

## Nigeria and West Africa's Silk Road: The New Crescent Economy

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### Abstract

The ancient city of Kano that is now located in north western Nigeria was an important player in the Trans-Saharan trade that flourished before the advent of the Europeans. The Trans-Saharan trade also predates the Danfodio Jihad that established the Caliphate system across northern Nigeria. The trade was seen to have involved many of the Sahel states in present times, but most importantly cities that distinguished themselves in the production of various commodities like Timbuktu, Gao, Djenne and Sijilmasa in Morocco. Since the demise of such trade, many cities that have hitherto been part of it, have lost relevance in the economic affairs and have been struggling to create new economies and have not been able to do so in modern times. Kano had been the economic base of northern Nigeria and its economy had supported the entire north of Nigeria as a result of the Trans-Saharan trade. Kano became known for trade across the Sahel and the Sahara for its textile and other services that include dyeing of clothing that were sent to as far as Morocco. The paper takes a look at the ancient Sahel economy and Kano's involvement and insists that for the economy of Northern Nigeria and that of Kano to be revamped, a new strategy will have to be developed. This strategy will look at reviving the ancient trade links that existed before and make for the construction of infrastructure, industries and necessary tourism potentials available. And that it is only by doing so that Kano as city will take its proper place among cities like Timbuktu and Gao, and impact on the economy of Northern Nigeria and by extension the Nigerian nation.

**Keywords:** Trans-Saharan, Trade, Nigeria, Kano, Sahel, Crescent Economy.

### I. Introduction

The Sahel region stretches across the south central latitudes of Northern Africa, between the Atlantic Ocean and the Red Sea. It includes parts of Northern Senegal, Southern Mauritania, Central Mali, Northern Burkina Faso, South of Algeria, Niger, Northern Nigeria, Central Chad, Central and Southern Sudan, North of South Sudan, Eritrea, Cameroun, Central African Republic and the North of Ethiopia. It covers an area of about 5,700 km and is considered as a transitional eco region that consists of semi-arid grasslands, Savannah, steppes and thorn shrubs lands that are located between the Sudan Savannah in the South and to the North, the Sahara. It is a fertile region and agriculture contributes heavily to the GDP of most of the countries located in the Sahel region presently.

There is absolutely no doubt that relations exist between the people and economy of certain parts of northern Nigeria and parts of the Sahel region in the past, present and definitely in the future. However, there have been changes overtime in such economic relations between for example, Kano, a major player in trans-Saharan and Trade and Gao or Timbuktu now in Mali. In fact no many in Nigeria or across Africa or the Sahel region understand and appreciate the significance of these trade relations that have existed over several hundreds of years.

Unfortunately, cities in the North of Nigeria have lost out in the lucrative trade flourishing along this once highly important area of trade and learning in Africa. Kano, Katsina and parts of Borno have been the main beneficiaries of the trans-Saharan trade that flourished in the Sahel and linked these cities with other cities in the region and even beyond. There also seems to be a decline in trading activities in general along this ancient trade route that many have found difficult to explain, and it has remained difficult to revive.

