Q1 Any update on publication details?
Conceptualising the Sahara: the World of Nineteenth-Century Beyrouk Commerce

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This article derives from work done several years ago in the context of a grant project on ‘A Family Affair’ – basically a study of how Saharan ‘families’, broadly defined, organized their interests in the trans-Saharan trade. While I have published an important piece from this project based on oral material, I have yet to exploit the micro-filmed/photocopied documentation. My scanned files are now ready to work with and I want to begin. An important portion of the files relates specifically to something called the ‘Beyrouk Registers’ – a series of commercial accountings (‘registers’) revealing the interests of an important southern Moroccan family, the Beyrouk. Some have argued that these registers represent a model of the trans-Saharan trade both in terms of content (arrangement of credit, commodities, personalities) and of organisation (networking, social categories, theories thereof). Indeed, the family itself has been credited with controlling, if not constituting, the ‘essence’ of this trade in the early-to-mid nineteenth century. I’m more skeptical of both the model and the content of the ‘registers’. My skepticism derives from my experiences in doing fieldwork in southern Morocco (specifically Goulimine, the ‘home’ of the Beyrouk), my close examination of these ‘registers’ in comparison with other source materials (notably those of Paul Pascon on the ‘House of Illigh’ – also southern Morocco) and my consideration of what I believe these registers really CAN tell us in the context of recent work on the topic of trans-Saharan trade. In addition, I draw on comparable materials from other Saharan sources, concerning other Saharan families as well as very different materials (oral as well as written) which collectively will help us ‘situate’ the Beyrouk and their registers more realistically in Saharan history. I believe the article is the first step in challenging our current conceptualization of both desert commerce and desert society. In short, we are now positioned to look at questions around ‘knowing’ with respect to the trans-Saharan trade from a number of different conceptual frameworks, as well as a number of different topical ‘focii’. It is precisely because we are beginning to ‘know’ more that we are also beginning to understand how much more, still, the trans-Saharan trade has to tell us about Saharan society.

For most of the twentieth century, historians of Africa have represented the Sahara through the eyes of outsiders. We began with the medieval accounts of Arab travellers and merchants, many of whom had never visited the region. These were mercifully translated into French and English, thereby making them, and by implication the Sahara, more readily accessible.¹ These travellers and compilers shaped our view of the Sahara to the extent that we have spent years trying to reconcile their understanding of geography with our own, and have developed research in archaeology
and oral history based on the framework these writings gave us. We then shifted attention to the knowledge provided us by Europeans as they first interacted with coastal regions and then began to ‘penetrate’ the interior. We began to feel comfortable replacing drawings of fabled kings on thrones with golden orbs in their hands, with tribal names scrawled across the interior. By the nineteenth century, European explorers (and merchants and military scouts) moved not only inland but overland – Europeans actually began to cross the Sahara, usually from North to South but there were exceptions. From them and from occasional shipwrecked captives, our ‘knowledge’ of the Sahara was fleshed out sufficiently to map it – tribes, confederations, emirates all gave shape and identity to the otherwise vast desert void. From the medieval through to the modern, however, one characteristic of the knowledge being produced was its focus on, if not obsession with, trade: what exotic valuables could be drawn out of Africa, what kind of a market for goods from the ‘outside’ world could be created within it. In addition to mapping the Sahara by its peoples, Europeans delineated it with a genre of commercial scaffolding – lines representing caravan routes drawn predominately north-south, with feeder routes cross-cutting them in places. In the nineteenth century, the age of abolition, these lines were given life with images of actual Saharans – raiders and traders, driving their hapless victims across the desert to a life of slavery in the Arab Muslim world.

There have of course been exceptions to this broad-brushed picture – famous products of Saharan knowledge like the *tariqh* of Timbuktu (*al-Fattash, as-Sudan*), the memoir of al-Shinqit (*al-Wasit*) and the correspondence of famous scholars like al-Maghili and Ahmad Baba, all of which are referenced frequently. But they are referenced within a conceptual framework rooted in knowledge produced by and large, externally. In recent years, of course, this situation has been changing as scholars are deliberately seeking out products of Saharan knowledge with which to re-shape their own. Witness the papers published in this volume. And there are others whose work should be similarly celebrated such as Abdel Wedoud ould Cheikh, Pierre Bonte, Tim Cleveland, Raymond Taylor and James Webb Jr. Ghislaine Lydon’s paper presented elsewhere in this volume and her recent superb thesis speak most directly to issues of commerce because she chose to understand the Sahara through papers left to us by the Tekna – Saharan traders *par excellence*. This paper draws on similar documentation – indeed some of the same documentation. However, what I want to do with it here is somewhat different. Rather than talking about how these documents reveal the nature of trans-Saharan trade, I would like to suggest that a close look at the Sahara through the eyes of those who wrote and ‘acted in’ these accounts actually challenges the notion that this was about trans-Saharan trade. Or put another way, I question the notion that these Saharans saw themselves and the Sahara in the ways we have assumed to date. I would like to explore the extent to which our continued focus on trans-Saharan trade is, itself, a piece of that ‘constructed Sahara’ reflecting the interests and perceptions of non-Saharans rather than those of the desert’s true inhabitants.

I would like to begin by returning to the seventeenth century, where Bruce Hall’s paper (also in this volume) so enticingly leaves us. Hall argues that by looking closely at Saharan-generated knowledge as it is selectively available to us in letters
and various manuscripts, using the example of the famous Kunta clan one can trace
the emergence of a particularly Saharan concept of race – a critical aspect of Saharan
culture and society. Elsewhere, I have drawn on different seventeenth century docu-
mentation to suggest other facets of a Saharan world in the making: a letter from a
Kunta Shaykh, a series of letters from the Moroccan Sultan to his son and a set of
questions put to a renowned cleric in Shinqit, all focusing in various ways on the ques-
tion of controlling and commercialising Saharan salts. In the first instance, in a
letter from Shaykh Sidi al-Mukhtar al-Kabir (Kunta) to the Moroccan Sultan Sidi
Muhammad b. Abd Allah (1757–1790) concerning Teghaza salt, one can almost
see the emergence of Saharan Islamic culture as it was being moulded by the
Kunta in their negotiations over space and influence with the Moroccan regency.
Each clearly had its own ‘vision’ of the Sahara. Both laid claim to the desert’s
material wealth – especially its salt mines and commerce – and both fought to
define and give legitimacy to its spiritual identity. That said, the Saharan reality
during most of the seventeenth and eighteenth century was that of a society in con-
stant flux, varying as much in its self-perceptions as in the observations of those exter-
nal to it. The questions posed to the Shinqit cleric, Mohammed bin al-Mukhtar bin
La’amech, along with his answers (which together comprised a nawazil), suggested a
further, albeit more speculative, influence. The questions received by bin La’amech
during the latter part of the seventeenth century came from Saharans positioned
near and far – the Adrar, Tagant, Southern Morocco (the Wadi Nun), Niger Bend
(Timbuktu), and ‘the Sudan’ in general. And they dealt with commercial transactions
spanning all parts of these regions, as for example in the query relating to the ethics of
debt collecting in Wadi Nun on the part of an agent sent from as far away as
Timbuktu. One of the two largest groupings of questions, some 35 (out of about
240 lengthy questions and sub-questions), concerned commerce, and half again of
these were either directly related to salt transactions or used salt as the example to
illustrate the question being raised. The Adrar, site of the medieval salt mine of
Ijil, and the Hodh, home to several of Ijil’s major markets, were the regional bases
for several queries involving credit and transport costs. And Shinqit, home to bin
La’amech himself, was Ijil’s principal distribution center in the Adrar. The fact
that a Shinqit cleric, who was never a formal qadi (judge), became a recognized
legal authority over such a large area, lends further credence to the impression given
by his nawazil: salt was widely used as the measure of value and the norm for compari-
sion in what was clearly an important emergent Saharan commercial culture. This
culture was based on a shared understanding of what being a good Muslim and a
good merchant meant as articulated by bin La’amech (and later, by his disciples’
interpretations). And the markets where commonly acknowledged sets of ‘ethical
Islamic practices’ were recognised and respected delineated its contours.

