



« Cap sur l’Afrique » – Economic Contacts in and across the Western Sahara through the Ages

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In 2010, the Director General of the *MarocExport* Agency announced that at the end of the same year, 8% of the country’s exports would go to African countries and that a share of 20% was envisaged for the year 2018. In 2015, King Mohamed again toured several sub-Saharan countries. Accompanied by a huge delegation of economic actors, his visit ended with the signing of more than 50 mostly economic agreements. Parallel to that, in recent years, national newspapers and specialised magazines highlighted the country’s « Cap au Sud », discussed its “Pan-African ambitions”, praised “the potential of the gigantic African market” and emphasised “the continental appetite” of Moroccan businessmen. All this reflects the fact that Morocco started to orientate itself towards the West and Central African countries in search of new markets more than 15 years ago. Yet, a general awareness of the intense caravan trade in and across the Sahara in the past, contrasts with the fact that contemporary academic research has largely ignored historical and recently revived economic contacts.¹ The reasons for the neglect of such trans-Saharan “regionalisations” are conceptual and epistemological, which make it difficult to engage with these regional links.

The problem of established “meta-geographies”

“Regionalisations”, as widely understood, are processes of conscious and unconscious region building. However, the term “region” itself is rather ambiguous, and a consensual definition is difficult to find. With the “cultural turns” in social studies and social-constructivist explanations of the human world, critical perspectives on the conception of social spaces developed. In particular, Lewis and

Wigen (1997) investigated the understanding of large world regions. Conventionally, they are defined by continental landmasses, which offer easily recognisable and repeatedly mediated “meta-geographies”. They are mostly taken for granted and fundamentally shape our spatial understanding. Similarly, efforts to construct “cultural continents” are based on exclusive definitions, which tend to essentialise seemingly very distinct parts of the world.

Area studies reflect this parcelling of the earth’s surface into well-defined, clear-cut and contiguous zones. Accordingly, they often limit their analyses of events, interdependencies and movements to within their respective world regions, but tend to neglect contacts that cross their predefined boundaries. This risks obscuring important socio-economic connections, as many countries and places display stronger orientations towards other parts of the world than to those to which they are commonly assigned. To prevent this “meta-geographical trap”, debates have started to reconceptualise area studies. Claims for multi-disciplinary und multi-regional research go beyond a purely comparative approach among regions, but also ask to be open to studying old and new emerging spaces that cut across established regions. Special attention should be directed toward literally “medi-terranean” areas around big seas, oceans and deserts.

In contrast, a strong tension exists between economics, which considers itself a “systematic” discipline with a universal claim, and the regional orientation of area studies. To work on areas like Africa and the Middle East is considered “peripheral” and “exotic”. Since its separation from trade geography, conventional economics largely abstracts from physical and social space. However, when economists analyse processes of economic

¹The following explanations draw largely on Wippel (2012), (2015) and Marfaing/Wippel (2004).



regionalisation, most of them implicitly assume given spatial entities and postulate, for example, the integration of the entire Arab or African world, despite their huge internal divergences.

However, in recent years, a "New Regionalism Approach" emerged at the intersection of political science and economics. It understands regionalisation as a multi-dimensional process that results from different kinds of institutionalisation "from above", interactions "from below" and the spatial imaginations of actors. These processes produce multiple spaces on numerous scales and in interpenetrating and overlapping constellations. They do not necessarily constitute continuous areas, but very often rather resemble fluid networks, spaced archipelagos and punctiform translocalities.

The creation of two distinct African worlds

Mostly from a socio-cultural perspective, the continental subdivision of the world has long been intersected by another world region that is commonly called the "Arab world", the "Near" and the "Middle East" and, nowadays, the MENA region. But the considerable variations of definitions and designations of this region in terms of time, place and language already contradict the essential character often ascribed to it. In fact, most of these notions arose from Western chancelleries since the late 19th century, which defined and institutionalised them in accordance with their momentary geopolitical interests.

