

A Historical Analysis of Empire, Trade and Religious Networks as Regionalization Processes in the Trans-Saharan Africa Region

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Abstract

Ancient societies devised strategies of interactions with one another that signified regional political, economic and social initiatives. Research in regionalism has been limited to regional integration within functional areas under Westphalian order. However, in precolonial Africa, some societies developed advanced mechanisms of trade and commerce, empire and religion which supported the regionalization process that created the Trans-Saharan Africa region. Empires and kingdoms such as Borno, Songhay, Mali, and the Trans-Saharan trade, whose routes created strong commercial and religious links among them. Using documentary analysis, this study argues that the forces of trade, empire and religion created the Trans-Saharan Africa region. It further argues that the transformation which the concept of regionalism has witnessed indeed had its origin in the regionalization process of the societies of the Maghreb and Western and Central Sudan which manifested in similar ways which contemporary open regionalism and Trans- and inter I regionalism imply. Finally, the study argues that this regionalization process incorporated the Mediterranean region into its orbit of regionality. It is recommended that future research focus on ancient regional connectivities particularly in Africa.

Keywords: Empire-regionalism, inter-regionalism, Mediterranean region, regionalism, religious networks, trade networks, trans-regionalism, trans-Saharan Africa

INTRODUCTION

Regionalism was an important feature of state relations in ancient times. Kingdoms and empires employed it as a tool for trade and economic development, security and sociopolitical control. Religious movements also used regionalism as tool for spreading religious ideas and social control of societies under single social order. Trade and commerce, more than anything, helped to keep societies in contact with one another. These earliest regional practices were based on then existing legal and political frameworks that were sustained by military force, the economic value accruing to the states from trade and commercial exchanges as well as the relationships that bound the social groups that inhabited those territories. In Africa, Asia and Europe, military alliances, trading and religious networks flourished to keep societies in perpetual relations thereby forming and reforming the idea and practice of regionalism.

In order to probe these historical links among the societies of the Trans-Saharan Africa, the following questions were tackled: i) was there a Trans-Saharan Africa region?; ii) what forces blended to create the Trans-Saharan Africa region?; iii) what were the typical features as well as similarities of the Trans-Saharan Africa regionalism to contemporary regionalism?; iv) was there trans-and interregional relationship between the Trans-Saharan region and the Mediterranean area?

As an attempt to look at regionalization process in precolonial Africa, this paper cruises on the historical approach and used mainly documentary analysis. The historical approach is essential in giving a broad perspective to the development of regionalism over time. This is because regionalism has provided frameworks for political and economic cooperation and community to ancient societies as it has provided in contemporary times from the 20th century to date. While contemporary regionalisms are based on norms, values and peculiarities of the regions in question, ancient regional practices also bore similar ideational stamps. This therefore makes the historical approach relevant in the analysis of regionalism. In the same way contemporary regional initiatives have differed in scope and size, ancient regional practices were also unique. Micro and macro drivers as well as formal frameworks supported the networking of societies in the Trans-Saharan Africa region.

Studies such as Fawcett (2004) studied regionalism from a comparative history approach. By looking at the vacuum that existed, which still exists, in the use of historical approach in the study of regionalism. Fawcett traced the regional efforts from the post-Westphalian Europe to the League of Nations as well as groups within the United Nations like the Group of 77 and those regional groups formed under the banner of ideology such as Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Organization of African Unity (OAU). Eric Storm (2003) looks at regionalism from a cultural history approach where he situates issues of identity and nationalism as the major unit of analysis. Plausible as his analysis is, it covers the period 1890-1945 and therefore offers limited perspective on the history of regionalism. Although his objective was to explore the methodological debates in the field, Vayrynen (2003) also limited the scope of his “old” regionalism to the pre-Cold War period. Rodrigo Tavares made an attempt to give regionalism the historical touch by listing forms of military regionalism by ancient empires, his expositions remain largely commentaries. However, he agreed that regionalism, in itself, is an old phenomenon that has been practiced based on the exigencies of the times (Tavares, 2004: 6-10).