Using these conceptualisations of the Sahara and its commercial culture as an
initial framework, I would like to explore its ‘evolution’ in the nineteenth century
through a series of commercial registers – largely but not exclusively belonging to
a family from southern Morocco known to us initially through European accounts
as ‘The Beyrouk’. It will not be possible to look at them in detail – although I will
draw on a few particularly interesting examples. But focusing on detail is probably
less important than trying to grasp a larger sense of what the documents, as a collection, reveal to us of Saharan views of their own commercial world.

The Beyrouk and Their Registers

Thanks to several accounts by Europeans who visited Goulimine (S. Morocco) either as shipwrecked prisoners held for ransom or as explorers and interpreters, the M’Barek family that came to be known by the diminutive ‘Beyrouk’, gained both fame and prominence far beyond the realm of the Sahara. The history of this family is at once both the best and the least well known: nineteenth-century sources seldom speak of the ‘trans-Saharan’ trade to southern Morocco without mentioning the central role of Shaykh Mohamed Beyrouk (d. 1859) and Goulimine, but precisely because most of this information is generated in the context of some fundamental changes in Saharan trade (notably, the attempts by Europeans to abolish the slave trade and those of Beyrouk and his sons to establish independent access to coastal Atlantic trade), it reflects the intersection of European and Beyrouk self-interests more than it does a careful exploration of Beyrouk history.

That said, if some question remains about the veracity of the Beyrouk’s own version of their rise to fame and fortune, the fact that they did enjoy both to some considerable extent in the newly emergent Goulimine market appears indisputable. When Leopold Panet visited in 1850, he spoke of Mohamed Beyrouk as a man of unusual intelligence whose efforts had turned Goulimine into a major commercial centre for merchants from Morocco and the Sudan. He observed caravans of 2,000 and 3,000 camels being sent to Timbuktu to bring back gum, ivory, wax and slaves. He noted that gold was acquired via relations with the Mauritanian Adrar and that caravans were also sent directly to Tichit. And he commented on the growing importance of commercial relations with the Tafilet and Tuat (in the contemporary Algerian desert). In short, he attributed all of this activity to Beyrouk’s ‘intelligent efforts, conciliatory nature which [presumably through mediation] assures peace’ and also to his employment of specialized Saharan ‘couriers de commerce’, the al-‘Arib. He also praised Beyrouk’s initiative of undertaking correspondence with ‘indigenous chiefs from the interior’ in attracting many more merchants. Panet quoted Beyrouk admiringly as saying (of himself) that ‘the role of a chief is to assure peace and stimulate work... This is what I do in using revenues which come to me through my position [as shaykh – taxes, gifts] to send caravans everywhere. Where I succeed, my subjects follow me there; where I do not, it means taking time and trying to overcome obstructive relations’. Beyrouk was apparently instrumental in turning the attention of his particular clan, the Ait Moussa ou Ali, to the purely commercial aspects of Saharan business, instructing his own group to leave questions of defence and retribution (also key to Saharan business) to a different clan (the Ait Lhassan). And as part of this strategy, he encouraged Ait Moussa ou Ali to move into Mauritania – into the Adrar (Shinqit, Atar) and the Tagant (Tidjikja, Tichit), as well as into Timbuktu (in modern Mali).
These initiatives were underpinned by a number of agreements and contracts, both with other merchants and with political authorities in the southern Sahara. They were also taking place in the context of continued competition from other markets (such as Iligh in the Tazerwalt region, and neighbouring Asrir and Tiermurt), and other clans – particularly the Azwafid who controlled the latter markets and although belonging to the same larger ‘tribe’, the Tekna, were part of an opposing leff (political division).

This broad-brushed tableau, although sketchy, helps us conceptualise the documents with which we are dealing – namely, what I am calling ‘the Beyrouk (commercial) Registers’. These are physical, leather-bound ‘books’ (often with locks) generated by several of Shaykh Beyrouk’s sons and kept today by their descendants, usually in their family residence. I located and micro-filmed a number of them during research in Goulimine in the summer of 1994. These are not the only registers I found nor are registers the only documents relative to Saharan trade that one can locate in Goulimine, let alone elsewhere along desert commercial itineraries. But focusing on this small, clearly delineated corpus will hopefully show why I made the statements earlier about seeking to understand Saharan commerce as Saharan merchants – rather than European travellers – understood it.

First, there is the issue of what is treated in these registers. All relate to the financial role as creditor and/or more generally the economic activities of Shaykh Beyrouk’s sons, principally ‘Abidin, Dahman and Shaykh M’Hammad (‘al-Shlayyah). The registers range over time from the 1840s through c.1900. It is fair to say that most focus on the acknowledgement of debts by various peoples to the ‘holder’ of the register and that many (if not most) of these are about credit being extended for trade. But the same register in any given case may also include acknowledgement of a financial agreement, discussion of the payment of debts following the death of a merchant, inventory of what remains at the end of a fair or moussem, expenses incurred on a voyage – including money paid for food, rent, services of shepherds, transporters and so on. One register belonging to an Azwafid ‘competitor’, the Lamti family, ends with a record of two births, one of which took place in Timbuktu. Another register, devoted primarily to the affairs of ‘Abidine, concerns the purchasing of land and irrigation works in the vicinity of Goulimine, as well as matters of inheritance within the family. In this particular set of documents, ‘Abidine appears active in a range of local affairs including extending loans and purchasing goods from other family members. Yet another Beyrouk register includes among its documents an acknowledgement of an agreement by Brahim bin Shaykh Beyrouk (another of Shaykh Beyrouk’s sons) to liberate his slave at the time of his death, as well as a discussion of the Beyrouk tribute ‘owed’ to the Ait Mussa ou Ali’s mudarat (protection payments) in a time of conflict. Mudarat is also the subject of a document in a Beyrouk register belonging to M’Hammed, this time a detailed outline of the payments made along the route to Timbuktu – how much was paid, to whom and where. The same register (in a separate section) indicates M’Hammad bin Shaykh Beyrouk’s extensive involvement with the al-‘Arib, the latter Saharan clan serving both as merchants and as guarantors vis-à-vis their Beyrouk creditor. Elsewhere, another of M’Hammad’s registers acknowledges the extension of
protection by Brahim to a Jewish merchant, a protection that extended from Goulimine as far north as Ifrane. And yet another links one more son, Dahmane, with extensive trade in eastern Mauritanian in the Tichit region.