Parallel to that, the French in particular contributed to the formal and mental bisection of the African continent in colonial times. They progressively distinguished "northern" Africa with a "white" (i.e. Arab, Moorish) population from the "Black" parts of the continent. The disruption of the long-distance trade and the political and administrative separation contributed considerably to the perpetuation of the image of the Sahara as an insurmountable barrier to cultural and economic exchange. This, in turn, also affected academic research in such a way that African and Middle Eastern studies split their preoccupation between the two seemingly distinct and unconnected parts of the continent.

But in fact, the Sahara has never been the natural barrier for movements of people, commodities and ideas as which it has been imagined for a long time. However, more comprehensive scientific consideration of interlinkages and commonalities only started in the course of the 1990s. Besides the conceptual shift away from container-like world regions, main reasons have been the excited political debates on clandestine and illegal migration, which has also arrived on European shores. Another cause for current concerns is the unrest in the wider Sahara, mostly linked to extremist and terrorist "Islamist" movements.

Spatial dimensions of historical trans-Saharan trade

Economy and trade are additional centuries-old fields that deserve scientific attention. In pre-colonial times, regular movements structured the Sahara and linked it with neighbouring areas. Numerous long-distance caravan routes formed loose-knit, wide-ranging networks. From west to east, four major trade corridors comprised several axes of circulation. In the utmost west, the most important trade route was the *Tariq lamtûni*, leading from southern Morocco via the Adrar region into the Sahel. Farther to the east, another route connected Morocco to Timbuktu.

Exchanges were carried out in several stages and integrated several spatial scales, from local trade to intercontinental exchange. Well-known trade hubs were located within the Sahara as well as at its edges. There, the trans-Saharan routes linked with continuing trade networks towards the Maghreb, the Mediterranean and Europe, on the one side, and via the Sahel and the Sudan down to the Guinean coast, on the other side. Despite a great continuity of these patterns over the centuries, caravan routes regularly shifted. But it was only after the 15th century that the Atlantic route offered an alternative to north-south trade through the Sahara. The "caravel" started to compete with the "caravan" (Barry 1988), but for a long time could not really replace it.

The colonial powers drew mostly linear territorial boundaries that had little to do with existing migration and trade routes. Traditional movements became "trans-state" (Bach 1998), and were considered "informal" or "clandestine", if they did not submit



to colonial regulations. But in effect, there were many more economic and technological reasons for the decline of trans-Saharan trade between the late 19th century and the 1930s. The increasing insecurity on the great Saharan routes, which was due to local conflicts as well as to resistance against colonial penetration, also played an important role. Some flows were even generated by the establishment of borderlines, including arms smuggling and the traffic in consumption goods that exploited differentials of prices, taxes and regulations.

When colonial expansion was completed, trans-Saharan long-distance trade resumed only hesitantly. Infrastructure for modern means of transport was missing. Grandiose railway and road projects were never realised. Compared with the ship, overland transport was excessively expensive. Since the beginning of the 20th century, exchanges between western and northern Africa have been predominantly by sea, even if until recently the establishment of a permanent shipping line has been difficult. In parallel, the legendary mail and cargo air traffic along the Atlantic coast developed. Finally, the establishment of independent nation states brought the last remainders of trans-Saharan trade to a final standstill. Politically, Morocco tried to gain support from sub-Saharan regimes for its Saharan cause, but trade with Africa remained negligibly low. Economically, the Sahara had thereby more and more evolved into a fracture between northern and western Africa, with all the lasting material and mental effects mentioned above.

Morocco's contemporary economic relations across the Sahara

Only in the 1990s did interstate economic relations between Morocco and sub-Saharan countries start to experience a new upswing. Morocco's African policy now also tried to find new markets and economic partners outside Europe (cf. also Institut Amadeus 2014; Abou El Farah et al. 2010). There has been an intense exchange of official visits; in 2015, the King made its sixth multi-country trip south of the Sahara since he came to power in 1999. On the institutional side, this has gone along with the establishment of numerous joint commissions and the conclusion of numberless bilateral agreements. Besides, Morocco

grants important development aid to African countries, particularly through scholarships to institutes of higher education.

