

The expansion of French colonialism in the northern Algerian Sahara and its impact on the caravan trade.

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Abstract:

In this research paper, the researcher addresses the problem of French colonial expansion in the northern Algerian Sahara and its impact on the caravan trade. The researcher found that after defeating the resistance of Emir Abdelkader and Ahmed Bey in the north, French colonialism began to advance towards the northern Sahara in order to control these regions, which were havens for rebels and resistance fighters. Military operations in these areas were accompanied by the establishment of systems and laws to control trade between the north and the south. The penetration of colonialism and its control over the centres of the northern Algerian Sahara led to the collapse of the caravan trade, resulting in dire conditions in the desert regions.

Keywords: Sahara, caravans, trade, colonialism.

Introduction:

Trade across the Sahara desert has been active since ancient times and flourished significantly during the medieval Islamic era. Caravans crossed the desert regions along specific routes, carrying various goods to the lands of western Sudan in exchange for other goods. Gold and slaves were the backbone of this trade.

Undoubtedly, the Sahara routes served as an important bridge for cultural interaction between the peoples of North Africa and those beyond the desert. Muslim traders took advantage of the flourishing economic relations between the cities of North Africa and the lands of

western Sudan. They sought to spread Islamic civilisation to these distant lands, for the work of the merchants extended beyond the transport of goods to the dissemination of the Islamic religion and the landmarks of Arab-Islamic culture throughout the regions crossed by the caravan trade.

Thanks to the efforts of these Muslim traders, several African nations embraced Islam and, gradually, significant Islamic states emerged in West Africa.

However, the arrival of French colonialism in the desert regions affected the dynamics of this trade and led to its decline.

So how did French colonial penetration of the northern Algerian Sahara affect the caravan trade?

First, the French colonial penetration of the Algerian Sahara:

After Dey Hussein signed the treaty of surrender on 5 July 1830, French troops entered the city of Algiers and declared the end of Ottoman rule. After much deliberation, the French government decided that Algeria was an occupied territory and that this occupation should be extended to all regions of Algerian territory.

The French forces began to extend their occupation towards the coastal cities. As they moved inland, they encountered the resistance of Emir Abdelkader in the west and Ahmed Bey in the east, which lasted for about twenty years. At the time, the southern part of Algeria remained resistant to French influence.

Once the resistance had been crushed in 1847, French forces turned their attention to the southern regions. The first confrontation with the people of southern Algeria was the resistance of the Zaatasha tribe in 1849. This was followed by the resistance of Sharif Mohammed ben Abdullah, which is considered the most important and largest confrontation with the inhabitants of the south-eastern part of Algeria.

The French had an earlier interest in the Sahara because of the discovery of oil and gas in the region in the 20th century. They saw the Sahara as a strategic depth and a route to reach sub-Saharan Africa. Their goals included the spread of Christianity and the control of trade routes and the exploitation of Africa's resources. It was therefore necessary to invade the Sahara in order to connect the French colonies to the motherland, France, via Algeria. The occupation of the Sahara also served to guarantee the stability of the French occupation in the northern regions. The Sahara became a sanctuary and a refuge for Algerian resistance fighters and insurgents, where they could regroup and reorganise their resistance.

This interest manifested itself in the sending of reconnaissance missions prior to the military invasion and in the launching of several economic projects to speed up or consolidate the invasion, such as the railway project and the inland sea project.

1- Exploratory Missions and Colonial Invasion:

Although the colonial powers were preoccupied with crushing the resistance in the north, French interest in southern Algeria began early and preceded by several years the crushing of the resistance led by Emir Abdelkader and Ahmed Bey. This was achieved by sending explorers and military spies to study the topography and climate of the southern regions and to familiarise themselves with the local population, their customs and traditions.

These individuals were required to report back to the military command on every detail they observed or experienced during their travels. Among them were Caillé, the German doctor Heinrich Barth¹, Colomb,

¹ - (Heinrich Barth) (1821-1865): Heinrich Barth was a German explorer and doctor. He accompanied Richardson, encouraged by the British government, and the two men left Tripoli in March 1850. After passing through Tassili and Aïr, they reached Lake Chad, where they parted company after a dispute. Barth continued his journey towards Kano and finally reached Timbuktu in September 1853. After six months in Timbuktu, he decided to return. Reference: Philippe Decraene and François Zuccarelli: Grands sahariens, Denoël Editions, Paris 1994, p. 267.

Duveyrier, Mircher, Polignac, Vatonne, Dr Hoffman, Ismail Boudierba and others¹.

Many of these reports and studies were indeed published, including Dumont's book "La Sahara Algérienne", published in 1845. The voyage of Duveyrier in 1860 and that of the doctor Barth in 1863 were also published.