The significance of these select observations is multi-fold. First, when these registers are looked at as entities, as actual books, and when the range of issues regarded by their owners as significant enough to be recorded in a particular way is considered, one sees a much more diversified, if not diffuse, notion of what constitutes ‘commerce’ than that suggested by our usual focus on routes, goods, prices, profits and losses. Second, the Beyrouk registers in particular reflect the integration of this family in local affairs, the ways in which social and familial issues were tied into commercial affairs, and the way in which political issues were also seen as part of ‘commercial’ (or financial) affairs. One sees them all in the same register. And the lack of distinction between ‘affairs’ across the Sahara and ‘affairs’ at home suggests a much closer integration of economic activities than we have perhaps been willing to allow. In this case, a comparison of ‘Abidin’s and M’Hammad’s registers in particular shows totally different forms of wealth accumulation occurring at the same time – the ‘registers’ allow us to see the seamlessness of the process. They suggest that there may have been a movement of capital and profit between what we would normally regard as separate economic spheres, and that this ‘movement’ may have worked more effectively than we have assumed precisely because from the perspective of the Beyrouk, these were not separate spheres at all.

Third, while not all entries indicate where the document was being written or where goods given on credit were meant to be sold, many do. Or, in identifying the individuals involved (including in some instances, intermediaries), ‘regions’ are also revealed. People’s names often incorporated a reference to their town of origin; even a ‘tribal’ signifier was an indication of regional affiliation. So a debt recognition that identifies a certain Larabi bin al-Hajj Brahim ‘Samsdi’ is a clear link to the sedentary Smaside clan settled in Atar, central Mauritania, just as reference to the debtor Ahmed Baba bin M’hamed ‘al-Tahali al-Rguibi’ ties the activity to the north-western Saharan Reguibat nomads, and Brahim bin Taleb al-Azbeir ‘al-Zafati’ indicates the indebtedness of a neighbour belonging to the rival Azwafid clan. What is clear is that this commerce did not operate only to the north (Goulimine) and the south (Timbuktu) of the Sahara but within the Sahara. Some activity is centred on the Timbuktu region – this is most evident in the Lamti Sidi l’Arabi register where there was clearly an extensive interest in the Tawdeni-Arawan-Timbuktu salt trade, and it is also revealed in M’Hammad bin Shaykh Beyrouk’s accounts detailing the exchange in Tawdeni salt for tobacco from the (Moroccan) Dra’a and American cloth. It is also to be assumed from some of the Beyrouk accounts of extensive credit being extended to the Tadjakant and the al-A’rib, both of whom were active along the Tindouf-Arawan-Timbuktu route, that these also reflected Timbuktu-based activity.

However, looked at as a whole, the collection of registers suggests a much more diversified concept of trading in the Sahara, even when these so-called ‘trans-Saharan’ activities are examined. One particularly illuminative account is the one previously mentioned that presents the costs of a voyage from Goulimine through
Tindouf to Timbuktu as seen through the mudarat paid along the way. An outline of the entry appears as follows:

Mudarat [paid in dirham] for:

- [Ait ou] M’Raybat and Dawi Belal (Ida Blal) 850
- Lamrabet bel La’amach 350
- Bani Delim 1100 + 1 baysa (piece of cloth)
- Sidi Ahmad Lahbib [illegible] + 1 burnous, 1 kaftan, 2 hayk (woman’s garment worn in North Africa), 2 loaves sugar, 1 horse (mare)
- Abdallah Hbir 1000 + 2 kaftans, 3 hayk, 3 baysa, 3 loaves sugar, 1 shash (cloth)
- Shaykh 1300 + 1 burnous, 1 kaftan, 3 hayk, 8 baysa, 2 baysa (shash), [ill.]
- Hammadi bin Sidi A’mar 200 + 1 hayk, [illegible], 1 baysa
- Emir and Qadi, ‘Fullan’ 200 + 4 baysa
- Turareg 250 + 100 + value (in goods) of 24 pieces of gold, 1 leather sac, 1 hayk, 3 malhfa (Saharan woman’s veil similar to the sari), 1 Hram, 1 veil, 50cms mlaff (fine, embroidered wool)
- Al-Qaid (caid) Zayn 300 + 3 baysa, 1 hayk, 2 loaves sugar,
- Abdallah bin Jamal 200 + 1 hayk, 2 loaves sugar, 1 baysa

From this we can see more or less the itinerary followed, useful in itself, but also the precise amounts that must be added to the cost of merchandise payments made in money but also clothing (burnous, kaftans, hayks, malhfa), various cloths (shash, hram, mlaff) and sugar. There are payments made to ‘warrior’ tribes along the way, the M’raybat and Ida Blal along the Dra’a valley, the Awled Delim en route to Tindouf, and the Tuareg between there and Timbuktu; to people of ‘authority’ in various towns, such as Emir ‘Fullan’ – presumably Fulani, in the Masina/Timbuktu area, al-Qaid (caid – secular leader) Zayn and Abdallah bin Jmal (place unknown); and people of ‘religious’ authority, the jurist and qadi Lamrabet bel La-amach, renowned religious leader of the Tajakant in Tindouf and of the same family as author of the seventeenth century Shinqit nawazil discussed above, Hammadi bin Sidi Amar (possibly Kunta, from Timbuktu, 42) ‘Shaykh’ Sidi Ahmad Lahbib, and qadi Fullah (probably a Macina connection, also in Timbuktu). It is worth noting that the largest amounts of mudarat seem to have been destined for the desert nomads who could alternately threaten or assure security of caravan movement – that is, the M’raybat, Ida Blal, Awled Delim and the Tuareg, and that those sums increased as one moved towards Timbuktu. Payments to religious authorities and sedentary notables tended to be markedly less. The document reflects the composition of the Sahara as experienced through the caravan’s travels: it reveals not just an itinerary or a means to facilitate trans-Saharan trade, it articulates
the intersection of Saharan social and political structures as they shaped how commerce took place and what it ‘cost’ to do business. And it hints at how benefits from trade contributed to local economy and authority, both political and religious, throughout the Sahara. In other words, the document is Saharan in nature and vision, and as such, is a reflection of that world and its functioning in the nineteenth century.44

A register belonging to the Beyrouk-related Arwayli family of Shinqit constitutes a similar vision of Saharan life, stretching over the best part of a century. It is similar to the Goulimine-located ‘books’, consisting of about eighty pages, containing some thirty recognitions of debt and lists of merchandise sold (along with the price of each article) for, variously, Mahmoud and/or Mohammad ould Abdallah ould Arwayli and Ali Fall ould Mohammed Arwayli. The ‘debtors’ are diverse clients from Goulimine and neighbouring areas.45 Among other ‘diverse documents’ (including more debt acknowledgements) located in the same Shinqit library is one attesting to an alliance between a Reguibat and his sons, and an Ait Mousa ou Ali of Shinqit ‘for mutual defence and payment of diyya (blood payment)’.46 It reveals the intersection of regions, the geographical areas nomadised by the Reguibat and those settled by the Beyrouk, and occupations, the ‘warrior’ specialisation of the former and the ‘merchant’ activity of the latter. Note here the two factors involved in the agreement: defence and diyya. It can be safely inferred that the intent was that the former would supply the ‘defence’, the latter the payments. This ‘partnership’ clearly went beyond simple commerce, yet was also, in large part, a mechanism intended to aid that commerce. This was a partnership that was both political and commercial – quintessentially ‘Saharan’.47