To this, we can add the improvement of transport connectivity. First, air connections expanded considerably. Today, the national carrier *Royal Air Maroc* serves 28 destinations in 24 sub-Saharan countries and established Casablanca as the second transit hub between Africa and Europe. Lines to East and South Africa are envisaged for the near future. Maritime links improved, too. Shipping lines now regularly connect the new container port of *Tanger Méditerranée* to about 30 terminals in sub-Saharan Africa. In 2006, the first paved trans-Saharan highway created an important connection paralleling the Atlantic Ocean. Traffic increased considerably, and Moroccan goods poured into the Mauritanian market.

This has also strengthened economic exchange. Trade more than tripled in the last ten years. In particular, Moroccan exports to sub-Saharan Africa have multiplied by five. Sub-Saharan Africa in 2013 took nearly 6% of all Moroccan exports. While about 80% go to former French colonies, an increasing part is now also done with Anglophone and Lusophone² countries. Bilateral "trade intensities" show that trade has become very intense with a block of countries around Morocco, extending from the western Mediterranean to the Sahel and fading out into Central Africa. However, sub-Saharan fears that Moroccan competition will become too strong for their national enterprises might be one reason why appropriate regional free trade agreements are lacking or ineffective. In particular, such agreements have been under negotiation now for nearly one and a half decade with the West and Central African economic communities. To the official figures, we have to add the important informal trade of small traders, travellers and pilgrims. Professional contraband is often integrated in transcontinental networks and includes the redirection of emergency assistance to refugees, the arms trade and the trafficking of cigarettes and other drugs.

Even more impressive than the rapid increase in exports is the growing direct engagement of

²Portugiesisch sprachige Länder (die Redaktion).



Moroccan companies south of the Sahara. They have invested in a wide range of firm cooperation with French-speaking Western and Central Africa and more and more with other parts of sub-Saharan Africa. This includes important fields like mining, agriculture, water and energy supply, infrastructure, construction, real estate and social housing, but also strategic sectors like banking, insurance and telecommunication. These subsidiaries contribute considerably to the results of their parent companies and simultaneously cover important parts of the target markets.

In the financial sector, the three major national banking groups are present in sub-Saharan Africa. In recent years, their presence is particularly marked by the takeover of entire groups that cover several African countries. The *Banque Marocaine du Commerce Extérieur*, which acquired the *Bank of Africa* in 2007, now has the largest network with 460 agencies in 17 sub-Saharan countries, including East Africa. In the insurance business, *Saham*, Morocco's third insurance provider purchased the pan-African *Colina* group and is now present in 18 countries. In the telecommunications sector, *Maroc Télécom* has acquired the national operators of Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Mali and Gabon in the course of the last decade. Here, it now covers an average of 45% of the national mobile phone markets. In 2014, the Emirati Etisalat overtook *Maroc Télécom* and ceded its subsidiaries in six further sub-Saharan countries to its new affiliate, making it the third telephone company on the continent.

Trans-Saharan links as part of multidirectional regionalisations

Over long phases, the Sahara was not only an important area of transit, a bridge between North and West Africa, but also part of a larger trans-Saharan space unifying its northern and southern margins and closely interlinking to other parts of the world. This was however interrupted by other periods in which the desert constituted a barrier instead.

With the advent of modern territorial states, there has been a shift of perspective from networked places and spaces to international relations. But only in the last few years has Morocco become a considerable economic player south of the Sahara.

So Morocco is now considered the second-most important African investor on the continent, in strong competition with South Africa. This re-orientation helps Morocco overcome its still overwhelming dependence on European markets. At the same time, integration with partners in the Arab world, the region to which Morocco is conventionally assigned, has been sluggish. In the end, Morocco's trans-Saharan relations are part of a broad diversification of economic relations and an increasingly complex pattern of "multidirectional" regionalisation, which also includes new partners in Asia and the Americas. Morocco wants to develop into an interregional economic hub, where for instance international firms invest to serve African markets as well.

We can thus assert a certain revival of goods physically crossing the Sahara at its western margins, with the truck having replaced the camel. However, most trade today goes by air and sea. The Sahara is usually only crossed if necessary, for lack of other means and by trans-state flows that seek to avoid border controls. In this respect, in recent years, the Sahara proper has become a zone of movement and transit again. Besides smugglers, nomads, bandits, rebels, insurgents and terrorists move, all integrated in regional and trans-regional networks. In particular, clandestine migration extends beyond several regional delimitations and has become part of an open global migration complex. Similar to historical long-distance trade, the dangerous, time-consuming crossing of the desert is done in several stages and along shifting lanes and corridors. Several former centres of Saharan trade have temporarily recovered some of the importance they lost when they were placed at the peripheries of the postcolonial states.