The military invasion was not easy because the Sahara had been a refuge for resistance fighters and revolutionaries such as Boumezzrag and Si Moussa Bouhmer. They received support and victory from the inhabitants of southern Algeria. In addition, the resistance of Ouled Sidi Cheikh delayed scientific and exploratory missions for ten years², and the resistance of Sheikh Bouamama also posed a challenge.

2-The Sahara Railway Project:

The French were interested in transport in the Sahara to facilitate the movement of their military forces, to improve conditions in military centres, for trade purposes and to open doors to African markets. As early as 1853, they initiated desert transport projects, with Cabanis proposing a railway line from Algeria to Ouargla via Bou Saada. From Ouargla, the line branched off in three directions: one to Tunis, another to Tripoli and a third to Ain Salah and El Golea³. In addition, Duveyrier, Bruslin and Maj carried out a separate study on the establishment of communication projects between Algeria and Senegal, including railways⁴.

¹- Yahia Bouaziz: French Interests in Southern Algeria and the Sahara Through Their Writings/In/The History of Algeria in National and International Conferences, University Publications Council, Algeria 1999, pp. 67-68.

²- General Government of Algeria: The Territories of Southern Algeria, Second Part, the Work Done 1903-1923, Algerian Printing Press, Algiers 1929, p. 110.

³- Yahia Bouaziz: Op.cit, p. 78.

⁴- Ibrahim Miyassi: French Colonial Expansion in Southwest Algeria (1881-1912), ANEP Press, Rouiba (Algeria) 1996, p. 95.

However, most of these projects were abandoned due to high costs, difficult desert terrain, the development of aviation and the two world wars.

3- The Sahara inland sea project:

After Ferdinand de Lesseps¹ successfully dug the Suez Canal, the French began to consider the creation of an inland sea in Algeria. This would facilitate expansion projects and overcome the obstacles to colonisation. The proposed inland sea would extend from the Gulf of Gabes in the east to the Ouled Naïl and Belad El Chibakka mountains in the west, and from the Aurès and Namamcha mountains and Tébessa in the north to the Hoggar mountains in the south².

François Roder, an officer in the General Staff, was enthusiastic about the project and contacted several adventurers, including Ferdinand de Lesseps³. In 1874, the French Parliament allocated funds to study the project. Prince Abd al-Qadir's support for the project led de Lesseps to try to persuade Prime Minister Jules Ferry in 1883, but he was unsuccessful⁴.

The project was shelved until 1952-1953, when the Technical Research Association for the Study of the Inland Sea was formed and presented its project to De Gaulle's office in 1958. However, the

¹- Ferdinand de Lesseps (1805-1894): French politician and diplomat, began his career as a member of the French diplomatic service. However, his most notable historical work is the construction of the Suez Canal, completed in 1869. He also attempted to build the Panama Canal, but was unable to complete the project. See: Abdul Wahhab Al-Kilani et al.: Encyclopedia of Politics, 7 volumes, Arab Institute for Studies and Publishing, Beirut, 1990, Vol. 1, p. 747.

²- Yahia Bouaziz: Op.cit, p. 78.

³- Yahia Bouaziz: Op.cit, p 78.

⁴- Yahia Bouaziz: Emir Abdelkader and the Project of the Gabès Canal and the African Sea/In/ Al-Asalah, Ministry of Original Education and Religious Affairs, Algeria, Issue 25, May-June 1975, p. 108.

colonial authorities' preoccupation with the revolution led them to ignore the project¹.

Second: The Trans-Saharan Caravan Trade

The trans-Saharan trade routes have played a significant and important role in the history of the regions on its northern and southern edges. These routes have been used since ancient times to trade and connect sub-Saharan Africa with the civilisations of the ancient world around the Mediterranean.

However, the golden age of trade routes to sub-Saharan Africa began with the introduction of Islam to North Africa, where Muslims settled in the Maghreb region from the 3rd Hijri/9th century AD. They intensified their links with the southern Sahara, stretching from the Chad Basin in the east to the Atlantic Ocean in the west.

By the time the Ottomans arrived in Algeria in the early 16th century, the volume of trade between Algeria and the central regions of Africa had reached a significant level. Major cities in the northern Sahara, such as Ouargla, , N'goussa, Tougourt Ghardaia and Laghout, prospered from this trade². This was mentioned by Leo Africanus³. However, after the Ottoman conquest, this trade gradually deteriorated and with the French colonisation of the region, very little remained of it⁴.

Camels or dromedaries are the primary means of transport for these caravan trade routes across the rugged and barren deserts. As a result, the major nomadic tribes, notably the Chaamba and Tuareg, gained control of the caravan trade. The nomadic nature of the Chaamba and

¹- Yahia Bouaziz: French Interests in South Algeria and the Sahara Through Their Writings, p. 86.