The registers also indicate a considerable amount of commercial activity between people and places in the Sahara. For example, one document dated 1861 involved Mawlay al-Mahdi Mawlay Ibrahim, a Sharif merchant from Tafilet (former ‘heartland’ of the Moroccan Alawite dynasty) who was involved in commerce in Mauritania. It consisted of three entries, each the same: a list of various cloth goods sent by Dhamane (Abd er-Rahman) bin Shaykh Beyrouk to the said Sharif by means of different merchants, one of whom served twice and was of the al-‘Arib clan that was closely connected with the Beyrouk.48 This document is important in that it delineates a sphere of interaction between Goulimine, Tafilet and Mauritania. And again, we must note that the ‘network’ underlyingly this sphere comprised not only commercial, caravan itineraries but a web of social and political relations. Similarly, c.1850, M‘Hammad bin Shaykh Beyrouk had several agreements with agents in Mauritania for a variety of merchandise – most especially gum. One of these specifies Tajakant transporters taking gum to Tichit, to be traded for camels and cloth, and another Tajakant taking gum to Goulimine.49 Two additional documents (one attesting to a commercial partnership or qirad between ‘Shlayyah’ M‘Hammad and one Addi bin Manu, a second to a loan by the former, to the latter) were signed the same day of March 1849, at Tidjikja, in Mauritania.50 Yet another referred to a debt contracted with M‘Hammed for the value of 100 loads of salt – payment owed by one Mohammed bin Barka for tobacco and cloth delivered to Tawdenni itself; it is not clear if the agreement was affirmed at the mine as well.51 Reading between the
descriptions of goods and trade routes, as well as the various locations of the signing of the contracts permits us to see something of the range of activities constituting Saharan commerce, as well as its geographical mapping from Goulimine to Tidjikja, to Tichit to Tawdenni to Timbuktu. This sampling of commercial arrangements that varied according to the place and goods involved, gives texture to our understanding of business reality.

One of the more interesting examples of this intra-Saharan activity comes from M’Hammad bin shaykh Beyrouk’s activities in early 1903. The document records one Al-Ghali of the Ahl Dsidi Ali (Tajakant) of Tindouf acknowledging three different debts of cereal and tobacco, the first of which is dated 1892. The entry was signed by Abdallah b. Muhammad al-Mukhtar bel-La’mach, son of the great Tindouf jurist and qadi who was responsible for directing his clan to rebuild Tindouf after its destruction in the mid-nineteenth century; therefore, it was almost certainly written in Tindouf. And Muhammad al-Mukhtar bel-La’mach had been a disciple of the famed Kunta shaykh, Sidi Muhammad al-Khalifa.52 Like so many others, these commercial transactions were firmly rooted in a long line of Saharan religious tradition and authority. Finally, one might also mention the presence in various documents of units of measure or value specific to the Sahara, such as the cereal measure of mudd in Tichit and the baysa (a hassanya, western Saharan, word) piece of cloth, both used alongside the more frequently invoked mithkal of Timbuktu. Careful attention to these aspects of Saharan exchange which operated as a kind of special ‘language’ helping delineate spheres of movement will also permit us to better understand how Saharan merchants defined their world.

This last observation relates to a point I wish to raise in connection with the registers, namely their surprising conformity over time and space with respect to articulating their subject matter. Whether written in Goulimine or Shinqit or Tidjikja or Arawan, what emerged was a common commercial culture, a common commercial language, delineating a Sahara that was universally ‘understood’ among all the actors involved. The nature of business partnerships, the meaning of local units of value, the arrangement of credit extension (and when and how and with whom it would be paid – often it was the timing of local fairs in Wad Nun that determined the timing of the loan repayment), the structure of mudarat – all were acknowledged throughout the ‘zone’. These many accounts (not to mention the supporting correspondence we could also work with) describe types of transactions that reflect specific experiences of commerce in different Saharan locales; what is important for us to recognise is how that commerce in turn simultaneously reflected local social and political structures and influenced them. Put another way: to the extent that we can understand an essential ‘Saharaness’ here, in the context of what commerce meant and how it was carried out, we can also begin to allow that analysis to help shape more generalized views of ‘Saharan’ society and how it operated.

As a final comment on the contents of the register collection and what it reveals of Saharan understanding of commerce, it is interesting to note the extent to which it mirrors the emergent cultural commerce of bel La’amech’s seventeenth-century nawzil – a somewhat more ‘mature’ incarnation thereof. Salt commerce appears to have retained its central place in these nineteenth century documents. One might
be tempted to argue that salt – a key resource of the Sahara – was also instrumental in generating the regional and inter-regional economic activity that comprised commerce in the Sahara. However, just as importantly, I think we need to remember that where that commercial culture took root was in the heart of the Sahara itself. Movement of physical, cultural, intellectual, financial then took place in and out of this ‘heartland’ enriching a growing ‘Saharan periphery’. Hence, a sharif merchant from Tafilelt became the link between the Moroccan Dra’a valley and Mauritania, while another ‘al-Filali’ (from Tafilelt) was found attesting to Beyrouk legal documents in Goulimine; a similar sharif al-Walati (from Walata, eastern Mauritania) witnessed commercial contracts in Goulimine, signing himself as an ‘inhabitant’ of the town; and the Shinqit Islamic scholarship represented by the bel La’amech family that guided the development of seventeenth-century commerce, re-rooted itself in Tindouf in the mid-nineteenth century. It is not coincidental that the people of Wad Nun thought of themselves as ‘Saharans’ and that Goulimine portrayed itself as the ‘bab’ or gate to the Sahara, as indeed it still does.

**Conclusions: ‘Knowing of the Sahara, in the Sahara . . .’**

In conclusion, I would like to return to the subject raised in the title of the paper, ‘Saharan conceptualisation’. The knowledge generated by Saharans did not occur in a vacuum; like all knowledge it both reflected societal reality and attempted in some way to mould, manipulate or direct that conceptualised reality. The specific accounts we have been discussing, as well as the larger documentation concerning ‘Saharan commerce’ broadly defined, comprise a part of that knowledge, a key to that conceptualisation. They provoke us to ask ‘what was Saharan about Saharan commerce’. We began by drawing attention to the pervasiveness of external, largely European and colonial paradigms in the reading of Saharan history and trade. We need to remember that simply identifying texts produced by Saharans does not, in itself, take us beyond these paradigms. Nor will Saharan scholars ever enjoy the luxury of knowing they have most of the relevant documents in hand – they are scattered far and wide, like Saharan life itself, and remain personal, not public, property. Indeed, it is unlikely we will acquire a true sense of just how much ‘recorded knowledge’ there actually is in Mauritania and neighbouring Saharan communities.