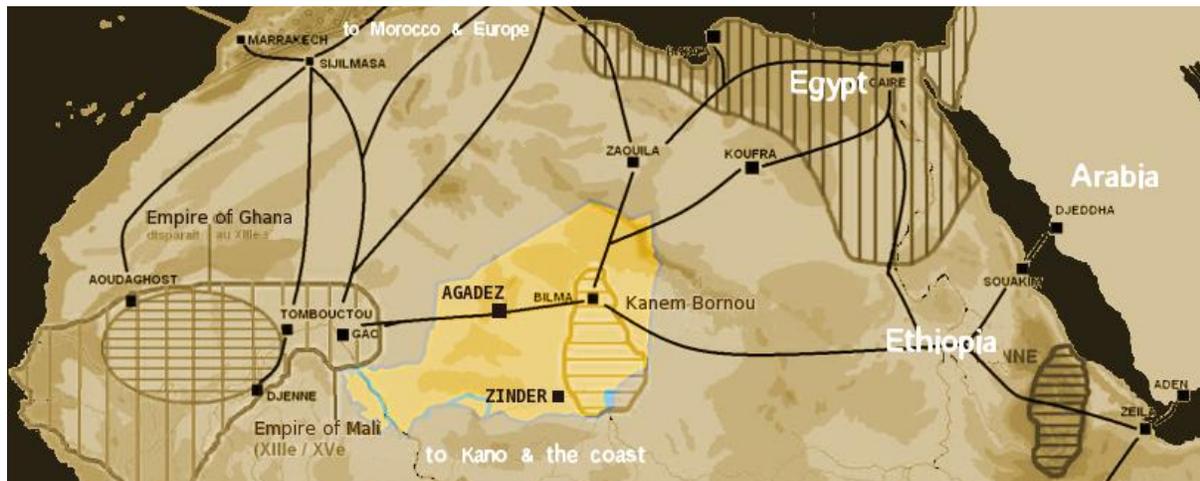
Today the Sahel region is seen as a dry, impoverished region as a result of several reasons that range from desertification, food insecurity to threats of Islamist terrorist. The region is general characterized by violence and insecurity. Droughts of the past years and desertification has led to a drastic decline in agricultural production across the region [Robert Muggah, 2019]. It is this same region that was in the past regarded as the region of trans-regional exchange, thriving urban centers and legendary kingdoms or empires such the great Ghana, Songhai, Takrur, Malinke, Mali, Kanem-Borno Empires and the Hausa states. Various products have been traded across this region over several years. These products include grains, meat and leather among humid Savannah products. Gold, Salt, Cloth and horses were traded across the region and the Sahara. Such



trade is mostly seen to flourish between Arab and the Berbers traders. Taghaza was famous for salt and had been under the control of the Sahara nomads before it came under the influence of Mali [Pekka Masonen, 1995].

## 2. The Trans-Sahara Trade

Herodotus [489-425 BCE], the famous historian had narrated in some of his writings about the people of the Nile Valley and their links their relation with other peoples further to the West. According Herodotus the link between the people of the Nile with the Mediterranean world existed centuries before the founding of the Roman Empire [C. Hassoum, T. Green]. Other sources also confirm that the links between West Africa and the Mediterranean world has been a very old one, and are believed to have existed even before the advent of Islam in the region which was around 6<sup>th</sup> Century CE. The use of camels by the Tuareg as means of transportation around 300 BC was seen to have aided trade in the region. Movement had been difficult and dangerous; however the use of camels not only made movement easy, but led to trade on large scale basis [www.ppps.org/cms](http://www.ppps.org/cms). It was seen to have established a link and fostered trans-regional trade with the Lake Chad Basin, Senegal River, the Niger bend and the Mediterranean region with the desert. The new trade came to attract Arabs, Berbers and Persian merchants. Some of the trade networks that came to be identified very early in the region include Jewish Berber merchants and Unorthodox Muslims, and after the conquest of North Africa by the Muslims in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century, Sunni Muslims dominated what came to be known as the 'Trans-Saharan trade', which linked Africa to the Mediterranean world. The Trans-Sahara trade route is among 8 famous trade routes that have shaped the history of the world and they include; the Silk road [Most Important], linking China with Rome in first Century BCE for exchange in wool, silver and gold coming from Europe. Spice route, Maritime routes that linked the East to the West for exchanges in pepper, cloves, cinnamon and nutmeg that were in high demand in Europe. Incense route is another of the eight and is located in the southern end of the Arabian Peninsula, frankincense and myrrh were exported to Rome and Greece and used to make perfumes. The Amber road links the Baltic region with Europe where stones are used for decoration and for medicines; deposits of amber are found in the Baltic Sea and is therefore exported to Europe. The Tea route is a tea producing area that link China to India through Tibet. The Salt route ran from Ostia across Italy to the Adriatic coast, salt was a precious commodity at the time, and then comes the Trans-Saharan Trade route, and is followed by the Tin route in the list of the Eight Trade routes. The Tin was a bronze and Iron Age route that was a source of ingredients used to make metals [Claire Cock-Starkey, 2016]. See map of the web of connections and routes in the Trans-Saharan trade.



Source: Wikipedia.

It is interesting to note that Islam was spread across the Sahel region as a result of commerce and not sword as in the case of North Africa. Trade brought all kinds of people to the region and not only merchants. There were pilgrims, adventurers and scholars like Ibn Batuta who visited Mali in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century and referred to the area as 'Bilad al Sudan' or 'Land of the Blacks' [www.oria.berkeley.edu](http://www.oria.berkeley.edu). It was against such background that the kingdoms and empires of the Sahel region emerged.