Perhaps, the most instructive study on the history of regionalisms was Fredrik Soderbaum (2015). In this work, he stresses that “regions need to be closely related to the changing historical political context” (Soderbaum, 2015: 5) which will help to properly develop the intellectual history of the field of regionalism. “Throughout history”, Soderbaum argues, “there have also been important continuities between various types of regionalism” (Soderbaum, 2015: 5) but the vast literature on regionalism remains scanty regarding the ancient forms of regionalisms this article is discussing. Moreso, the literature ignore these earliest types of regionalism as existed in Africa. Even in Soderbaum’s historical background to early regionalism, Africa’s ancient regionalisms were excluded. Although De Lombaerde and Soderbaum (2003) provided some explanation as regards to the difficulty in achieving comprehensiveness in the field of regionalism due to “prevailing fragmentations” in the field that hinder its “maturity”, the various intellectual traditions signifies richness of the field rich to develop robust methodological and theoretical base. This should also allow for the flexibility with approaches and the extension of scope to ancient periods in regions such as Africa.

It is on the basis of this gap that this article argues that military alliances, trans-regional trade and trans-regional religious groups and movements represented important efforts by African societies at integration referred to in this article as ancient regionalism. The article further argues that the conceptual development and policy practices in contemporary regionalism already existed in Africa’s precolonial regional initiatives. Finally, it also argues that inter-regionalism characterized the web of links between Trans-Saharan Africa and the Mediterranean regions.

This article is divided into five broad sections. The first section is the introduction which gives a brief overview of regionalism in its ancient manifestation. The second section looks at the concepts

of region, empire, religious networks and provides an operationalization for each. The third section makes the argument that the empire, religious networks, language, and trade were the major drivers of regionalism in precolonial Africa. The fourth argues that the Mediterranean and Trans-Saharan Africa regional systems were integrated by inter-regional frameworks of politics and trade. The fifth section is the conclusion where it is argued that regionalism is not a recent phenomenon in Africa and that Africa international relations had set the foundations of present clamors for contemporary free trade, common borders as well as common continental identity as exemplified in the Trans-Saharan Africa regional system.

THE CONCEPTS OF REGION, EMPIRE, RELIGIOUS NETWORKS AND TRADE

The Region

The concept of the region is highly contested in international relations literature due to the multidisciplinary nature of regional studies (Fawcett, 2008). Some of these studies (Fawcett, 2004; Muntschick, 2012) used broad schemers and have captured more than one factor driving the formation of a region. Other studies (Odeyemi, 2020; Salawu, 2019; Kolawole, 2018; Nye, 1968) contracted their approaches to single utilitarian or geographical variables. However, Fawcett (2008) argued that a one-driver perspective of the region, especially which confines it to a definite geographical area is untenable in the social sciences.

Muntschick (2012) observed that the region is an entity or a subsystem of the larger international system whose component units are the sovereign states bounded by geography and a web of interdependence. According to him, regions are made by geography and a network of economic relations that bind states in political, economic and social symbiosis. But relations between and among states are multilayered and therefore include even the informal ties between groups within each entity.

As early as mid-20th century, scholars were concerned with the conscription of the concept of the region to a definite geographical space. Russett (1967) argued that it will be parochialism to continually tie the concept of region to a fixed geographical area especially in a world increasingly characterized by interdependence. Writing later, Morchand, Boas and Shaw (1999) amplified this argument when they stated that the concept of the region has become elastic so that state actors are no longer the single actors in any regionalization process. Elaborating their position, they contended that although states are still most important actors, non-states including multinational companies and civil societies are also significant players (Morchand, Boas and Shaw, 1999:897). But further than this, micro-drivers such as ethnic affiliation across boundaries have driven regionalization processes throughout the world.

In the same way, Tavares argued that the indefinability of the concept of region should rather be appreciated for the comprehensiveness it brings to regionalism studies. Tracing the etymology of the concept of region, he argued that the concept of the region has always been the outcome of the symbiosis between politics and geography (Tavares, 2004: 4). The geography variable is constant because it is states that integrate, going by the intergovernmentalists.

But the concept of region is much more wide-encompassing as social, historical, language and cultural linkages also play significant role in what people perceive as region. Social constructivists (Ghica, 2013; Jessop, 2003; Risse, 2009; Adotevi, 1997; Koslowski and Kratochwil, 1996; Koslowski and Kratochwil, 1994) see the region as a socio-historically determined phenomenon and that it is the actors' thoughts that shape its development. Within the constructivist tradition, Langenhove (2003) used the historical, geographical and sociocultural parameters to explain regional interactions.

