HAUSA

History Explorer
The Sahel - A Brief History of its Empires and Peoples

Introduction

The Sahel is a geographical designation for the area in Africa which divides the Saharan desert from the wooded savannas to the south. It is a transitional band of land running across the continent touching many countries including; Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Algeria, Niger, Chad, Nigeria, Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea. It is an arid plain broken by occasional mountain ranges. A harsh, unforgiving country populated by nomadic peoples, but from the Sahel sprung many of the greatest African empires.

The importance of the Sahel stems from the great trans-Saharan trade route - the main conduit for moving goods from one side of the continent to the other. Gold, slaves and ivory moved from West Africa across to either the great Mediterranean ports or to the Arabian Peninsula. In return salt and other goods flowed in return. The route was well established from ancient times and was of key importance to the Egyptians, the Roman Empire and remained so into the medieval period.

The trade routes were the life blood of the Sahel. Much as the growth of the railway in the American west led directly to urban development, the trade routes were directly responsible for where cities sprung up in the Sahel. Located by strategic watering holes and oasis, placed at places ideal for further dispersion of goods, the empires of the Sahel began as trade oriented city states. The empires that controlled trade controlled the region. Gaining wealth and influence that was renowned from Arabia to Europe.
Various kingdoms sprang into existence from the 700s AD. The most prominent early empire being the Ghana Empire. Arab traders greatly influenced the growth of these early kingdoms. Their explorations and trade efforts created a reason for local kingdoms to expand and seek to dominate trade routes. Which, due to Arab traders were becoming valuable commodities? But perhaps the most influential moment in the history of Sahelian kingdoms occurred when around the 1070s AD when the Almoravid Empire established itself in a territory which by 1120 AD extended from Spain across the Sahara into the Sahel displacing the regional influence of the Ghana Empire. The Almoravids established a territory which opened up more direct travel and influence between North Africa and Europe. The extent of their efforts is clearly stamped into the architecture of southern Spain. The spread of Islam under the Almoravids established cultural norms which would continue into the present day in the Sahel.

However the Almoravids were a Berber people with their roots in North Africa. The next great Sahel Empire rose from the ashes of the Ghana Empire and is known as the Mali Empire. Based around the great Niger River and extended as far east as Timbuktu. The Mali Empire controlled many vassal states. These usually consisted of trading towns whose local rulers fell under the sway of the empire. However the Mali Empire had increasing trouble controlling its vassal states and in 1340 AD the Songhai people successfully established their own empire and gradually expanded to become the largest African empire ever seen. Controlling the great trading towns of the Sahel, Timbuktu and Gao, the empire reached from the Atlantic Ocean in West Africa across what is present day Niger.

More than gold and salt flowed on the trade routes. Islamic scholarship flourished with great libraries established and scientific as well as religious study encouraged. The empire was not
simply a collection of trading outposts but a center for cultural growth and understanding. The Songhai Empire encompassed numerous ethnic groups and a territory greater than Western Europe. It was an empire of many facets with a shrewd foreign policy relying on not just strength of arms but diplomacy. All of this was tied under a banner of Islam. Various leaders of Songhai during different periods made their hajj to Mecca - illustrating the relative ease of travel over tremendous distances inside the lands of the empire.

The military might of Songhai is a perfect example of the normal pattern for Sahel armies. The cavalry was all important. Drawn from wealthy retainers, the nobility and any others who could afford horse and equipment, the cavalry was the force that broke the backs of the enemy. The geography of the Sahel made cavalry a natural pinnacle of local armies. Broad plains allowed for swift charges and the lack of cover meant infantry had difficulty defending against armored horsemen. This natural dominance led to cities increasingly investing in extensive earthworks and fortifications with the result that siege warfare became common.

The Sahel states were not only subsisting on trade. The Hausa lands, in what is modern day Nigeria, were made up of heavily fortified city states which occasionally worked in concert but mainly remained separate entities. The Hausa were well known as traders but their cities also gained a reputation for industrial output. Particularly in arms and armor the Hausa were well known for iron and steel working, blade manufacture and export. Their states formed a well-equipped manufacturing region which exported both goods and craftsmen both to the east and west of their own territory.

Perhaps the best comparison cosmopolitan nature of Sahel society and trading centers is the silk route in Asia. Cities did not have a homogenous ethnic population and frequently changed ruling
hands over the centuries. For example Timbuktu was at various times part of the Mali Empire, Tuareg, Songhai, Fulani and more. The struggle to control trade was paramount.

