The Libyan Desert:
Natural Resources and Cultural Heritage

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27. Snapshots from the Sahara: ‘Salt’, the Essence of Being

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Abstract
It may not be immediately apparent why we should be looking at snapshots of Morocco, Mauritania and Mali in a collection of works devoted to Libyan culture and history. Nor why we should be focusing our viewfinder primarily on a moment in time, between the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, that is scarcely treated elsewhere among these papers. It is my contention, however, that this particular set of text-images reflects something essential about what it meant to ‘be Saharan’ at this particular moment of transformation, and that this ‘essence’ has relevance in other times and spaces. In this case, there is a relevance attached both to the specifics of Saharan salts and their industries, and to the dynamics of Saharan politics and their power configurations.

Introduction
Among the other papers here, for example, are references to the Garamantes’ salt works at Jarma – an extensive industry about which we know something in archeological terms (Ziegert 1974), but little else with respect to its historical economic or political role (see Mattingly and Wilson, this volume). Also mentioned are the extensive salt works of Kawar, production sites known to have played an important role in the extension of political power by the Fazzan, under the leadership of both Jarma and of Zawila (Insoll, this volume). Knut Vikor’s work on Kawar confirms this lengthy and significant period straddling the Islamisation of the Fazzan in which the Libyan region attempted in various ways to establish influence (if not hegemony) over this source of trans-Saharan trade revenue. Vikor would argue that the Fazzan-Kawar relationship survived centuries of transformation and strain, finally pulling apart only when influences from the south, from the rising states of Kanem and Bornu in sub-Saharan Africa, became dominant from about the thirteenth century (Vikor 1999, 140-8; 161-4). In short, both in terms of the specific questions raised by looking at salt in its cultural and commercial contexts, and the general ones emerging from images of political economies seeking to incorporate control over salt as a basis of power, the following set of ‘snapshots’ do indeed reflect something of the dynamics, if not the specifics, of moments in the history of the Fazzan.

Snapshot 1: The Legends of Ijil (c. Eighteenth Century)
A shepherd of the ‘saintly’ Kunta Choumad family of Wadan is ‘led’ by a giant lizard (dzabe) to the Ijil saline; it then disappears into the middle of the sebkha and the salt is discovered (Brosset 1933, 259-60). Some versions of this oral tale continue by saying that the Kunta chief, a highly respected wali (saint or marabout in French terminology) kept this a secret for a long time because the mine lay close to wells dug by another tribe (originally of southern Morocco), the Ahel Barikallah, and therefore by Islamic law ‘belonged’ to them (Berges n.d.). The wells are
indeed 10 km from the sebkha, although a 1949 report indicated that at that time, the part of the sebkha being exploited was only 4 km from the wells (D’Arbraumont 1949). Eventually, when his son became chief, he bought the wells, thereby gaining the right to exploit the surrounding lands and the resources lying beneath them. When the Ahel Barakallah discovered this deceit, they appealed to the local Emir to annul the purchase. The Kunta took the case to the Sultan of Morocco who in turn issued a certificate affirming that the deal had been made in good faith, and that the Kunta were indeed the new proprietors (Berges n.d.). A variation on this rendition has the Kunta immediately ‘offering’ the mine to the Sultan of Morocco and in turn receiving ‘first rights’ to exploit it – a document said to have been notable because it was written in red ink. Then the Kunta purchased the nearby al-Aiouj wells from the Ahel Barikallah, and dug additional ones at F’derick (d’Arbraumont 1949).

Berges draws liberally on Brosset. This account raises a complication, however: according to Brosset and d’Arbraumont it was the father of the current Kunta Choumad chief, Dah ould Choumad, who made the trip to Morocco, which would place the event in the late nineteenth century, at best. The document was said to have been lost in a great war (in which the Kunta were defeated) in 1900. There are a number of possibilities here with regard to interpretation: complete legend, a telescoping of events between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a misunderstanding on Brosset’s part of what was meant by ‘père’ (it often refers to a relative of some unspecified generation in the past, not necessarily ‘father’ in the immediate sense) or a confusion between the moment of beginning exploitation (which may well have been in the eighteenth century) and that of dealing with the Moroccan Sultan and the Ahel Barikallah (which might well have corresponded to a time when the Ahel Barikallah were actually becoming quite wealthy and had dug numerous wells in the region and the Kunta were feeling their power being challenged) – namely, the nineteenth century. Their defeat at the hands of the Awlad Bou Sba (another tribe of southern Moroccan origin) at the end of the century and its association with the loss of the ‘red inked paper’ might indicate a moment of challenge to their claims to proprietorship over Ijil.