These two issues are brought to the forefront in the work of the Moroccan scholar Mustapha Naimi. Close to twenty years ago, he attempted to arrive at categorical answers regarding the nature of trans-Saharan trade through the study of ‘la maison commerciale de Glaymim’, by which he meant ‘the House of Beyrouk’. He acquired what he identified as three commercial registers of ‘unequalled importance’ representing the affairs of M’Hammed (one from 1833 to 1855, the other from 1843 to 1860) and Dahman (from 1857 to 1872) bin Shaykh Beyrouk. He then conducted a detailed analysis organized around specific products of trade from the south (slaves, gum and gold in that order of priority), expressed in a variety of tables, charts and pie-graphs. In spite of the intent to let these ‘new sources’ drive his analysis, the framework for everything from the history of the family to the selection
of commodities analysed (as reflected in an extensive attention to the slave trade, for example) is based on the same European materials we identified at the outset of this paper. The author is Moroccan and the texts are Saharan, but the ‘eyes’ remain European. Moreover, there is no information given as to the provenance of the ‘registers’ that he labels BI, II and III or the manner and circumstances in which they were collected. Naimi implies that these are the Beyrouk registers and that therefore an analysis that counts transactions, determines percentages and generalises about the nature of both Saharan trade and the role of the Beyrouk family in it, is methodologically justified. Unfortunately, the fieldwork that located the registers (and other ‘diverse documentation’) that I have been referencing here, failed to turn up any of the collections Naimi used in spite of consulting the same family ‘sources’. None of the registers we did locate and micro-film ‘matched’ BI, II or III, although several of them did indeed belong to M’Hammed and Dahmane bin Shaykh Beyrouk, and covered the same time period indicated by Mustapha. While it is certain from comparing the registers located so far that whatever BI, II and III cover, it is only a small part of the documentation available, it is also possible from making this same comparison to suggest that we are dealing with some of the same materials. In some fashion, Naimi may have ‘re-arranged’ them to get at the questions he was exploring. Simply put, the collection does not support the weight of Naimi’s analysis. And what even this sampling might have told us is compromised further if the documents have indeed been removed from their context, the ‘books’ in which they were created.

The real problem here, however, is the legacy of this work. As the only article to date specifically addressing this source material, it continues to shape scholars’ approach to the subject. And as Naimi has generously made his photocopies of these ‘registers’ available to some of these scholars, they have become influential in themselves as the ‘Naimi collection’ – removed yet one step further from their Goulimine source. A recent thesis on the Beyrouk family, for example, relied solely on this ‘source’ for its analysis of the Beyrouk family’s role in nineteenth-century trans-Saharan trade. Ironically, its intent was to challenge the received wisdom with respect to the Beyrouks by deconstructing those same European sources Naimi (and others) have used so extensively. The registers (BI, II and III) have been ‘re-arranged’ (again?) to address the needs of this particular inquiry, thereby taking us ever further away from the original view and value offered by the materials. Put another way, the ‘registers’ per se have become completely invisible. That said, we must remain careful about what we do and do not conclude on the basis of what will always be an unintended sampling imposed by the nature of fieldwork. The fact that I now have ‘more’ of these records and can contextualise them better than my predecessors does not necessarily mean that the interpretations I draw from them are ‘more true’ – only that they are more likely to be getting us closer to a Saharan view of the Sahara. In part, the problem arises because the documentation is scattered throughout the Saharan world we have been probing. Hence one finds documentation – including registers – relevant to the Beyrouk with various people, in places far removed from Goulimine. Moreover, it is likely that we will continue to find documentation, including registers, generated by other
families especially if we do not assume that in acceding to the Beyrouk family the place of prominence claimed for them by their European ‘discoverers’, we have indeed discovered reality.

There is a final issue to take into account. Saharans are conscious that their ‘knowledge’ as preserved in these documents is an intrinsic part of their contemporaneity identity; in many instances, these same documents can be used to access political power or economic resources. They have value to Saharans beyond the original intent of their authors and gradually, it has become apparent that they have value to outsiders as well. Virtual ‘markets in documents’ exist. In Mauritania, manuscripts are offered for sale, taken far from their original context (indeed, the seller often has no idea of where the document originated) and separated from the documentary collection of which they were initially a part. All of this in fact reduces the value of the material in understanding the past (as I have attempted to show here in appreciating ‘registers’ as coherent entities). But that process is not commonly understood locally. In Morocco, the Foucauldian notion of ‘knowledge is power’ is fully understood. Some Saharans want to control which ‘knowledge’ is shared and with whom. It is not merely a matter of being able to profit from making such material available to visiting, wealthy foreigners, or of deciding that if their history is to be written, it deserves to be written by fellow Saharans (a not unreasonable position, by the way, in light of current discussions around the ‘appropriation of knowledge’). It is a realization that by giving out ‘pieces’ of knowledge to researchers – be they foreign or local – they are actually shaping the past. By controlling who sees and who interprets ‘knowing’ as it was articulated in the Sahara, they are also controlling ‘knowing’ of the Sahara. This contemporary reality must be factored into our efforts to chronicle history, with full recognition that as we do so, we also become part of a dynamic ‘conceptualising’ of the Sahara.

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NOTES


2. A good example are the multiple interpretations of al-Bakri’s description of eleventh century trans-Saharan itineraries. Rod McIntosh, the well-known American archaeologist of West Africa, once commented to me that there were times he wished the Arab ‘travellers’ had not written so much, as their vision of the Sahara – based on some very wrong notions of the local terrain and river patterns had for so long determined where archaeologists dug. In other words, the ‘terrain’ had already been staked out by those external written sources and archaeological ‘finds’ were only expanding knowledge within pre-conceived parameters. (Personal communication)
3. Reference is to the famous Catalan Map of Charles V (1375), reproduced in many places but most relevant here, as front piece to E W Bovill, Caravans of the Old Sahara. An introduction to the history of the Western Sudan (London: International Institute of African Languages and Cultures 1933).

4. I refer to this process and identify relevant sources the reader might like to consult in “The Caravel and the Caravan”: Reconsidering Received Wisdom in the Sixteenth-Century Sahara’ submitted for publication in proceedings from The Atlantic World and Virginia: 1550–1624’ organized by The Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Virginia (originally presented at the conference of the same name, Williamsburg, March 2004).

5. Maurice Barbier (ed.), Voyages et explorations au Sahara occidental au XIX siècle. (Paris: Editions l’Harmattan 1985) gives an overview of these voyages as well as an excellent selection of excerpted texts for the western Saharan region. Barbier has also published a similar book of texts from the late eighteenth century produced by three French shipwrecked seamen taken prisoner in the desert (Trois Français au Sahara occidental en 1784–1786, (Paris: Editions l’Harmattan 1984). Any number of books on Timbuktu and the Atlantic, such as Rene Caillié (1828), Heinrich Barth (1853–4), Oscar Lenz (1890), who tend to be better known precisely because of the famed Timbuktu connection. John O Hunwick’s “Timbuktu: a biography” is helpful here (http://www.sum.uio.no/research/mall/timbuktu/research/articles/bibliography.pdf), no date.