The sociographic and geopolitical context that arises from the Sahel is one of organized city states, empires consisting of multiple holdings of city states and on the edges predatory nomadic groups capable of capturing and controlling trade routes themselves. The city centers or what we could perhaps term heartlands, were not only economically powerful but important religious and cultural centers with influence spreading to surrounding areas.

**Peoples**

The great Sahel empires of Mali, Songhai and Kanem-Bornu were founded by the Mandigo, Songhai and Kanuri peoples respectively. Their great leaders and general histories are relatively well known and scale and scope of this work does not allow for a detailed examination of their histories. In general the empires encompassed many ethnic groups and had a range of social castes, professions and trades among them.

The Hausa people provide a large portion of the western Sahel population and built many city states. They combined agriculture, trade and an effective military and their cities were the terminus for much of the trans-Saharan trade. While many were subsistence farmers within the cities skilled artisans and craftsmen were common. The Hausa enjoyed a particular reputation for blacksmithing and many of the Sahel blades can be attributed to Hausa craftsmen, who established guild like communities across the Sahel.
The Kanuri held the heartlands around Lake Chad, where many Sahel peoples migrated to and subsequently migrated from in search of pastures, escaping from the dominance of another people and religious persecution for animist tribes.

The city states faced not only the threat of empires with ambitions of expansion of the constant threat of nomadic raiders. Just as the in Europe, where waves of mobile nomads invaded with regularity, the empires and states of the Sahel had to contend with two major forces; the Tuareg in the north and the Mossi in the south. With time the Fulani would exert similar pressures and form the Sokoto caliphate; however they were long dominated by the Hausa.

The Tuareg were constant threat to the established empires and states. They held remote territories including the Air Mountains and facilitated much of the salt trade. However they were more than just raiders and traders, being perfectly capable of capturing and holding cities such as Timbuktu. Raiders, slavers and merchants as well the Tuareg are perhaps the best known people of the Sahel.

The Mossi are a Negroid people from savanna. Their wooded lands made it difficult for the Sahel cavalry to exact efficient reprisals for the Mossi raids. One of the few non-Muslim ethnic groups in the region the Mossi adapted aspects of Sahel warfare for themselves. While not a massive military force, they were a constant thorn in the side of their northern neighbors.

Other important peoples included the highly developed Nupe culture and a wide range of small groups on the border of modern Cameroon, in and around the Mandara Mountains. This area served as a refuge for peoples fleeing from the dominance of the city states and empires, with a
rocky landscape which provided a natural defense against the frequent slaving raiding which took place to fuel the needs of the urban upper and middle class.

**Trade**

The root of all Sahel development was the constant nature of the trade routes. While traffic was diminished once the Portuguese established outposts on the West African coast from the 1440s A.D., the main trans-Saharan routes remained intact. In fact they are still in localized use today. The main product carried east was gold, exchanged for salt from the Sahara. Arab traders then distributed their purchases into Arabia and Mediterranean ports. Trade was facilitated by way of camel caravan. Routes either crossed from south to north into what is now Morocco and Algeria, or from Bilma, either a southern route to Ethiopia, or a northern route terminating in Egypt.

Various products made the return journey, including some military equipment such as maille- for which there is little to no evidence of local production in the Sahel except in certain Sudanese areas such as Omdurman. High quality riveted maille was apparently exclusively imported, possibly coming from as far away as India. That such items were not produced locally goes to show that the local economies were well adapted to the routine of import and export and did not feel a need to be self-sufficient in certain industries.

Local industries in mining and smelting existed across the Sahel with the Hausa dominating the trade. Brass and other white metals were produced in West Africa and exported in ingot form eastwards. Artisans for the working of brass and other soft metals existed in most Sahel cultures leading to the differentiating motifs and designs found on sword hilts and jewelry.
Imports from Europe usually focused on materials and items which, due to a lack of industrialization, were not cost effective to manufacture locally. These included some cloth products like silk, paper, beads, needles, mirrors and sword blades. Some of these products were supplemented by local production. In general imports appeared in areas where it was cost effective due to the industrialization of Europe and did not necessarily reflect a lack of ability to produce the same materials on a local level, but rather a lack of ability to produce them at a competitive price. The large distances and transportation costs meant that the cloth produced in the Hausa city of Kano would be many times more expensive even in other Nigerian cities like Yano, no more than 600km away. The reader can imagine the increasing costs when items from the city states were exported as far as Tuareg lands or the Sudan. Products of industrialized Europe thus played an increasing role in trans-Saharan trade with diverse entry points ranging from Morocco to Egypt to Guinea.