In both versions, the work of extracting the salt was delegated to the Agzazir, who some say were ‘slaves’ of the Kunta, others ‘haratine’ or freed slaves, others merely ‘clients’ who had sought Kunta protection before the mine came under their proprietorship (d’Arbraumont 1949; Bonte 1998, 41-7; Brosset 1933, 259; Leriche 1950, 144; Mahomoud Salem ould Bailla 1978). For d’Arbraumont and Brosset, the Agzazir were clients. Noted French ethnologist Albert Leriche called them haratine (freed slaves); Mahomoud Salem ould Bailla referred to his clan as ‘slaves’ of the Kunta – a term often used in Mauritania to actually mean haratine. Pierre Bonte has recently analysed a wide range of sources (oral and written) concerning the Agzazir and argues ultimately for either a haratine or at least ‘lowly’ social status, that gradually evolved as they moved from being dependent upon the Ida Ali clan of Shinqit to becoming dependents (‘clients’) of the Kunta. Bonte argues that the Agzazir were already salt workers before they came to live with the Kunta in Wadan (suggesting an Ida Ali involvement with, if not control over, exploitation prior to the Kunta ‘takeover’) and that it was their skills that helped them climb the social ladder and negotiate a more ‘elevated’ social relation with the Kunta – hence the
ambiguity and convenient lack of memory on the part of the Agzazirs regarding the origins of their involvement with Ijil and the Kunta (below).

Agzazir oral traditions retain almost no memory of this moment, although one I collected would locate it as early the beginning of the seventeenth century (Mahomoud Salem ould Bailla). He suggested that exploitation probably began some 350 to 450 years ago – but also claimed to know nothing of history. Kunta written traditions say only that the Kunta became the ‘owner’ of Ijil in 1766/67 (McDougall 1980, 98). An eighteenth-century dating is the most common across all the accounts, although some Kunta claim a fifteenth-century exploitation. And most confirm that possession remained with the same Kunta family, the Ahel Choumad, into the twentieth century (de Lartigue, 66). I discuss this in more detail elsewhere (McDougall 1980: 82-98; 1990, 249). The key issue is that the mine was clearly being exploited by the fifteenth century and is reported in Portuguese accounts but the Kunta is not likely to have been a fully autonomous tribe at that time; if it is true that the Kunta acquired rights to exploit Ijil in the eighteenth century, then they clearly did not ‘discover’ it.

That said, one French colonial account (itself based on oral information) argues that in fact the Kunta of Wadan possessed neither property nor use rights over the saline. This rendition maintains that Kunta claims to possession (and consequently, to taxation rights) derive from their close relations with the *jnun* or demons (s. *jinn*) who frequent the nearby Kedja (mountain) of Ijil. One Captain Laforgue was told in the early 1930s that the Kunta were “absolutely indispensable” intermediaries in obtaining permission to extract salt from the salines of the Kedia of Ijil – and the *jnun* were “the true masters of the *sebkha*” (Laforgue 1933, 410; quotation 423).

**Snapshot 2: The Saharan Letters (I) (Late Seventeenth Century)**

*Letters from Mulay Ismail (Sultan of Morocco) to his son, al-Mamun Governor of Tafilalt and Dra’a, 1692, 1699 and n.d.* (Mohamed al-Gharbi, 217-26; 227-36; 237-43).

In these three letters, al-Mamun is severely chastised by his father for mismanaging Saharan affairs. His incompetence is said to extend to all his duties; basically, he never follows his father’s advice. His father’s invocation of the proverb: “even a donkey learns from repetition” underscores Mulay Ismail’s disappointment in his son (Mohamed al-Gharbi 323). He refers to the lands now governed by his son as the traditional ‘heartland’ of the empire, one whose resources, especially the caravans arriving regularly from the Sudan, should allow him to build up a significant power base. The letter continues:

> “An effective governor would have written to the Arabs of al-Gebla [southern Mauritania] and of Teghaza [salt mine north of Timbuktu] and the Kings of Sudan and would have addressed all of these countries and planted spies in all of these directions such that you know every tribe and its intentions and every leader and his situation. And if you saw anyone of the Arabs of these areas go astray, you would bide your time, and then you would chose the right opportunity and take him to task wherever he might be. Had you done this all the Arabs would have come to respect and fear you and had you established yourself in that manner they would have sent presents to you and they would have come to visit you and you would have had the right or the ability to do to any of them near or far, what you wanted. And as a result everyone would know your name, and they would send delegations to wherever you are and your country would become prosperous, you would be able to make the caravan routes safe and [collect appropriate taxes].”

