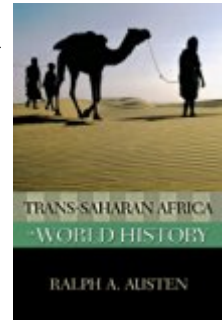


**Ralph A. Austen.** *Trans-Saharan Africa in World History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. x + 157 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-19-533788-4.



**Reviewed by** Ousmane Traoré

**Published on** H-World (September, 2013)

**Commissioned by** Aaron D. Whelchel (Washington State University-Vancouver)

In *Trans-Saharan Africa in World History* Ralph Austen sheds new light on the Sahara's complex history and its recently discovered secrets. In this text the author brilliantly recounts the history of the trans-Saharan trade, including not only the economic and political dynamics of the Sahara desert but also its demographics, with a description of the diverse peoples populating the Sahara before and after their dispersion in 5000 BCE toward the Nile Valley and other parts of Africa. The book is composed of six chapters that follow the historical evolution of the Sahara desert in its transition from a natural ecological barrier to a global highway, one offering opportunities for trade and the birth of a sophisticated diplomatic system as well as a space for economic development and state and empire formation. The six chapters describe, both thematically and chronologically, how the trans-Saharan trade interacted with "Islam and an Islamicate Culture," a Muslim community that facilitated state formation in western and central Sudan as well as in West Africa. The chapters discuss how Islam

shaped economic, political, cultural, and religious dynamics in the Sahara, playing "a critical role in the medieval world economy" (p. 30) and allowing business to flourish, the educational system to blossom, and literacy rates grow as languages transitioned from oral to written forms via scripts such as Ajami.

The introductory chapter presents the historical evolution of the Sahara from a natural "desert barrier" to a "global highway." The author describes in great detail the encounter between the Mediterranean and its centers of civilization and tropical or sub-Saharan Africa, often caricatured as "uncivilized," and how both were bound together by the Sahara desert. Austen raises important questions as to the origins of trans-Saharan trade, many of which also provide methodological guidance: "When and how did trans-Saharan commerce really commence?," "Which African peoples, both around and within the desert, were involved in the first stages of this enterprise?," "What did the new religion and society of Islam add to the impact of earlier civilizations on this

region?” (p. 1). Revisiting previous historical analyses with a fine-toothed comb, the author explores the ecology and demographics of the Sahara, along with its natural history and geography. He also offers an analysis of the different theses proposed to help locate the historical origins of trade relations between the Mediterranean coast, Saharan regions, and Western and Central Sudan while advancing a very relevant clarification of the difficulties inherent in moving across the geographical barrier of the post-Neolithic Sahara, at least “until the arrival of Arab conquerors” (p. 11).

It is worthwhile underlining that the chapter incorporates details regarding the importance of rivers, temperatures, climate, and soil that are critical in helping the reader better understand the shape and timing of human settlements, the possibilities for the intensive development of agriculture, and the growth of urban centers in the Nile Valley, the Savannahs, and Western and Central Sudan. Austen further describes how the beneficial climate and favorable soil of North Africa and Egypt, along with adjacency to the Mediterranean, made possible the birth of ancient urban civilizations that would anchor one end of trans-Saharan trading networks. By noting the important boundaries demarcating the Sahara, Austen characterizes how the proximity of these boundaries accelerated the process whereby the desert changed from a natural ecological barrier into an economic highway that allowed the exchange of goods, skills, and culture. Political development benefited as well, as borne out by the colonization of the North African coast by the Carthaginians, Greeks, and Romans in 814-146 BCE, the subsequent Islamic invasion of North Africa in 642 CE, the blossoming of the Sudanic empires in 900s-1500s, and the arrival of Europeans on the west coast of Africa in the fifteenth century.