8. Abdel Wedoud ould Cheikh, “Nomadisme, Islam et Pouvoir Politique dans la société Maure Pré-coloniale: essai sur quelques aspects de tribalisme” (Doctorat d’état, Paris V, 1985). This as yet unpublished thesis is essential reading for anyone working on the Mauritanian Sahara, written by a scholar familiar with all the relevant Arabiic manuscript materials and steeped in the culture necessary to interpret them.

9. Pierre Bonte, ‘L’émirat de l’Adrar. Approches Anthropologiques et Historiques’ (Doctorat d’état, Paris, 1997). Bonte’s work employs the results of thirty years of repeated visits with the people of the Adrar; he has become a valued source of oral history among Mauritians themselves as he retains information given him by elders long since deceased.


14. I have been for many years questioning ‘what does it mean to be Saharan?’ and in so doing, sought to move beyond earlier conceptions of the Sahara as seen by outsiders. While my ideas have been
explored in papers and articles, there is as yet no comprehensive development of them in monograph form. It is not surprising, therefore, to see that Ghislaine Lydon’s work, following many of the same sources, both oral and written, has begun to explore some of the same questions. Her thesis, ‘On Trans-Saharan Trails’ approaches issues of economic, Islamic ‘culture’, as well as defining a ‘trab al-Bidan’ that corresponds largely with the one I have worked with over the years. It is also noteworthy that for many years, my work on Ijil salt and the Adrar was developing independently of but, it turns out, parallel to that of Pierre Bonte’s. While his interests, and his masterful doctorat d’état ‘L’émirat de l’Adrar’, extend far deeper into the theoretical aspects of power and authority in this region than mine, it was fascinating to see how many lines of inquiry we had both followed in response to the ‘evidence’ suggested to us by the Adrar sources. And even more fascinating to discover how many conclusions we shared. I thank Pierre for the hours of conversation and hospitality he generously shared with me while allowing me to consult his (at the time) unfinished thesis. What these developments suggest to me is that there is something essentially ‘Saharan’ here and that if we listen closely to the voices of the past in all their modalities, we will eventually come to understand this fascinating crucible of culture and commerce in very different – hopefully more relevant – ways. These ways need also to be contrasted to a different historiography, a largely Moroccan one, in which the Sahara as an entity essentially disappears. This absorption of the Sahara to Morocco is not only an overtly political issue; for an excellent example of how it also shapes the writing of economic history see Zahra Akhchiche-Tamouh, ‘Le Maroc et le Soudan au XIXe siècle (1830–1894). Contribution à une histoire inter-régionale de l’Afrique’ (Thèse pour le doctorat de 3ème cycle, Paris–1, 1982).


16. ‘Snapshots from the Sahara: salt the essence of being’ in Journal of Libyan Studies, special conference proceedings (Forthcoming 2005); paper originally presented at ‘Conference on the Natural Resources and Cultural Heritage of the Libyan Desert’, Tripoli, December 2002. The documents I am referring to are the following: (1) Letter from Shaikh Sidi al-Mukhtar al-Kabir (Kunta) to the Moroccan Sultan Sidi Muhammad b. Abd Allah (1757–1790) concerning Teghaza salt. (n.d.) A partial copy of this letter was obtained in Nouakchott, Mauritania by Mohamed Lahbib Nouhi from Sidi Ahmad ould Ahmed Salem. The latter had himself copied a number of documents from an archive supposedly housed in Tichit. Unfortunately, there is no indication on the letter as to the exact whereabouts of the original. (2) Letters from Moulay Ismail (Sultan of Morocco) to his son, al-Mamoun Governor of Tafilt and Dra’a, 1692, 1699 and n.d. Notes from Mohamed al-Gharbi, Rio Oro (As-supiya al-hamra wa wadi dhahab dar al Kibab, Casablanca, s.d); pp. 217–26; 227–36; 237–43. (3) Muhammad b. Muktar Bel-La’amech al-Shanqiti (d.1696), “Nawazil”, Ms. # 5742, al-Khizana al-Hassaniyya (Archives Royales, Rabat, Morocco): 94 pages (microfilmed). My appreciation to Mohamed Lahbib Nouhi for acquiring the microfilm, translating relevant sections and working through an analysis of them with me.

17. These ideas are developed further with respect to the emergence of a ‘dynamic Saharan world’ on the margins of the emergent Atlantic world in McDougall, ‘The Carvel and the Caravan’.


19. These ideas were first expressed in McDougall, ‘A Qadi from Shinqit and the Question of Salt: the nawazil of Mohammed bin al-Mukhtar bin Laamech (late 17th C.)’, paper presented at the African Studies Association meeting, November 1999. Lydon devotes several pages of discussion to this nawazil in Chapter 2 of ‘On Trans-Saharan Trails’, and more recently notes that ‘Bel ‘Amish set the tone of Saharan legal discourse since it is widely agreed that Maruitanian jurisprudence begins with his [late 17th century] nawazil’. She also reiterates the centrality of salt both to this document and those of other scholars and traders, referring to salt as a ‘Saharan currency’. (‘Inkwells of the Sahara: reflections on the production of Islamic Knowledge in bilad shinqit’, in Scott S. Reese (ed.) The Transmission of Learning in Islamic Africa (Leiden-Boston: Brill 2004), p. 39–71; quotation 65.6; comments re: salt and scholarship p. 60.

20. The main European sources are those found in Barbier, . . . Sahara Occidental, in particular Charles Cochelet (1821), Leopold Panet (1850), Bou el Moghdad (1861 – a Senegalese ‘metis’ working for the French) and Oscar Lenz (1884). Tamouh also has a section in her thesis on Goulimine in general and the prominent Beyrouk family in particular (‘Le Maroc et le Soudan . . .’), pp. 205–19). Her discussion rests heavily on Panet and a somewhat problematic (but nevertheless informative) colonial ethnography by F. de la Chapelle, ‘Les Tekna du sud marocain’, t. 1–4, 1933–4 Bulletin du comité de l’Afrique Française. She also draws on a locally-compiled ethnography (also ‘colonial’ in context, being a set of oral materials originally collected in the 1930s) by al-Mokhtar al-Soussi, al-Ma’sul 20 tomes, Casablanca, 1961; the Beyrouk are treated in volume XIX. ‘Mbarek’ meaning ‘blessed or good’; the use of diminutives and nicknames are common ways to distinguish between people and
families who carry the same name. The Beyrouk family, along with another well-known commercial family settled in Morocco’s Tazerwalt area (Illigh), were actively engaged in the ransoming of Christian prisoners. Cochelet, himself a shipwrecked prisoner ultimately sold to the Beyrouk and then ransomed, gave a detailed description of the ‘business’ in his 1819 account. (On Illigh, see also Tamouh, ‘Le Maroc et le Soudan…’, pp. 219–225).