(Mohamed al-Gharbi 228, 9)
At this moment Mulay Ismail’s concern was Teghaza, and the failure of his representative there to collect the required salt taxes. He gave explicit instructions as to what his son, al-Mamun, should say in the letter he was being ordered to send with the Sultan’s emissary to the mine. He was to threaten the Teghaza agent with replacement unless the overdue taxes were delivered immediately, and he was to outfit Mulay Ismail’s emissary with 20 of his own best camels… “[D]o not question why or to refuse this man anything”, his father concluded (Mohamed al-Gharbi 241-3).

Snapshot 3: The Nawazil of Shinqit (Late Seventeenth Century)
Although compiled and recorded later by the qadi of Walata, this document consists of about 240 questions (and lengthy sub-questions) put to the learned Shinquit scholar Mohammed b. al-Mukhtar b. La’amech (d. 1696). The questions are posed by ‘Saharans’ positioned both near (the Adrar), and far (the Tagant, Timbuctu, Southern Morocco – the Wadi Nun) and the Sudan in general. One of the two largest groupings of questions, some 35, concerns commerce; half again of these are either directly related to salt transactions or use salt to illustrate the issue at hand. The Adrar and Hodh are the regional bases for several queries involving credit and transport costs. For example, if a man owning salt and a transporter owning camels fall out in the course of a journey to Zara (in this case over whether the route was too unsafe to continue), and the transporter continues, sells the salt as agreed upon, but is then robbed on his return voyage, how much does the merchant owe the transporter? Or … credit is extended in Shinquit to a merchant traveling to Zara (a southern salt market). The contract stipulates that payment is to be made in Shinquit on such-and-such a date. The date passes without payment. The salt owner encounters the merchant in Zara. Should the debt be paid in Zara, because the time is overdue, or should the owner wait until the merchant delivers the payment in Shinquit, because that is where payment was to be made? Other questions revolve around how to exchange different qualities of salt: what if you know the dimensions of salt bars but not the mine of origin; what if you know the mine but not the dimensions; what if one is bar salt and the other salt en vrac (loose or earth salt, like that of Tishit)? “What if the price of an adila (bar) of salt from Ijil and an adila from Aglil (Awil) are equal, and if the people of the country (in which the salt is being sold) do not prefer one over the other? What if this situation pertains and the people do prefer one to the other but are not willing to pay more to have that which they prefer? What if the two salts are equal in quality but the people have a preference anyway?” And on it goes.

Another lengthy inquiry focuses on exchanging one adila for another, whether equality between them is to be judged purely by number or whether quality is to be taken into account, and whether one can give a bar of better quality for one of lesser? And yet another group of questions relates to the payment of zakat. The people of a country undertake commerce in uroud (moveable merchandise) and with the proceeds buy camels. Then they load the camels with salt and travel to the countries of the Sudan. Here, they sell the salt for grain and cloth and then return to their own people. They consume the grain, use the cloth, give presents and with what remains, they buy camels and salt or maybe just salt, and then they exchange the salt for cloth and on the cycle continues. “This is their habit and custom.” There are some among
them who sell the salt for horses and slaves and they 'commercialise' these also. There are also among them those who sell the salt against gold and then they spend it (that which they gain in the process) to buy salt that they sell for grain and cloth and so it continues. The question goes on to say that from these transactions, people live or sometimes they spend part of the profit for consumption and invest the rest. Sometimes they spend even some of their capital to live. In this case, they borrow from someone. In the end, the question is asked “on what does one have to pay zakkat?”. The question seems endless, but does ultimately ask “what in this case belongs to ‘living’ and upon which one does not pay zakat, and what belongs to capital [and profit] and is therefore subject to zakat?” (see McDougall 2001).

Snapshot 4: The Saharan Letters (II) (Second Half of the Eighteenth Century)
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.)

After a lengthy introduction, Sidi al-Mukhtar arrives at the heart of the matter. He alludes to earlier letters sent by the Moroccan sultan to his representative Qaid Abd el-Malek al Hayyuni, at Teghaza, letters that instructed him to collect the taxes owed by everyone extracting Teghaza’s salt. ‘Everyone’ included the Kunta (of the Azwad, related to but distinct from the part of the clan residing in the Adrar). Sidi al-Mukhtar objects to this order: first, because his – a respected family of venerated walis – should not be required to submit to the authority of a mere qaid – a ‘lay’ person, uneducated and ‘without value’); and second, because the sultan had no right to charge fellow Muslims for accessing salt. According to ‘ancient traditions’ (possibly hadith), he claims, water, fire, pasture and salt should be free to all.

