



James McDougall and Judith Scheele (eds.,).- *Saharan Frontiers: Space and Mobility in Northwest Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 291p.

The Sahara Desert was once rendered as an isolated wasteland of no importance and of little interest to the outside world; yet today it figures among the globe's most infamous trouble spots. *Saharan Frontier* has been published at a moment when public media have brought into sharper focus the African “illegal” migrants crossing the Mediterranean basin to

reach Europe or “El Dorado.” The post 9/11 spread of militant Islamist groups in the region, the growing concern of narcotics smuggling and terrorism, the downfall of Colonel Muammar Al-Qaddafi in Libya in 2011, the resurgent Tuareg separatism in Mali and the movement’s 2012 declaration of the “independent state of Azawad,” have brought the Sahara directly and firmly to the world’s attention.

Edited by James McDougall and Judith Scheele, *Saharan Frontiers* is comprised of four parts, which are branched into fourteen chapters. The latter were virtually developed from a series of conversations between the editors over several years, emanating from a three-day international, multidisciplinary conference under the heading “Navigating Northwest Africa: Towards an Analysis of Saharan Connectivity?” which was held at Magdalen College, Oxford, in September 2008. The volume provides valuable insight into a part of the world long perceived as an empty space or *terra nullius* – “a gap that must simply be crossed”(5). The contributors to *Saharan Frontiers*, who practically have a francophone backdrop, and most of them are historians, anthropologists, or geographers, shed light on a constellation of images of the Sahara as an empty stage for European agency, courage and imagination; it is rendered as a dynamic, highly differentiated social and ecological space characterized by an “intrinsic interdependency of exchange”(13), both internally and with neighbouring regions.

Saharan Frontier is about the other Sahara, not the empty waste of romantic imagination, but the vast and highly differentiated space in which Saharan peoples and, increasingly, newcomers from other parts of Africa, live, work and move. It is about the contemporary Sahara, about principal

aspects of the ways of life of its inhabitants, and about how the changes of recent times have shaped or been resisted by them, with a focus on the ways in which Saharan peoples have moved through time and space, and on the limits, both long-established and recent, to those movements.

Saharan identity is forged by the main tracks people, livestock and goods follow within and across this space, depending upon the climatic, economic and political circumstances. This volume is of paramount importance as it destabilizes the prevalent binary constructs about the Sahara, and the volume's parts and chapters proffer an antidote to the discursive homogeneity and sterility dominating the discourse about the region such as "sub-Saharan," "black," "sedentary," "off-limits," "verboten," "filibustering," "*terra incognita*," "smuggling," "*inter alia*."

The starting point of the book is the all-encompassing rendering of the Sahara as a mysterious, empty and threatening *topos* difficult to penetrate and control, and replete with anguish and psychological alienation as it is pictured in a variety of (non-)literary works as well as in films. Researchers have already conceptualized the Sahara as a bridge rather than an obstacle, particularly over the last decade. However, the editors complain that these publications still put emphasis on "trans-saharan" movements of goods and people, leaving the Sahara again as a gap to be crossed between established world regions whereas most of these flows were in fact directed into the desert. Thus, the "local" cannot be conceived without its long-distance and long-term interconnections and interdependencies. Still, the debate between "trans-" and "intra-" Saharan movement is not new. The argument may help to position the book in its academic environment, wherein its proper value lies, anyway. But the conceptual opposition seems to be overstressed and the different standpoints are rather complementary – as indeed the following chapters show.

Highly theoretical, Part 1 of the book is entitled "Framing Saharan Africa." This part considers the Sahara's long-term history, underscoring its connections with its neighbours to the north and south. Starting from the concept of "connectivity," Peregrine Horden, for example, puts stress on the idea that "seas, oceans and large terrestrial areas, rather than nation-states and empires, are the constituent parts of a global history"(36). Following Horden's discussion of historical connections linking the Sahara with the Mediterranean, E. Ann McDougall provides a historiographic review contrasting the meaning of Saharan identity in western and Saharan thought. Katia Shorle considers the Sahara in classical antiquity, describing it as "a space of vibrant interaction

extending in all directions” (70). James McDougall discusses Saharan Africa as a shifting social and ecological entity; the Sahara frontier regularly opens and closes, advances and retreats. The Sahara was “always a borderland in the sense of a zone constituted by its multiple interactions with neighboring worlds without which it could be unable to survive”(83).

Part 2 “Environment, Territory, and Community” focuses on central and Southern Algeria, the Senegal Valley, and Northern Mali. The four chapters of which this part is made up draw on the fieldwork in the Sahel and the Northern Sahara to exemplify how, in recent times, modes of social power in the region have been variously related to the control of territory and the ability to move through it, the control of people and their places of settlement, and the control of resources and their local and regional distribution. The second part considers changing forms and new concepts of power, territoriality and ethnicity as well as invigorated and changing socio-cultural and religious practices in line with regional dynamics. Strict opposition among social groups, national territories, or geographical places is made more complete by placing emphasis on interdependence across such borders.

Part 3 of the book “Strangers, Space and Labour” tracks the question of the intimate connections between mobility, economic practice, and the making and transformation of place through analysis of various forms of contemporary Sahara and trans-saharan urban settlement. In this part, there is the analysis of international labour migration, its blurring with transit migration, interaction with local communities, and effects on urban space and economy. The case of Mauritania points up how a country can serve as both a destination and a transit point for migrants; the cities of Nouadhibou, Nouakchott and Tamanrasset in Algeria have witnessed rapid growth, and they are seen “as both inherently cosmopolitan and fractured”(18). Notwithstanding they have already been mesmerizing destinations for migrants, the blocking of free movement has led even more permanent residency; different communities live instead in daily co-existence producing an often fragile “cosmopolitanism from below”(186).

Finally, the volume’s fourth part, “Economies of Movement,” throws light on flows of people and merchandise through Saharan borderlands: Southern Morocco, Northern Mali and Northern Niger. The dynamic, regional and lucrative cross-border trade and traffic that help to supply a large part of the market in these regions can be revitalized by migrations and the need for transportation that they create. The strengthening of border controls and surveillance has led to the initiation of substantial rise in illicit trafficking and smuggling and the re-actualization of long-standing patterns

and techniques of intraregional exchange; simultaneously, it has disrupted the complementary of the movements of goods and persons. Saharan towns mostly exist only as a result of these constant movements. In the same of line of argument, European countries try all the harder to encourage African governments to fight against irregular trans-saharan migration system that consolidates economic dynamism and development in the Sahara.

The contributors of this very recommendable book make us conceive of the Sahara not as a region clearly defined by natural characteristics and not as a *topos* replete with emptiness, mystery and anxiety, but as a space on the move that extends and expands according to vivaciously effervescent human encounters. Taken together, these studies suggest a new way of approaching the Sahara beyond images of fearful disaster or unchanging emptiness. We hope that they will be a step toward understanding the Sahara and Saharans on their own terms, in the context of their own histories, in relation to the broader regional and global past of which those histories are a part, and in relation to the historical, political, social, and ecological complexities they are facing today.

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