21. (With Mohamed Hassan Mohamed), ‘Les Maisons Beyrouk et Illigh: construction d’identité au Maroc de Sud, 16ème à 18 ème siècles’, paper presented at the second Table Rounde de Goulimine, conference jointly sponsored Centre National de Recherche Scientifique Paris (organizers Pierre Bonte, Claude Lefevre) and Institut de Recherche Scientifique, Rabat (Mustapha Naimi), Rabat, Morocco, February 1999. [Paper written in English, Presented by McDougall in French [invited]]. This effort built on my research-in-progress ‘Saharan Business & Merchant Capital In the Nineteenth Century: preliminary findings from Southern Morocco’, paper presented at the International Economic History Conference, Milan, September 1994. Mohamed Mohamed has since completed a thesis specifically looking at the Beyrouk as a case study in Saharan identity: ‘Born in the Text: The Bayrouk of Southern Morocco, a Study in History and Identity’, (PhD Thesis, University of Alberta, 2004). This research, entirely independent from my own, is strongly critical of all the European sources and challenges the supposition that the Beyrouk had anything close to the significance that even our jointly-authored earlier paper postulated. Both suggest, however, that in looking at the Beyrouk, we are looking at a case of identity construction in which Europeans unwittingly played a large role and in which contemporary historians, continuing to use these sources largely unquestioningly, have further entrenched the Beyrouk in their chosen historical role. My interest here is in the documentation left by the Beyouk rather than in an examination of this identity.

22. As far as we can tell, a particular Ait Moussa ou Ali fraction led by Fal Abeid Allah ould Salem was attracted into the Wadi Nun region in the early eighteenth century and had achieved some prominence by around 1750. Abeid Allah is much discussed in the Arabic sources, while the European ones focus more on another ‘ould Salem’ Mohammed Beyrouk. Cochelet introduced both Beyrouk and his brother Ibrahim as the ‘powers that be’ in early nineteenth century Goulimine. Ibrahim then tends to drop out of the European story, leaving center stage to the increasingly active Beyrouk. (‘Les Maisons Beyrouk et Illigh’).


24. Ibid. In Panet’s account, we can see clearly the ‘trans-Saharan tradition’ of focusing on and listing the value of desert exports, but as well, something of Beyrouk’s own agenda in impressing European visitors with his business acumen.

25. See ‘Les Maisons Beyrouk et Illigh’; also Mohamed ‘Born in the Text’ (chapter dealing with Beyrouk commerce) and Lydon, ‘On Trans-Saharan Trails’, Chapters 4–6, parri passu.

26. According to al-Soussi (and referenced by both Mohamed Mohamed, ‘Born in the Text’ and Tamouh, ‘Le Maroc et le Soudan…’), the family originated in Touat, migrated into the Wadi Nun region in the 17th century and assimilated into the Ait Jemal ‘clan’ of the Tekna. Its political rival was the Ait Bella, to which belonged the Azwafid family. Mohamed Mohamed puts forth an intriguing ‘reading’ of this particular family text, noting the proclivity towards dichotomy in all historical explanations of identity formation as he questions the validity of much of what we have come to accept as ‘truth’.

27. In July 1994, with the assistance of Mohamed Lahbib Nouhi, I micro-filmed and photocopied a number of ‘family documents’ in Goulimine, Morocco. These documents, including the ‘registers’ I refer to here, are kept by family members and are made available to researchers only on the basis of individual negotiation and agreement. There is no desire on the part of these families to centralize these materials or to grant carte blanche access. (Consequently, there are no copies of my micro-films deposited either at the closest university in Agadir or at the Centre of African Studies in Rabat.) While this is entirely understandable, as these ‘documents’ are their personal and familial history, it means that it is difficult to arrive at any kind of universal cataloguing that would easily permit subsequent researchers to consult the documents cited here. It also means that researchers may or may not have consulted the same materials even if they have worked in the same town and consulted with the same families; the decision as to what ‘history’ will be revealed remains with the proprietors of the documents (a point I will return to in the conclusion of this paper).

In general terms, I reference the ‘Beyrouk Registers’ according to the following family collections:

[A] Ahmed Salek:
1. Documents primarily belonging to Shaykh M’Hammad/Muhammad (“al-Shlayyah”) bin Shaykh Beyrouk/M’barek, but also including documents belonging to Shaykh Beyrouk’s other children.
2. Documents primarily belonging to Shaykh M’Hammad bin Shaykh Beyrouk (as above).

3. Documents primarily belonging to Shaykh M’Hammad bin Shaykh Beyrouk (as above), involving dealings mostly with the Tajakant and Reguibat (Trans-Saharan nomadic tribes covering much of the desert between southern Morocco, Algeria, Mauritania, central Mali; Tajakant in particular actively involved in transport).

4. Documents primarily belonging to ‘Abidin bin Shaykh Beyrouk.  

Raji Aaoussi: Documents primarily belonging to Abd er-Rahman [Dahman] bin Shaykh Beyrouk (only a few seem to have been generated by ’Abidin bin Shaykh Beyrouk, as above)  

Laghzaoui Bachir: Documents primarily belonging to Shaykh M’Hammad bin Shaykh Beyrouk (as above), involving dealings mostly with the al-‘Arib (Trans-Saharan nomadic tribe with special relationship with the Beyrouk, actively involved in transport).

28. In addition we micro-filmed may diverse documents that I have catalogued in terms of ‘Family Archives’, as well as ‘Registers’ belonging to other families (eg Lamti Sidi Mohamed l’Araibi of the rival ‘Azwafid’ clan). I will reference these individually in the course of the text below; most of this particular discussion relates to the Beyrouk Registers as described above. There are also a few references to Tekna documents photographed by Mohamed Nouhi in September 1997, in the Mauritanian town of Shinqit, including a Beyrouk-type register belonging to another Ait Mousa ou Ali family, the Ahl Arwayli, who were apparently related through marriage to the Beyrouk proper. These too will be introduced as is appropriate (below).

29. The first attempt to situate and analyze Beyrouk registers was Musapha Naimi’s some years ago, ‘La rive sud saharienne de 1842 à 1872 dans les registres comptables de la famille bayruk. (L’apport de trois nouvelles sources)’, in *Le Maroc de l’Avenement de Moulay Abdelaziz à` 1912 t.3* (Mohammedia: juillet 1987), pp. 167–92. I will discuss Naimi’s article further in the conclusion; for the moment suffice it to say that there are issues to be raised as to the methodology he used; this paper incorporates additional registers. Mohamed Mohamed’s thesis (‘Born in the Text’) also uses the Naimi collection of register material. Lydon has also accessed most if not all of the same texts; it is my understanding that they were the original books and not copies from Naimi’s library. (Curiously, Tamouh made no use of these sorts of documents, relying solely on printed and Library materials.).

30. The exceptions are the register belonging to the Lamti family of Sidi Mohammed l’Arabi (Azwafid) from the neighbouring town of Asrir, and that of the Ahl Arwayli in Shingiti (as indicated above).

31. Register Lamti, Sidi Mohamed l’Araib (1900).

32. Registers Beyrouk, Amed Salek [A-4], dates ranging from c.1867–1882.

33. Registers Beyrouk, Amed Salek [A-2]; the declaration concerning his slave Belaid bin Barka is dated September 1875; the document on *mudarat*, 1881.

34. This is discussed in more detail, below.

35. Register Laghzaoui Beshir, no date regarding the *mudarat* payments; 1850 mentioned in one account involving al-A’rib credit.