Hence, between the Sahel and the Mediterranean, again, several networks and economic zones overlap and interpenetrate again. Links between the Maghreb and southern parts of Africa extend on different scales, from local cross-border exchange through interstate relations to intercontinental connections, emerging from multiple social, economic, political and cultural activities, flows and contacts. Depending on the actors, products and geographical perspectives, different regional spaces emerge, which intersect, overlap and link with other networks and go beyond those regions that have been traditionally



observed. But despite the references often made to former connections, the revival of trans-Saharan relations today is not a simple perpetuation of the past, but is first of all based on the current interests and geopolitical aims of a multitude of state and private, national and transnational actors. Beyond all similarities, the goods exchanged, actors involved, ways and means of transport and regional reaches have changed considerably. However, both call for the consideration of alternative and multiple regional constellations.

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Buchtipps zur Vertiefung

Steffen Wippel: *Wirtschaft, Politik und Raum. Territoriale und regionale Prozesse in der westlichen Sahara*; 2 Bände. Berlin / Tübingen 2012 (1438 Seiten).

Die Arbeit von Steffen Wippel umfasst 2 Bände und ist von einem Forschungsschwerpunkt am Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO) in Berlin mit dem Titel „Aneignung und Abgrenzung in der Globalisierung“ inspiriert. In Band I nimmt Wippel den Raum des nordwestlichen Afrikas in den Blick und fokussiert auf die beiden Nationalstaaten Marokko und Mauretanien. Den modernen raumsoziologischen Konzepten folgend, widmet er sich zugleich der Sahara als einem diese Weltgegend stark prägenden Raum. Er versteht die Wüste dabei nicht nur als physisch und ökologisch bestimmten Naturraum, sondern vor allem als Raum, der durch menschliches Handeln geprägt und geformt ist und somit eine eminent soziale Komponente hat. Dies wird auch deutlich, wenn er Territorien als Gegenden einführt, die wirtschaftspolitischen Regeln unterworfen sind und Gebiete zwischen Staaten bezeichnen können, die einer gemeinsamen staatlichen Verwaltung unterliegen. Regionen sind demgegenüber eher durch akkumulierte individuelle Wirtschaftsaktivitäten „von unten“ geprägt. Mit diesen raumbasierten Konzepten können Wechselbeziehungen von Wirtschaft und Politik zugleich als *Territorialisierungen* und *Regionalisierungen* gefasst werden.

Als Beispiel sei kurz der Transsaharahandel vorgestellt. Einen Wendepunkt stellte der Niedergang Timbuktus als Handelszentrum zwischen 1880 und 1890 dar, das zu dieser Zeit noch formell auf dem Herrschaftsgebiet des marokkanischen Sultans lag. Im Interesse der französischen Kolonialpolitik lag die Umlenkung des Handels in die Ost-Westrichtung, um die Güter über ihr Territorium, nämlich die Seehäfen in ihren Kolonien, weiter zu verteilen. Doch hierauf reagierten die marokkanischen Händler, die begannen, sich weiter südlich an den neuen Routen Richtung Meer niederzulassen und somit neue Räume erschlossen.

Der zweite Band ist der konkreten Entwicklung der bilateralen Beziehungen zwischen Marokko und Mauretanien in jüngerer Vergangenheit gewidmet. Neben die Analyse der zwischenstaatlichen Interaktion treten auch Themen wie Migration und Islamismus. Ergänzt wird die Palette durch die Darstellung der Aktivitäten auf einzelnen wirtschaftlichen Feldern wie Telekommunikation, Bergbau und Transport. Damit bietet das Buch eine wahre Fundgrube an Informationen, sowohl in konzeptioneller Hinsicht als auch hinsichtlich von Beispielen, die eine sehr anschauliche Vergegenwärtigung transnationaler Dimensionen in einer oft nur am Rande betrachteten Weltgegend ermöglichen.

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