**Cities**

Sahel cities followed a similar pattern across the region and were often heavily walled. One of the best examples is Kano, a Hausa city state. When Europeans first reached its walls in the early 1800s it had 30km of enclosing walls which varied in height from 9-20 meters. Building materials ranged from mud, to wood, to stone. Compacted mud remained the most economical and common solution. The typical imagery of a Sahel city would be large mud walls enclosing a dense complex of 1-2 story flat roofed mud buildings. Even mosques followed the same construction methods. Wood was used to frame and support structures. This method of construction was well suited to the climate and made good use of materials at hand.
The large walls would serve to not only protect the population, where gardens and fields were commonly found inside as well as urban structures, but as a symbol of power and declaration of the importance of the city to the surrounding area. They were centers of trade and embodied the power of the local leader. Siege warfare was common at least among Hausa states and a picture emerges of the Sahel, while no means being an analog, as at least bearing a passing resemblance to Medieval Europe, or for that matter, Medieval Syria and the Near East. This is by no means an attempt to argue that the Sahel did not develop, or was backwards as many 19th century European travelers considered it, but perhaps it can be taken as an indication that the trade routes provided a level of economic sustenance which did not dictate rapid social change.

Inside the city, farmers tilled their fields while the centers of the cities included merchant households and the holdings of craftsmen. The local mosques served not only as religious centers but sponsors of scholarly endeavors. The Sufi branch of Islam which was embraced locally heavily supported libraries and select scientific efforts such as mapping and astrology. The manuscripts preserved in Timbuktu are a striking example of the advanced literary status quo in the Sahel.

It is impossible to do justice to the unique architectural styles found across the area, suffice to note that they exist with a myriad of local innovations and elements. Each region had its own peculiarities regarding their settlements but hopefully the reader will at least have the most common imagery in mind from these descriptions.

The Sahel had far more cities than can be seen today. Due to the less than permanent materials used, when cities fell into disrepair they gradually decayed until evidence of their existence is not readily visible. Stone, being a relatively expensive building commodity, does not often remain to
clearly mark for the naked eye where these settlements once stood. But archeological efforts are slowly starting uncover a wealth of information and a picture emerges of rather densely packed city settlements.

Culture

The culture of the Sahel is of course partially dependent on which ethnic group is under discussion. However some broad areas can be defined.

While the main ethnic groups of the Sahel are Muslim many animistic influences remained. This lead to not only unique geometric designs, drawing on Islamic tradition, but also detailed sculpture, carving and motifs creating a fascinating crossover between Sufi Islam and local beliefs. Until the Fulani Jihad of the early 1800s Islam was generally restricted to the upper classes of Sahel society. Still the Sufi theology tolerated much of the existing native beliefs and the two systems managed to coexist due to the Sufi focus on inner thought and focus on God, rather than more strict, theological interpretations, for example of Sharia Law. Even the Fulani Jihad in the early 19th century, while strictly speaking a religiously motivated war, led by an Islamic teacher, had perhaps more to do with social issues than conversion.

Slavery was an important part of Sahel life. In fact while outlawed in modern states, the practice, in effect, continues to this day, although not formalized. Generally slaves were drawn from specific ethnic tribes or prisoners of war. They were generally divided between domestic slaves and agricultural (manual labor) slaves. In some Sahel cultures domestic slaves had important governmental and administrative posts, being trusted and responsible to their masters they were personally immune from prosecution. Slaves also were utilized as infantry in the army. Slaves
were not perhaps always unwilling, it was an institutionalized system as evidenced in modern times by the reluctance of certain tribes to abandon their overlords – there is obviously some appeal for surety of social status and a master looking out for your welfare!

Education was largely tied to Islam. Religious schools and universities spread literacy and localized scripts, some based on Arabic, were adopted to express local languages. Graduates of Islamic schools, trained scholars, provided valuable services as record keepers, librarians and scientists. In Timbuktu, where large private libraries are known, texts date back as far as the 13th century and include treatises on everything from medicine to astronomy and mathematics. This directly disproves the common idea that African history was only passed down orally and that written history, a hallmark of civilization, did not exist.