36. Registers Beyrouk, Ahmed Salek [A-3], 1874.

37. Register Raji Aaourssi, (1874–5).

38. This raises the question of the actual *intent* of these registers. Some entries are specific that so-and-so has ‘in hand’ a recognition of such-and-such a debt, which may indicate the existence of a legally-written acknowledgement; others simply list debts and/or travel expenses and may be personal accounts without any legal implications, by implication, reflecting a certain level of confidence between the individuals involved. As we find all of these different forms of entry in any given register, the problem of determining a universal ‘intent’ becomes further complicated. Thanks to Mohamed Nouhi for discussion on this question.

39. Registers Beyrouk, Ahmed Salek, [A-1 through 4, *passim* but especially #2 and #4].

40. Register Laghzaoui Beshir, no date; Register Beyrouks, Ahmed Salek [A-3], 1832 (date somewhat unclear); Ibid. 1849. This last documentation is interesting, showing that in spite of the rivalry that developed between the Ait Moussa ou Ali and the Azwafid during Shaykh Beyrouk’s time (which intensified after his death), there was a flow of credit moving across the line of competition that would seem to have been substantial. More work is needed on the registers before this observation can be elaborated upon.

41. Register Lamti, Sidi Mohamed l’Araib, no specific dates given on the Arawan-Timbuktu salt commerce documents but one document interspersed with them is dated 1899; Registers Beyrouk, Amed Salek [A-1], 1848.
42. Suggested by Mohamed Nouhi.
43. Register Laghzaoui Beshir, no date. My thanks to Mohamed Nouhi for his insight on this document.
44. Unfortunately, the documents immediately preceding and following this one are not dated, nor is this account.
45. Register Ahl Arwayli (Shinqit), entries dating between 1828 and 1905. (Photographed in the Bibliothèque Hammoni, September 1997 by Mohamed Lahbib Nouhi.).
46. One of the Bibliothèque Hammoni documents photographed by Mohamed Lahbib Nouhi (as above), attestation dated 1808.
47. It was also long-lasting, in the sense of a ‘process’. Another letter in this collection dated 1907, addressed by a Tekna named Mohamdad al-Mokhtar to ‘Abidin bin Shaykh Beyrouk, informs him that while the Reguibat and Awlad Bou Sba have recently reconciled after a period of pillage and bloody warfare, he (‘Abidin) should remain on garde, as rumour has it the Awlad Bou Sba plan to destroy the houses of all Ait Moussa ou Ali in Shinqit. His Tekna leff (Ait Jemal) awaits the word of ‘Abidin to ‘act’. The same letter tells ‘Abidin that the price of camels and slaves is high.
48. Register Raji Aaoussi, 1861. Mawlay al-Mahdi Ibrahim’s connection with Tafilelt is not spelled out in this document but it appears elsewhere in the commercial documents (personal communication, Mohamed Nouhi.).
49. Registers Beyrouk, Ahmed Salek [A-1], c. 1850.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid.
52. Registers Beyrouk, Ahmed Salek [A-3]. The other two entries were undated. The one following states simply: ‘credit in cereals contracted in 1903’; it may well be between the same creditor and debtor.
53. The two shurfa are identified in documents in Registers Beyrouk, Ahmed Salek, probably [A-3]. The uncertainty here lies in the fact that not all of my micro-films have been translated; however sections of the microfilms were available earlier in photocopy form. These particular examples are drawn from those (which are translated) and they seem most consistent with the documents in [A-3]. I return to the problem this earlier photocopied collection poses for us, in my concluding section below.
54. In so doing, he drew on a model developed by the late Paul Pascon. Pascon had plumbed an extensive fond of documentation from a major trading operation in the Tazerwalt region of southern Morocco, the House of Illigh. I would argue that the Beyrouk Registers are not comparable to the Illigh material and therefore do not lend themselves to the same kind of analysis. Among Pascon’s prolific publications, the most relevant here are: ‘Le commerce de la Maison d’Illigh’, Les Annales ESC, 3–4, mai–août (1980), pp. 700–729; La Maison d’Illigh et l’Histoire Sociale du Tazerwalt SMMMER, Rabat (1984), pp. 43–91.
55. With the exception of one reference to Mokhtar al-Soussi, all references are either to a handful of contemporary theses or (for the most part) European travelers like Cochelet and Panet, and colonial writers like de La Chapelle, Paul Marty and the doyen of colonial economic history, J.-L. Miège. Naimi’s understanding of the registers is derived through the prism of these external frameworks.
56. Nowhere in the article is there mention of additional materials; the modelling on Pascon’s work implies that these three registers are the equivalent of the exhaustive documentation Pascon had to work with in the Illigh estate.
57. This is a truly puzzling aspect of Naimi’s work. The ‘sample’ pages reproduced by photocopy in the article are clearly from a ‘book’, just like the registers we micro-filmed. And Naimi made available to me (as well as to others, see below) photocopies of what he has called the ‘three registers’. They too seem to be ‘registers’ properly speaking. But either they are completely different books than we were shown (and this is not consistent with what the ‘owner’ of the registers, the late Ahmed Salek, or what Naimi himself told us) or the pages have been re-arranged.
58. To a considerable extent, the fact that we know nothing of their provenance (as noted above) already compromises their value as historical evidence.
59. And in so doing, potentially influencing fieldwork. I originally assumed, for example, that I already had copies of Ahmed Salek’s registers belonging to M’Hammed and Dahmane and therefore did not need to re-photo them. I decided to do so anyway in order to have a filmed collection that I could later scan (in the pre-digital camera era!). It was only after the fact that I realized none of the registers was consistent with any one of BI, B II or B III. Similarly, the register of Dahmane identified here as ‘Register Raji Aaoussi’ is completely different from the one Naimi refers to (and was ‘held’ by a different Beyrouk family member).
60. Mohamed Moahmed’s thesis, ‘Born in the Text’ challenges the notion of the Beyrouk’s importance, especially with respect to the slave trade – entirely contradicting Naimi, Tamouh and others. The thesis is a provocative one that may well be correct. However, building on the already weakened
‘Naimi collection’ compromises an otherwise convincing argument. This thesis deserves to be published. Hopefully, the issue of these registers and the difficulty of working with them in this form will be addressed.

61. Such as the Register Arwayli, in Shinqit (Mauritania) mentioned earlier. It has been suggested to me that others may be with Beyrouk relations in Nouakchott as well. Lydon has searched exhaustively from Louga (Senegal) to Goulimine and throughout much of Mauritania – yet even this degree of diligence has not necessarily turned up ‘all’ such materials.

62. Such as the Lamti family represented in the ‘Register Lamti Sidi l’Araibi’, referenced to above.

63. This raises yet another conundrum for researchers: ethically, we are obliged by granting agencies to make and leave copies of interviews and micro-films in the country of origin; practically, these same agencies encourage projects that make materials as widely available as possible (web-based dissemination, for example). But the ‘owners’ of the history (oral or written) feel that the right to decide who hears/sees their history is their right. Therefore, they do not want ‘copies’ made available either in their country or abroad, as this removes control from their personal purview.