From a politico-institutional perspective, Nacer Bournane takes the region as “partners who have chosen to share a common destiny in a politico-institutional framework pre-established through negotiation based on a strategic vision of their common future” (Bournane, 1997: 51). Most economic communities are established on this philosophy.

Adotevi (1997) looked at culture as a prerequisite for the sense of community to develop among states and that it is this sense of cultural affinities that supports region building and regionness. According to his approach, the region starts with the feeling of “we” where other drivers such as politics follow. Ghica (2013: 739) also argued that the concept of region is a natural phenomenon as well as a social construct that is laced with political cosmetics. Ghica also argued that regionizing is the idea stage of region and that this manifests in the mental process through which actors conceive and construct the region which leads to framing the identity of ‘we and them’. Koslowski and Kratochwil on the other hand believe that international and domestic forces contrive all international structures accepted by political leaders, the regions inclusive.

For this paper, the region is defined as any group of countries whose common historical, social, political and economic, security or any other needs or problems pushed them into the process of constructing an identity upon which to hinge their cooperation toward achieving common goals or solving common problems. This is because ideas and concepts are not static. They change with the transformations taking place in the day-to-day affairs of societies. Writing his *Mi'raaj al-Suud* later, Ahmad Baba al-Timbukti provided a new conception of the Bilad al Sudan as a region of independent societies that should be dealt with on the level of equality as Muslim states (Hall, 2011: 52-56). Based on the foregoing, the region is taken to be what it means for parties at any given time. Therefore, the idea of the region changes overtime as new imperatives come on the table of societal needs.

The Empire

The concept of “empire” has attracted interest of scholars of history and political science. This has been accompanied by debates that are principally concerned with the actual meaning of the concept. However, there seems to be general agreement among scholars that empires are state formations of various sizes that operate under centralized forms of governments (Hausser and Pietschmann, 2014: 2; Mout, 2012: 203). As a state formation that wields considerable power to protect its territories from external aggressions, empires can also be political entities that have largely weak control over their dominions.

Hausser and Pietschmann's concern was the misuse of the concept to represent just any “political formations” with vast territories. According to them, empires are noted for “their great political, economic-financial, military or religious-ideological power” (Hausser and Pietschmann, 2014).

Instances of empire regionalism abound in world history. From Ottomanization to colonial empires, the empire system was used to forge together, forcefully and otherwise, territories and societies for economic and political reasons. Politically, empire regionalism manifested in the form of military alliances as in the Peloponnesian League (De Ste. Croix, 1972: 85-123) and the Delian League (Rawlings, 2008: 49-58). Drawing mostly from Thucydides, both studies illustrate how regional alliances were formed to solve common problems and also how the strongest partner dominates. Ottomanization, as example of empire regionalism as tackled by Faroqhi (2008: 75-97), implies the comprehensive political, social and economic framework upon which the Ottoman Empire conducted relations with her dependent principalities.

Religious, Commercial and Trading Networks

Networks are powerful forces pulling together properties together. Networks are everywhere and can pull different properties depending on the context be it political, economic, and social and so on. Religious networks basically draw allegiance and loyalty from adherents. These followers see themselves as one community across boundaries. Social movements are goal oriented groups grounded on ideas that seek to effect a reforming or transforming of social, political, cultural orders in societies. Some social movements are promoted and sustained with force or ideas or both. Like all networks, commercial and trading networks also pull its properties from various points as long as they have economic value for trade and commerce. Therefore, trade networks thrive on the ‘forces of demand and supply’.

THE EMPIRE, ECONOMIC AND SECURITY REGIONALISM, AND TRANS-SAHARAN AFRICA REGION

Societies at the northern and southern end of the Sahara have been tied by important historical links which take on broad sociopolitical, economic and diplomatic character (Smith, 1976; Soucek, 1976; Smith, 1973). These social, economic and political interests kept these states in perpetual relations that manifested in the form of trade and commerce, military alliances as well as diplomatic exchanges that guaranteed seamless passage of goods and persons among them.