Interpreting the Photos
These snapshots place us in different spatial, conceptual and focal positions. Temporally speaking, they move us across a short period of time, yet it is not insignificant that they do so. The late seventeenth-century texts show us more or less contemporaneous views of the Sahara but views that nonetheless present very different perspectives. Morocco is an integral part of both – one looking towards Ijil and the Adrar (Shinquit, Wadan), the other towards Teghaza and the Azwad. But while the former incorporates Morocco as part of its commercial boundaries, Shinquit serving as the ‘centre’, the latter view situates the Sahara in general (and in this case Teghaza in particular) as a geographically distant but economically central part of the Moroccan empire. There is an implicit conceptual competition but in real terms, both ‘Saharas’ coexisted. Indeed, as we see from the two texts dating to less than a century later, both Saharas actually intersected and indeed, overlapped. Morocco’s influence, we find, is equally present at Ijil and Teghaza and by extension in the surrounding regions whose economic importance derives from these salts. Between the earlier and the later texts, the Kunta emerge in both regions as personifications of magical, religious and (increasingly) economic power – again, all tied to their connections to the salt industries. What is also evident in the earlier text, and implicit in the latter ones, is the integral role played by commerce with the Sudan. This commerce, in turn, revolves around the interregional salt trade.
Emergence of ‘Saharan Power’

So, taken together, what do the snapshots reveal? Leaving aside the details each individually contributes to our ‘picture’ of Saharan history, collectively they reveal a complex interrelationship between the local-level role of magic in defining ‘power’ and that of Islam, which in serving as an intermediary between jnun and sufī groups like the Kunta, supported the emergence of specifically ‘Saharan power’. It should be remembered that jnun represented both evil and good spirits; another saintly clan, the Tadjakant (generally believed to have been the clan from which the Kunta derived their origins) was believed to have relations with ‘good’ jnun through one of its most famous clerics, Sheikh Mohameden Fall (Laforgue 1933, 404, McDougall 2001). The Kunta here operated on various levels – ‘communing’ with local jnun, ‘negotiating’ the right to exploit Ijil, for example. Elsewhere, in the Azwad, Kunta were known for ‘commanding’ such non-muslim demons through more sophisticated access to the occult, access tied directly to their scholarly or ‘saintly’ knowledge. This was the same ‘saintly’ identity Sidi al-Mukthar al-Kunti drew upon in juxtaposition to that of the qaid – who ‘merely’ represented the political power of the Moroccan sultan – in his attempts to gain exemption from the Morocco’s taxation.

They also expose the extensive relationship between the developing culture of Islam and the salt trades (based on many different salts – Awlil (McDougall 1999), Ijil, Teghaza and Tishit (McDougall 1990, 250,1; 1999) are mentioned here). One set of contours can be traced from the perspective of the Kunta, clerics seeking to build their religious reputation in the context of competing clerical clans, entrenched indigenous families (and powers) and the ongoing struggle with Morocco’s claims to both material and moral capital in the desert (as exercised in both the Adrar with respect to Ijil, and in the Azwad with respect to Teghaza) (McDougall and Nouhi forthcoming). Here, one can almost see the emergence of this Saharan Islamic culture negotiating over space and influence with that defined by Morocco. Both laid claim to the Sahara’s material wealth – especially its salt mines and commerce, and both fought to define its spiritual identity. That said, the Saharan reality during most of the seventeenth and eighteenth century was that of a society in constant flux, varying as much in its self-perceptions as in the observations of those external to it (Bonte 1998).

Salt as a Tradable Commodity

A second set of contours can be discerned through the lens of the nawazil. It addresses commerce or a network of commercial relations, in early development. The concerns with ‘equivalencies’ between different salts being traded mirrored concerns expressed in more general terms of what commodities could be appropriately exchanged and whether Sudan measures unknown to Saharan merchants were ‘acceptable’. Bel La’amech drew repeatedly on writings from the eighth century, notably a time of explosive growth for Islam, emphasising the aada or ‘urf ‘the custom of the country’, urging merchants to accept the measures and practices recognised by the Sudanese. Merchants were not only trading in unfamiliar territory, they were also dealing in unfamiliar commodities – as Bel La’amech noted, “salt is not in the sharia”. There was nothing automatic about using salt as currency, about extending salt on credit, about arranging for salt
to be transported and sold on your behalf, about paying zakat – or not, about dealing with a variety of salts both in desert and desert-side markets – all had to be negotiated within religious and social cultures that were themselves of uncertain definition (McDougall 1999).