Chapters 2 and 3 focus on the penetration of Islam into the region and its significant effects on the Berber peoples who lived in the Sahara and

on the populations living just south of the desert (the Bilad al-sudan). The author further explores the impact of Islamic thought on African economies and state and empire building as the faith diffused into Western and Central Sudan, West Africa, and the forest zones to the south. Beginning with the expansion of Muhammad's empire, which started its historical extension toward the Maghrib in 643, Austen notes how Islam encouraged conversion, education, and trade and resulted in “*Kharijite* settlements in North Africa providing a recorded beginning point for regular trans-Saharan trade on a significant scale” (p. 22). This chronological and historical narrative of the history of trans-Saharan Africa highlights the desert in its role as a space for diplomacy and a site of negotiations where political and economic ambitions driven by gold, salt, slaves, and culture collided. Austen argues that these conflicting elements ultimately resulted in a competition between “caravans and camels” versus “caravels and railroads” once European colonization began. While providing the reader with vital information on politics and foreign policy these chapters also describe Sudanic states’ involvement in and mastery of their trans-Saharan and domestic markets, since the commercial networks controlled by the Jyula and the Hausa not only “provided the Western Sudan with a valuable market for both imported and locally manufactured goods, but also ... spread their own trading diasporas over the Central Sudan and the neighboring forest zones of present-day Ghana, Nigeria, and Cameroon” (p. 42).

Chapter 4 develops the argument that “caravan traffic was an essential condition for the emergence of powerful political centers in the Sudan” and discusses how “rulers to the North and South fight to control the Sahara” (p. 54). Continuing the theme of how Islam diffused and infused into the Saharan and Sudanic contexts from the Maghrib under the direction of Sufi *zawiyas*, this chapter, which Austen entitles “Islamicate Culture,” illuminates the history of present-day

*tariqas* such as the Qadiriya and Tijania, both well represented in West Africa. Taken together with chapter 5, this section of the book details the progression of Islam as a religion and culture carried by savannah-based merchants in their migration to the forest zones of West Africa. Chapter 6 is dedicated to European colonialism and the disruption and continuities of trans-Saharan links during this period. It offers a lucid analysis of the “Scramble for Africa,” not only the context of confrontation among Europeans themselves for African colonies but also how this competition affected trans-Saharan trade.

This final chapter also serves as an epilogue for *Trans-Saharan Africa in World History* that convincingly portrays not a “victory of the caravel over the caravan” but rather the disruption and regression that resulted from the arrival of “rail lines, motor roads, and airplanes” brought by European colonization (p. 118). It clearly summarizes the competition between caravans and railroads that led to what Austen describes as being one of the “most illusory yet persistent projects of colonialism in Africa” (p. 123), namely the trans-Saharan railway project. The author cites the French engineer Adolphe Duponchel, who “asked his readers to imagine that once the desert barrier was broken ‘Timbuktu merges with Algiers at the latitude of Marseille’... France would thus gain access to the one hundred million inhabitants of the Sudan, a region rich in critical raw materials where ‘we would, in exchange, dispose of the ever-increasing products of our manufacturing industries!’” (p. 123). This chapter, however, is also about continuity in the sense that the author explains that “under colonial rule Islam maintained its dominance in the Maghrib and the Sahara while expanding more widely and deeply throughout Sudanic West and Central Africa” (p. 128).

*Trans-Saharan Africa in World History* could be used effectively in a history graduate seminar or an undergraduate survey and would be as fit-

ting for a “History of Islam in Africa” class as for a “History of Africa before 1800” course. It is well written; Ralph Austen, an acknowledged expert in African history, utilizes an intellectual style that makes the reading fluid, accessible, and replete with crucial and useful information that, framed in the perspective of world history, makes the story of trans-Saharan Africa fresh and interesting to learn and teach. *Trans-Saharan Africa in World History* represents an important contribution to the field insofar as it pays tribute to the still little-known history of the Sahara as well to the role played by sub-Saharan Africa in the history of international relations, negotiations, diplomacy, state formation, and empire building facilitated by the trans-Saharan trade.

(pp. 4-5)

(p. 19)

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-world>

**Citation:** Ousmane Traoré. Review of Austen, Ralph A. *Trans-Saharan Africa in World History*. H-World, H-Net Reviews. September, 2013.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37980>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.