Precolonial state formations conducted relations with one another as often sovereign entities even if most often the idea of strength of one empire or kingdom makes the idea of sovereignty blurry. Therefore, embassies were exchanged (Soucek, 1976) between and among societies of the Trans-Saharan Africa region as evidenced in the accounts of Ibn Batuta who travelled to Gao and other states around the Niger in the period 1351-1352 (Levtzion and Hopkins, 2000; Sutton, 1981). War was another factor that kept these societies in perpetual relations suggesting empire regionalism. What is more, these historical ties have remained indelible in the modesty, architecture and even language of the people. It also led to intermarriages between the peoples of the two regions. In his review of Timothy Cleaveland’s *Becoming Walata: A History of Saharan Social Formation and Transformation*, David Gutelius (2003) has showed how social and cultural identities were formed and transformed in the Walata. These identity formation and transformation processes can be extended to all over the Trans-Saharan Africa region. The point should, however, be noted that war was an important factor that created and sustained relations between ancient Trans-Saharan Africa societies.

Smith (1976) has put that war also encouraged societies to integrate. Arguing that pre-colonial Africa had a state system, even if less developed, he stated pre-colonial international relations covered peacetime relations which were basically conducted diplomatically as well as expansionist conflicts. Drawing from Wright (1965) typology of war, Smith explained that there are two types of wars – primitive and historic wars. The primitive wars were of value to civilizations and their development while historic, modern wars are detrimental to civilizations. But further according to Wright (1965), wars happen as a result of changing relationship between several variables that include technology, social and intellectual development.

Through their several military campaigns and cooperation in the western Sudan, the Almoravids created loosely held empire that spanned one century (Conrad and Fischer, 1982; Semonin, 1964). These military campaigns and cooperation further deepened the connections between the societies on both sides of the Sahara by creating commercial zones that stretched from the southern end of the Sahara to the northern end of the Mediterranean (Bennison, 2016). This regional enterprise as argued Garrard (1982: 459) increased the volume of trade and commerce between the societies of Western Sudan and those of North Africa and the Mediterranean. According to him “the well-developed trade network in the Savannah and Sahel zones” (Garrard, 1982: 459) elevated Al-

Andalus ports to serve as regional hubs where transfers of gold, fur and even grains from western Sudan and Maghreb were made of other parts of the world. To amplify this position, Staros (1996: 23) noted that it is undisputable fact that the Trans-Saharan trade routes had indelible footprints on the Trans-Mediterranean trade by increasing its volume. Hunwick (1996: 232) also argued that the Almoravids gave the Western Sudan the Maliki legal code, as they did in the Maghreb and Andalus. This also integrated the Mediterranean and Trans-Saharan Africa regional systems under uniform judicial system.

Austen (2010) maintained that Islam was able to link the different groups in the region together. Islam gave the societies an identity that blended their social identities and relations even if their political structures clashed (Lavers, 1990). Two contributions of Islam to the development, sustaining and transformation of the Trans-Saharan Africa region have been examined. In their separate studies, both Lavers (1990) and Fischer (1970) have observed that there were strong relations between kingdoms in North Africa and West Africa before 1800 AD. According to Fischer (1970), Qaid Abdu's incursion in the last part of the 16th century triggered the formalization of diplomatic relations between the Bornu Empire, Egypt, Fezzan and Ottoman Empire. This was the reason that prompted Mai Idris Aloma to send an embassy to Istanbul and in turn the Sultan sent letters to the Viceroy of Egypt and Sanjak of Fezzan which, in part, reads:

From the arrival of this order, you are bound in this regard to take no extra exactions from the travellers, to devise more necessary and suitable regulations about goods, and not to molest any travellers wishing to visit or return home from the Holy Ka'ba or any merchants from this territory on the roads or trails at the hostels or stations or anywhere (Quoted in Lavers, 1990: 247).

The articles of this letter reflect those in modern conventions and protocols of regional organizations in three ways – a legal and political rule that provides a framework for a regional symbiosis among political entities; a tariff regime for economic, commercial and trading activities that cut across these entities; consular services to support freedom of movement and transit as well as ensuring security of travelers along the long distance routes – between Ottoman's two vassal states on one hand and Bornu Empire on the other hand.