The nawazil suggests a further, albeit more speculative, influence for us to consider. The questions posed to Bel La’amech were for the most part submitted in writing and came from a very large geographical area. Indeed, one question related to the ethics of debt collecting in Wadi Nun on the part of an agent sent from Timbuktu. The fact that advice was sought from so far a field from a Shinqit cleric, and that in the course of many of his answers it became clear that Ijil salt was widely used as the measure of value and the norm for comparison, attests to an important emerging commercial culture. This culture was based on a shared understanding of what being a good Muslim and a good merchant meant as articulated by Bel La’amech (and later through interpretations by his disciples). And the markets where commonly held sets of ‘ethical Islamic practices’ were recognised and respected delineated its contours.

So if we put these snapshots, these static moments in time, together, what emerges is a glimpse of something that was in fact extremely dynamic. And we have only touched the surface here of what can be drawn out of this sequence of moments. What appears to have been a key catalyst was salt itself. All the memorable aphorisms refer to salt as the ‘gold’ of the desert, or remind us that “man can live without gold but not without salt” (Bovill 1933, citing Cassiodorus, 57). In the case of the Sahara, however, man could and did live without it – without directly consuming it, that is. It was the one place where the value of salt was not as food for human consumption. It acquired its consumption value – other than earth salts that were used as ‘cures’ or ‘purges’ for camels – in the sahelian regions to the south where sea salts either could not travel or did not store well, and where the only indigenous salts were locally-manufactured vegetable varieties (McDougall 1990, 231-7; Vikor 1999, 64-81).

Salt, at least certain layers of Ijil salt, were believed to bring (simultaneously) bad luck to the workers who dig it and the camels who carried it, while assuring prosperity to any woman who received it. Another was carried as a ‘token’ in the leather sack used for personal effects; it was believed to bring good fortune to the tent or dwelling where its owner resided. More generally, when handled appropriately, salt was said to be capable of destroying the power of the ‘evil eye’; jnun were believed to be afraid of salt (Berges; Leriche 145-7). Salt, associated as it was with jnun (both ‘good’ and ‘evil’), with powerful sufi clerics (who in turn could ‘commune’ with these jnun and who were regarded as one of three ‘catagories’ of people most susceptible to establish relations with jnun (Laforgue 1932, 443), with its Islamic commercial culture, and with its importance to the ultimate power of the Sultan, became in many ways a symbol of what it meant to be Saharan.

Conclusion
I conclude with a fifth and final snapshot, again at Ijil, this time set in some unknown ‘past’ but recounted during the 1930s. The ‘ultimate power’ is no longer the Moroccan Sultan but rather, the French colonial government. It is still ‘power’ of a questionable and negotiable nature.
Snapshot 5: The Jnun and the Jadawil (Ijil, Date Unknown)

In the practice of jadwal (magical charts) ‘power’ is associated with the written text (often worn on the body as an amulet) as well as with the ‘quality’ of the person who writes it and who can activate the force hidden (‘coded’) within. At Ijil, a tribe of non-Muslim jnun from the nearby mountain is interfering with normal salt production. The Kunta Ahel Chommad (Wada) as acknowledged ‘possessors’ of the mine, compose three, very particular jadawil in order to “clear them out [the jnun]” of the sebkha. The first of these was to protect salt workers (the Agzazir) against mischief – it was to be buried along the shore of the sebkha itself. The second and third were to be hidden in the mountain, the Kedja d’Ijil, where they would literally chase the demons away (Laforgue 1935, 21, 2). As expected, the Kunta magic – powerful and immediate – works. A French colonial administrator, recounting this event in 1934 noted, that “It must be believed that these amulets are effective, for the exploitation of the salt is today [still] very advantageous for the Kunta and their workers, the Agzazir of Adrar” (Laforgue 1932, 410; 423). Two years later (1936), a local French officer who wrote a full report on the subject of sorcery in the Adrar left us with thought-provoking reflection: “We are in the domain of the supernatural and everyone knows that domain is closed to the Europeans” (ARIM, E2 (1936). For more on this subject (McDougall 2001).

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