²- Oscar Mac Carthy: Physical, Economic, and Political Geography of Algeria, Dubos Frère Printer - Publisher, Algiers 1858, p. 235.

³- Al-Hassan Al-Wazan: Description of Africa, Translated by: Mohammed Haji and Mohammed Al-Akhdar, two parts, Dar Al-Gharb Al-Islami, Beirut 1983, Vol. 2, p. 135.

⁴- Oscar Mac Carthy: Physical, Economic, and Political Geography of Algeria, Dubos Frère Printer - Publisher, Algiers 1858, p. 235.

their knowledge of the desert routes qualified them to engage in trade and to excel in the management of trans-Saharan caravans in the 19th century. Félix acknowledged this when he confirmed that the caravans moving from El-Bayadh towards the Gourara and Tamanrasset regions could only be managed by competent and specialised guides, especially from the Chaamba tribe, who had extensive experience of the routes in these desolate areas¹. Tinelani also mentioned that, in 1816, he accompanied a convoy of Chaamba traders from Timimoun to the city of Algiers, where they accompanied him to Metlili, from where he continued his journey².

The Chaamba receive goods brought by caravans from the north, including Ouled Nail and others, and transport them to the markets of Mezab and Metlili. They then send them to the markets of Ain Salah, Timimoun and Tamanrasset. When they reach Tamanrasset, the Chaamba hand over the task of protecting the goods to the Tuareg, who accompany them all the way to Timbuktu³.

These trading caravans carried various goods and commodities from the north to the south, such as oil, sugar, coffee, textiles, clothing, dates and more. They would exchange these goods for items brought from southern markets, including feathers, ostrich eggs, filali (a type of rubber), ivory, dyed fabrics, rock salt, gold, slaves and other commodities. For example, olive oil produced in the tribal areas would be marketed by the tribes from the region to Bou Saada. From Bou Saada, it would be transported by the Ouled Nail tribe to Metlili, then from Metlili to El-Menia and from there to Tamanrasset by the Chaamba tribe. Finally, from Tamanrasset, it would be taken to Timbuktu by the Tuareg³.

¹- Félix Jacquot: Expedition of General Cavaignac in the Algerian Sahara in April and May 1847, Gide Et J. Baudry, Publisher-Editor, Paris, 1849, p. 184.

²- Abdul Rahman Al-Tanlani: Tanlani's Journey to the Thaghr of Algeria, Manuscript, Sheikh Sidi Abdullah Al-Balbali Library in Kousam, Adrar, p. 1.

³- Rozet Claude-Antoine et Autres: Algeria, Tripolitanian States, Tunis, Firmin Didot Frères Publishers, Paris, 1850, p. 158.

The officer Coÿne explains: "Despite the dispute between the Chaamba and the Beni Mezab, the Chaamba transport goods from the Beni Mezab to the markets of Tuat, Gourara and Tidikelt, with which they regularly trade". He adds that the Beni Mezab bring henna, iron products, scrap metal and other materials from the south-western markets, which the Chaamba bring from the Tafilalet region¹.

Officer Coÿne says: "Despite the disputes between the Chaamba and the Beni M'zab, the Chaamba transport goods from the Beni M'zab to the markets of Touat, Gourara and Tidikelt, which they visit regularly². He adds that the Beni M'zab used to bring henna, iron products, scrap metal and other imported goods from Tafilalet via the Chaamba³.

DelaMartinière mentions that the Beni Mezab did not travel to Tuat in person, but conducted their trade agreements with traders in the region through their intermediaries, the chaamba. The Chaamba brought wheat, soap, wax, tobacco, sugar, coffee and other goods to the area, which they exchanged for filali (a type of rubber), ostrich feathers and eggs, palm ropes, gazelle and cheetah skins, Tuareg tools and weapons, tanned leather, incense, henna, dyed cloth, rock salt and, above all, black slaves and female slaves⁴.

Third: The impact of colonial expansion on the caravan trade

In parallel with the military invasion of the northern Sahara, the colonial authorities worked on monitoring commercial movements and tightening control over the caravan trade, subjecting it to a strict taxation system that controlled the outlets and routes of these caravans. In addition, there was increasing penetration southwards into the depths of the Algerian Sahara.

¹ - Chikh Lakehal: Resistance of the Metlili-Sha'annaba Region to French Colonialism in the Period between 1851-1908, Vol. 1, Dar Sabhi for Printing, Publishing, and Distribution, Metlili 2019, p. 72.

² - A. Coÿne: A Ghazzia in the Great Sahara, Adolphe Jourdan Publisher-Editor, Algiers, 1881, p. 7.

³ - A. Coÿne: The Mzab/In/ R.A., V23, 1879, p. 201.