According to Lavers (1990: 249) as far back as 17th Century, there is evidence that European merchants, particularly Italians and Portuguese, were in Kano seeking to open a trading post which the ruler of Kano rejected "on the advice of merchants from Cairo". Further he noted that in 1636, Pasha Muhammad Saqizli (1633-1649) formed a trade agreement with Fezzan and Bornu and this was also formalized a year later by exchanging gifts and emissaries (Lavers, 1990).

What is worth noting is that these regional military alliances, economic cooperation and political unions that were established by pre-colonial societies in the Trans-Saharan Africa which flourished until colonialism set in in the 19th and 20th centuries. These social links were deep-rooted that architectural and ethnic features bear peculiarities. While the juxtaposition in culture and architecture have been well noted by previous research (Gutelius, 2003; Aradeon, 1989), present reminiscent abound in northern Nigeria, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Chad where many communities trace their ancestry to the northern edges of the Sahara.

TRADE AND COMMERCIAL NETWORKS, OPEN REGIONALISM AND THE TRANS-SAHARAN AFRICA REGION

Commercial and trading networks served as drivers and stakeholders in precolonial regionalism in Africa. The importance of trade and commercial links elevated merchants to an important status of diplomatic representatives along the trading routes.

Kang (2016) saw open regionalism as a system of trade relations between nations that must not necessarily be contiguous. The guiding principle in open regionalism is the market and it is backed

by intergovernmental support which encourages consensus in decision making. Writing in 1996, Aggarwal and Morrison also viewed regionalism as “open”. Open regionalism according to them is based on “concerned but voluntary actions” by states in areas where imperatives of cooperation present themselves (Aggarwal and Morrison, 1996: 385). Open regionalism is like a marriage of convenience and is usually employed in regions where advantages of interdependence and military tensions coexist. Because it is flexible, open regionalism is open to even non-members while optional to members described as “free riders” that are within and outside the arrangement (Aggarwal and Morrison, 1996: 387). Open regionalism is driven by mainly economic forces, particularly the activities of companies in the intra-regional investment flows.

Kang (2016) also discussed shallow and deep regionalism. Kang’s shallow regionalism implies a regional integration process where countries are only interested in the removal of trade tariffs between them. Shallow regionalism, featured by lack of concrete commitments to agreements, is similar to Aggarwal and Morrison’s open regionalism. Deep regionalism on the other hand takes shape when there is harmonized system of legal standards guiding the trade, investments and relations between members. The North America Free Trade Area (NAFTA) and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AcFTA) are examples. Further in his analysis, Kang (2016: 259) has argued that “gravitational” regionalism denotes a framework that has two parties – a regional union or trading bloc, on one hand, and a single country, on the other hand. However, Kang (2016) gave it a brief, almost hypothetical attention. He has not fully explicated on the concept. Moreso, he used economic theory in his analysis. This research seeks to depart from such existing studies by looking at the identities and structures that reconcile states’ interests and the external environment. Ghislaine Lydon (2009: 1) has observed that the Islamic legal and justice system encouraged trade, movement and fused societies on both edges of the Sahara desert together. Therefore, a system of settlements of claims and disputes, mediated by Muslim jurists, was enabled and this gave the traders and their creditors the confidence to invest in the lucrative affair.

Lovejoy (1971) was concerned with the simplification role of Islam for the trade between the Hausaland and the societies in the forest belts south of the Niger bend region in the 17th century. He argued that commercial networks of the Hausa merchants succeeded in extending the links to Borno. This is akin to modern free trade agreement or free trade area. According to him, “a common faith in Islam and the use of Hausa as a lingua franca” (Lovejoy, 1971: 539) knitted together the trading posts into the trans-savannah trading zone with diplomatic and political pillars of the kingdoms and empires that trading route passed through.

In their respective studies, Wilks (1968; 1962), Fage, (1962) and Wright (1976) concerned with how the Dyula commercial network established trading posts across the region between the Sahelian societies and the forest states of the southern West Sudan since the 13th century. The Dyula, a Mande speaking nation, were professional traders that used Islam as vehicle to facilitate trade into the Akan Kingdom as well as the Dagomba Kingdom. Although there was no specific indication that regional markets were sustained, the Dyula are credited to have been the drivers for establishing of free markets in Abonse and Adangme as well as the Begho-Jenne trading complex (Wilks, 1962: 338-339).