Accounts of various Arab and European travelers show a sense of marvel at the wealth and prosperity of Sahel kingdoms. In particular foreigners were impressed by the quantity of gold on display in Africa courts. However gold was not the only currency of the area, in fact cowry shells were a common method of exchange along with slaves and depending on the area, livestock and camels. Different tribes also utilized everything from cloth strips to iron in various shapes. There was in practice no uniformly accepted currency for long distance trade. Even silver dollars were not universally usable. Therefore Sahel economies were largely exchange based until the colonial takeovers instituted set currency.

**Warfare**

Conflict was a constant feature of Sahel life. Whether it was raiders from on the fringes of an empire, or clashing city states, armed struggles defined the expansion of influence, the control of
trade routes and the rise to power of nations. Sahel warfare featured all aspects of armed conflict including firearms. However, for a variety of reasons cannon and muskets would not dominate until a very late date when the colonial powers invaded. Except for some relatively isolated incidents of outside influence, such as a Moroccan attack on the Songhai Empire in 1590, firearms would not play a forceful role in the Sahel although certainly in use, including the manufacture of cannon (noted to be made in at least Zinder – a Hausa city). Partially this was due to the relatively low quality of the firearms available and probably a secondary factor was the inability to manufacture high quality powder. Even with the import of trade muskets in the 19th century, firearms maintained a secondary role, being further limited by ruling classes anxious that these powerful weapons did not gain widespread use among the peasant population.

Cavalry were the elite units and could in fact be termed knights. Heavily armed and armored they were shock troops that broke the enemy with a charge. In the deserts, camels were the mounts of choice, however in the more fertile south horses were prized. Mounts were expensive and limited the cavalry to the upper classes or those with sponsorship. The basic armament of a Sahel cavalryman consisted of a long lance or spear, a straight bladed, double edged sword and a large hide shield. Armor could be either maille or multi layered quilted cotton. Helmets were based on a quilted skullcap with metal bands running overtop from the brim to the crown.

Infantry were often drawn from slaves. A variety of weapons were employed, spears, axes, swords, slings, crossbows and flat bows. Siege warfare become more common as cities increased their fortifications, leading to the use of sappers, scaling ladders and moat filling. Technological advances included the use of poison on the tips of projectile weapons, useful in countering heavy cavalry. Infantry was highly dependent on the season, being drawn from classes most often
engaged in agricultural activity, the dry season was the time for campaigns while the wet season saw the population engaged in farming. Infantry was not an afterthought in Sahel warfare as the Fulani jihad was quick to show. Fulani archers played a key role in neutralizing the heavy Hausa cavalry.

The relatively flat landscape of the Sahel provides an interesting picture of military clashes with the outcome defined by tactics not dictated by the geography upon which the battle takes place, but rather by the timing and planning of the opposing generals. This led to formalized tacticians and it is possible to even pinpoint certain developments such as the introduction of quilted armor entering use in certain kingdoms.

Summary

As we have seen, the Sahel is a region with a social, political and military history which clearly differentiates it from North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa or the Arab states to the east. While warfare was existed on a massive scale, trade and learning were also valued commodities. The region featured a level of social development which compared favorably with the Arab Islamic world, with which it shared such a close heritage.

Trade linked it closely with the rest of the known world, Europe, the Middle East and the Subcontinent. However the Sahel supplied not only raw materials but also highly prized manufactured goods. It was a regional economy that was founded on the principles of long distance trade and the richest cities thrived as havens of goods and exchange.

The military might of the cities and empires provides a fascinating counterpoint to the popular image of pre-colonial Africa as simply a collection of tribal entities engaged in simplistic
conflict. The true picture from the Sahel is of assaults on walled cities, ranks of armored horsemen charging across the grassy plain, camel riding nomads raiding towns and through it all a struggle to control the gold which fed the greed of man and the salt required for his health.

This is not the Africa you may recognize, but it is an Africa that existed and the bones of which you can still see to this day. It deserves study, admiration and recognition. While the main focus of this work is the iconic sword of the western Sahel, to truly appreciate the weapon it is necessary to appreciate the cultures that produced it. While these few paragraphs by no means provide comprehensive coverage of the extensive history and issues of the Sahel, it is hopefully enough to spur the interest of the reader to explore the topic further.