⁴ - H.-M.-P. de La Martinière et N. Lacroix: Documents pour servir à l'étude du Nord-Ouest africain, Government General of Algeria, Algiers 1897, Vol. 3, p. 435.

On 6 December 1880, a proposal was submitted to the French parliament to extend French influence by creating an advanced desert line beyond the existing one (El-Bayadh - Laghout - Biskra). This proposed line would link the following towns Tiout, Metlili and Touggourt, by creating administrative districts or at least annexes in these three cities, based on the recommendations of the military leaders. The aim was to prevent the rebels from entering these towns and exerting influence on the tribes living in the surrounding areas¹.

By the end of the 19th century, France had consolidated its control over most of the Saharan regions and established numerous trading centres to attract the goods and various products that were abundant in the desert. However, the activity of the caravan trade did not come to a complete halt. There remained a modest level of trade between the north, south and other desert regions².

The French colonial expansion southwards led to the collapse of trade across the Sahara after the occupation of northern Saharan outlets such as Biskra, Ghardaia and El-Aghwat. As a result, the caravan trade declined and was replaced by depots and warehouses in the northern Sahara³.

After the occupation of Ain Salah in 1902 and the consolidation of their control over the northern Saharan regions, from Touggourt and Ouargla in the east to Béchar and Béni Abbès in the west, Passing through the impregnable Ghardaia Menia and El Bayadh.

The military authorities renewed the regional organisation of the south according to the following scheme:

1. The transfer of the district centre from El-Menea to Ghardaia, as El-Menea had lost its military and strategic importance. This was due to the surrender of all the oases surrounding it, while Ghardaia retained its

¹- Louis Rinn: *Our Saharan Frontiers*/In/ R.A., V30, 1886, pp. 216-217.

²- Donald C. Holsinger: *Trade routes of the Algerian Sahara in the XIXth Century*, In, ROMM, N°30, 1980, p. 68.

³- Jamal Qannan: *Issues and Studies in the Modern and Contemporary History of Algeria*, National Museum of the Mujahideen Publications, Algeria 1994, p. 150.

importance as a link between the north and the south. Known for its flourishing and extensive trade, Ghardaia became the headquarters for its subordinate centres such as El-Menea and Ouargla. This was in accordance with the decree of 30 December 1903 concerning the allocation of budgets to the southern regions.

2. The need to unite the annexes of Béni Abbès, Taghit and Gennat El Dar (Béni Ounif) under a single command by creating the centre of "Colomb"¹.

3. The creation of a station in Taghit.

4. The transformation of Ain Sefra from a district to an annex.

5. The removal of the district of Taghit and its transformation into a "Colomb", with Béni Ounif becoming an annex under the direct orders of the commanding general of the military division².

In addition, the decree of 5 September 1907 established a border line in the southern regions of Algeria, made up of fixed points: Touggourt, El-Hajira, Ouargla, Metlili, El-Abiodh Sidi Cheikh and others. This line separates the areas of conditional customs exemption from the areas subject to normal customs duties. The decree also stipulated that under this line there should be a circle with a radius similar to that of the border in the east and west, where customs operate with the support of the military authorities. Within this circle, there was also an external control zone, which served as a base of protection against smuggling operations³.

The implementation of the decree of 5 September 1907 led to the creation of new customs offices in places such as Ouargla (temporarily closed), Metlili (temporarily present in Ghardaia) and M'sila. These offices, in addition to the existing ones, were open to the export of

¹ - This is the current city of Béchar.

² - Ibrahim Miyassi: French Occupation of the Algerian Sahara 1837-1934, Dar Huma for Printing, Publishing, and Distribution, Algeria 2011, p. 533.

³ - Government General of Algeria: The Territories of Southern Algeria Second Part, p. 574.

goods shipped from Algerian ports, the import of natural or manufactured products from the southern Sahara, Morocco and Tunisia, and the import of goods subject to customs duties or specific duties for overseas territories that had taken the southern route before entering the subject territories¹.

Thus, the colonial authorities sought to control markets and trading areas by expanding the scope of military surveillance and establishing these customs offices. This led to the collapse of the caravan trade. As a result, dire conditions prevailed in the desert regions as the colonisers tightened their grip on the local population's livelihoods, coinciding with the spread of famines that led to poverty and widespread drought. In addition, oppressive punishments and high taxes were imposed, further burdening the population and emptying their pockets.

Based on the above, it can be said:

-that the French interest in the Sahara preceded the discovery of oil and gas in the region in the 20th century. They saw the Sahara as a strategic depth and a route to access sub-Saharan Africa.

-In parallel with military operations, they established systems and laws to control the movement of trade between North and South.

-The penetration of colonisation and its control over the northern centres of the Algerian Sahara led to the collapse of the caravan trade, resulting in dire conditions in the desert regions.

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