OPEN REGIONALISM, RELIGIOUS NETWORKS AND THE TRANS-SAHARAN AFRICA REGION

Trade was the most important pull factor that integrated the regional systems of the Sahara, Bilad al Sudan and by extension the Mediterranean region. Prange has argued that trade was so versatile economic factor that pulled all the social, political and cultural factor to support the regionalization of the trans-Saharan Africa regional system. The Islamic religion and especially the Sufi

movements passed over to the Bilad al Sudan from the Maghreb through the trade routes. Elsewhere in this article, we have seen how the state political and individual religious efforts of the Almoravids and the Almohad as well as scholars such as Muhammad Al Maghili and other spread Islam to West African empires and kingdoms. It is pertinent to look at how the Sufi movements further connected the Maghreb to the Western and Central Sudan together, thereby further integrating the societies in the Trans-Saharan region.

The Sufi Networks in the Trans-Saharan Africa region were, and still are, communities of adherents connected by their identity as members of respective Sufi movement from which they derive inspiration from the teachings of their grand founders. Like the chain (*ijaza*) that held students and their teachers, the initiation and the *zawiyas* served as strong glues that perpetually keep the network flourishing. Being the major Sufi orders that made inroads into the Trans-Saharan Africa region were the Qadiriyya, Tijjaniyya and Sanusiya (Hunwick, 1996). As argued by Hunwick, the Sufi movements helped to create a “Pan Islamic network” that bound the Trans-Saharan Africa regional system. Although other Sufi movements also spread across the region, their presence is almost insignificant in comparison to these three. Sufism had been on the scene of political, economic and social development of the societies of Western and Central Sudan since the earliest periods of the advent of Islam in the region, although it became common and popular in the 12th and 13th centuries (SPICE, 2009).

The Qadiriyya was popularized in Western Sudan in the late 15th Century by Sheikh Muhammad Al Maghili (Kane, 2016: 70). The Qadiriyya order spread and consolidated in the region for three centuries, largely as sub-religious activity before the Tijjaniyya and Sanusiya. While the Qadiriyya and the Tijjaniyya came into the Sudan through the western route of the Trans-Saharan Trade that started from Sijilmasa in Maghreb to the Niger Bend, the Sanusiya spread mainly through the eastern route that started in Tunisia and Libya to the Lake Chad areas of the Central Sudan. It must be observed that the Qadiriyya, Tijjaniyya and Sanusiya were able to spread quickly in the area due to mainly their connections with the Trans-Saharan traders, scholarship development and their doctrinal trainings and appeal.

TRANS- AND INTER-REGIONALISM: LINKING TRANS-SAHARAN AFRICA AND THE MEDITERRANEAN REGION

African scholarship bear the “patterns of local and trans-local interaction and integration” (Kea, 2014: 425-426) along cultural, political, economic and social life of people in the Mediterranean and the Trans-Saharan region. Kea argued that the Mediterranean-Sahara regional system was supported by the “Trans-Saharan Pastoral Technocomplex”. Demonstrating how empire regionalism also thrived in the 1000BC-666BC period when conquests, alliances and trading networks served as instruments of integrating the societies in the Sahara and the Mediterranean, Kea (2014) argued that the histories of the Mediterranean and the Saharan regional economic, political and social systems are inseparable. Scholars have also tried to study the Trans-Saharan and Trans-Mediterranean links from the biological sciences using the genealogical approach. Harich et al argued that the Saharan trade contributed to the “pre-historic migrations across the Mediterranean Sea, leading to exchange of linkages between Iberia and Maghreb” (Harich et al, 2010). In one respect, trans-Saharan Trade was that important agent of connectivity that pulled the regional political, economic, social and regional systems of the Trans-Saharan Africa and the Mediterranean together.

In their authoritative work, Insoll and Shaw (1997) demonstrated that interregional trade in Africa is an old phenomenon. Using the Igbo-Ukwu beads of the forest zone as case, they traced that these ornaments were transported to Fustat, Egypt through Gao in the Western Sudan. Examining

the north-south trade links, Insoll and Shaw argued that there was also the south-north flow which was equally strong and important in the interregional trade in precolonial Africa.

