeria has more than 100 million) and their economic potential. These two countries also belong to two different currency zones. The CFA franc is very strong while the naira is significantly undervalued, making foreign currency inaccessible.

- Economic factors that stem from disparities in economic policies (customs policies, subsidies, state interventions, protection, etc.) that create trade opportunities and the possibility of manipulating them legally or otherwise (Grégoire, 1986).

Niger is therefore focused and dependent on the south for a large part of its provisioning, notably of food. In turn, it benefits from the dynamism of Hausa merchant networks whose reach extends from the village to large cities, to the markets of Nigeria and, in certain cases, to other continents through connections developed with the multinational grain traders.

CONCLUSION

The colonial, and later the independent states, were largely responsible for subjecting agricultural and pastoral societies to destabilising influences. This was the case early on with trade, whereby certain peasant societies were more or less forced to produce ever-increasing quantities of groundnuts and cotton (the long-standing primary financial resource of both the colonial powers and later the new states). The intensive practices associated with these crops affected both the production systems and the population's food security, notably during the 1973–4 drought. This was also the case, starting in 1975, with the development of projects in the Sahel designed to guard against future famines. The 'technological package' popularised from Senegal to Chad was, therefore, exactly the same throughout; it failed to consider regional differences, be they ecological, social or cultural. These projects could not succeed because the technical themes they promoted did not respond to the peasant's real needs, nor to his capacity for absorbing new technical practices or investment. These factors eventually led the Sahelian states to incur substantial debt. That the major labour reserves were also affected by these massive efforts to diffuse commercial agriculture or the more recent large agropastoral development projects was overlooked. Labour was exported to the centres of Sahelian commercial agriculture and especially the coastal plantations (see Chapter 3).

To these peasants, merchant networks represented an alternative to state intervention. It was therefore preferable to sell their groundnut or cotton harvest to private merchants rather than to the co-operative, since closer economic and social ties were maintained with merchants than with the co-operative agents who often mistreated them. In fact, the trade created through these alternative, merchant-based arrangements gave these rural societies a certain margin of flexibility, enabling them to survive and meet their needs at the margin of the formal economy. Hence, the diffusion of

fertiliser in central Niger is primarily the result of merchants, rather than state agencies. Farmers purchase fertiliser brought in fraudulently from Nigeria at reasonable rates instead of the product that is more costly and often not adequately available through official circuits. These exchanges do not always benefit the farmer. Cereals imported at lower cost (notably Asian rice) have long undermined the development of regional production. Rice produced in the river valleys of Niger and Senegal, as well as in schemes developed over the last few years, is more costly than rice imported from Thailand or Vietnam. It is still too early to assess the impact of the recent devaluation of the CFA franc (12 January 1994), although several developments suggest that national rice production may have regained its competitive edge (in March 1994 a bag of Nigerien rice sold for 9,000 CFA francs in Niamey while a bag of imported rice cost 13,000 CFA francs).

Like those of coastal states, the economies of Sahelian countries are, therefore, characterised by a juxtaposition of two systems: a formal economy attempting to order production and to regulate trade within a rigid legal, administrative and financial framework, and an informal economy, following a different principle, animated by merchant networks and the populations that take advantage of these arrangements (if necessary, fraudulently). With the economic recession plaguing West Africa, the dichotomy between formal and informal economies has been accentuated. The crisis in the formal economy is connected to the state (also hit hard by recession) which limits its capacity to function and thereby reduces its revenue and tariffs. States can no longer meet basic expenses, such as recurrent civil servant salary payments, maintaining and developing social infrastructure and the cost of sovereignty which has been on the rise with the advent of democracy and the associated institutions created by it. Although it is better able to absorb its effects, the recession also impacts on the informal economy. Merchant networks have created breathing space in the form of markets outside state control. These markets are based partly on the economic and social organisation of older models of society (including multiple elements, such as kinship, religion and clientilism) and partly on a deeper understanding of market mechanisms, both at the global level and the level of internal continental trade. The strength of these networks, therefore, resides in their ramifications which are primarily economic, but also state-related, social and religious.

In the end, at the margins of the state, these networks order trade by taking advantage of complementarities between production zones, differences in legislation from one country to the next and membership in different monetary zones (for example, Senegal and Gambia, or Niger and Nigeria). To understand a population's economic strategies and the dynamics that order its relationship with the natural environment, in all its diversity, we must consider the informal economy. Trade and production principles can conflict, especially given present circumstances of trade globalisation and the extremely competitive nature of interstate commerce. Within such a context, the Sahel appears more subordinate than ever to the external world and deprived of a voice. These rural populations are exposed to economic constraints beyond their control, yet to which they must respond, that have repercussions for the way they manage the natural environment.

NOTES

1 Office of Agricultural Commercialisation in Senegal, Office of Food Products and the National Company for Groundnut Commercialisation (SONARA) in Niger, Office of Agricultural Products in Mali.
2 This is a lump sum personal tax or 'poll tax'.
3 This analysis is based on work by the research team of IRAM–INRA (Institut de Recherche et d'Application des Méthodes de développement (Institute for Research and Implementation of Development Methods) – Institut de Recherche Agronomique (Institute for Agronomic Research)) and of Benin University (Coste and Egg, 1993; Egg and Igué, 1993).

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