Like relations between societies, it will be difficult to authoritatively point to a period when regionalism started in Trans-Saharan Africa. However, the rise of empires, and the alliances among them as well as the advent of the Trans-Saharan trade are taken to be important events as the origin of regionalism in the area under study. However, these events mark anything but the end of the story. The eventual development of strong networks of links rose beyond the boundaries of the Trans-Saharan Africa region to connect the neighboring Mediterranean region. This surge was driven by the desire of empires to control sources gold and salt and the trade routes as well as another strong force, Islam.

As much as Trans-Saharan comprised the Saharan and Western and Central Sudan, the region's distinguishing feature was that it was inseparable from the political, economic and social developments in the larger Mediterranean area due to the stated multiple factors above. From the perspective of his paper, this is testimony to the wide trading, political and social relations between empires on the Mediterranean coast.

CONCLUSION

This article has sketched out a modest history of regionalism and regionalization in the Trans-Saharan Africa region. The Trans-Saharan Africa region encompassed the Sahara as well as the Western and Central Sudan region. The region rose as a result of the conspiring of strong economic, social and political factors. The confluence of culture, religion, trade and commerce as well as state formations integrated the societies. This created a sense of regionness among the societies. However, it is instructive to note that the Trans-Saharan Africa region was not a static geographical area. It expanded and contracted as the expansionist desires of the empires blew or calmed and as the scholar-traders opened or extended the trade routes to new areas. This is B. Marie Perinbam's position when she stressed that permanent borders did not exist but flexible trading and market networks (Perinbam, 1973: 436).

Regionalism is not a recent initiative even in precolonial African international relations. The African societies had achieved integration at various levels using various mechanisms. As demonstrated in the preceding pages, the forces of empire, religious and commercial networks as well as culture conspired to create the Trans-Saharan Africa region covering societies on both northern and western edges of the Sahara which in present-day fall in countries north and west Africa. These strong political, economic and social links supported the integration of these societies into a region.

Economically, trade links which were bolstered by camels, the ship of the desert, were the most important drivers of integration in the Trans-Saharan Africa region. The control of trade routes became synonymous with influence in regional trade by the empires and kingdoms. In fact, the desire to control of these routes in addition to the source of gold, salt and slaves saw the rise and fall of many empires and kingdoms in this region. Commodity exchange went both ways from the south to north and vice versa, and also extend to the Mediterranean. It should be observed that this long distance trade was sustained by Islamic legal codes, as for settlement and measurement, and Arabic language as medium of communication.

Socially, three important drivers supported the development and sustaining of the Trans-Saharan Africa region. Islam and its legal codes, the Arabic language and the cultural diffusion by way of migration and intermarriages among the communities led to the formation of the Trans-Saharan identity and gave the people a sense of *regionness*. Through religious fatwas of scholars such as Ahmad Baba Al Timbukti, the age-old attachment of blackness to slavery was challenged so that

the new identity was being a Muslim. Reformist movements and Sufi networks, especially the Qadiriyya, but later Tijjaniyya and Sanusiya, also helped forge another layer of regionness in the Trans-Saharan Africa region. Almoravid scholars such as Muhammad Al Maghili traveled across the region to reform Muslim societies especially the Hausa states. This helped in further development of the political structures in these kingdoms.

What is more, the Sufi Qadiriyya, Tijjaniyya and Sanusiya revivalist movements also supported the regionalization process in the Trans-Saharan Africa region. Within the Islamic identity, these networks spread a community consciousness deriving inspirations from teachings of their founders. The Qadiriyya and the Tijjaniyya forged inter-regional consciousness of its community of adherents particularly in the Western Sudan while the Sanusiya dwelled mainly on the Central Sudan region linking the Kingdoms of Wadai and Borno to southeastern Libya. One significant factor to note is that both Islam, the Sufi revivalists and the reformist Almoravids used the trade routes significantly in their spread across the Trans-Saharan Africa space.

In conclusion, this paper is a modest contribution to the debate about African history. It argues that Africa had indeed a rich past in which it developed a strong regional framework under which political, economic and social interactions were anchored over many centuries. One of these was the multidimensional regionalization process in the Trans-Saharan Africa region that was interrupted by European incursion and arbitrary demarcation of borders in the 19th century.

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