Trade in the region with Hausa speaking urban centers like Kano developed due to old linkages with the Fulani people and the Tuareg population. The Hausa and the Kanuri regions were characterized by an intensive mixed agro-pastoral production system similar to that obtained in the Songhai region. It helped produce and amounted to more than a reserve and was seen to have helped contribute to the attraction and resilience of the urban market centers at Kano, Katsina and Zinder. The milk, leather and Islamic literature of the Tuareg were highly prized in these urban markets that developed. The Hausa were known to appreciate clothing styles, leather works and the jewelry of the Tuaregs. Kano in those days was very famous for cotton and indigo, which was greatly valued in Morocco. Moroccan leather, usually exported to Spain was sourced from Kano; an important center for animal hides production [Monica, 2013].



### 3. Reviving the Ancient trade Routes and the Sahel Economy

The decline of the trading activities in the Sahel region in recent years has been attributed to several factors. The mercantile policies of Europe's rising economic powers are among major factors. The Trans-Atlantic slave trade led to the collapse of the trans-Saharan trade. The natural resources of the Sahel are now extracted and shipped to Europe unlike in the past when it was taken and sold in Kano, Timbuktu or Gao and now these cities are left redundant and economically insignificant to the regions prosperity. The trans-Sahara trade was a profitable web of connections that facilitated movement of goods between North Africa, West African Empires and city-states and the Near East.

Experts believe that it is not impossible to re-establish these connections. In fact the re-establishment or revival of the trans-Saharan trade is being compared to the present attempt by China to revive the old Silk road in what came to be known as the 'one belt one road' initiative, which many believe will be beneficial to the Chinese [Andrew, 2017]. The Silk Road is the ancient network of trade routes that linked East Asia and Southeast Asia with East Africa, West Asia and Southern Europe.

According to the African Development Bank, about 85% of Morocco's investments go to sub-Saharan Africa [The Economist, 19.07.18]. And this shows that there is potential for economic growth, and possibly industrialization. However, what is required to make the new crescent economy a reality is that governments of Sahel states and in this case Nigeria must undertake a study that will lead to the establishment of manufacturing industries in the North; Kano, Katsina, Jigawa e.t.c. Textile and leather industries could be established in these cities and their products moved into the Sahel markets. President Buhari as the current Chairman of ECOWAS must facilitate the construction of super crescent highway that links these Sahel cities to one another, to facilitate movement of goods.

The popular and famous cities of Timbuktu, Gao, Kano, Agadez, Taghaza, Daura, Djenne, Sijilmasa, Cairo and Borno will all be linked together. A route for the super highway can take off from Kano to Zindar and then to Agadez, and will link up to Gao and then Timbuktu, from Timbuktu it will be linked to Sijilmasa in Morocco. Other cities like Djenne will easily link up through Timbuktu. Another suggestion by experts is that Kano should take inspiration from Timbuktu and become a tourist center for being part of the wondrous Sahel world, by preserving its history and presenting it to the global audience as part of that cherished Sahel past and thus becoming a center for tourists worldwide. The traditional festival is among popular celebrations in Kano that attract people from far and wide, including Europeans and if well-organized could attract the attention of the world. Perhaps the creation of the new emirates by the Kano state government is justified and it may probably create a new modernized traditional state that will appeal to a global audience. Another attraction is the Dawakin Tofa pottery, Kurmi market, Kofar Mata dyeing pit, Minjibir weaving place and some of the remnants of the city walls [Augustina 2018].

### 4. Conclusion

As this short article has shown, the Trans-Sahara trade was no doubt a phenomenon in the history of Africa. Not only did it create an economy for many city states at the time, it also established contact between peoples of various regions and cultures. The article has also shown what kind of economic relations existed between different states or cities and the importance of the various commodities each state possessed. At this point if one argues that the re-establishment of the linkages or connections between the different cities in modern times is not out place, one can be correct. If we take into consideration the investments of Morocco in Sub Saharan Africa, which is huge, and the proposals for the Trans-Sahara Gas pipeline by West African States [Michael, 24.03.17], including Nigeria, the reality of the re-establishment these old connections becomes clear. What is needed to get trade moving is road infrastructure across the Sahel to the Sahara. And apart from the road infrastructure, industries across cities like Kano that would produce goods for the Sahel states that would stir economic intercourse between these states. The revival of the textile industries with particular focus on the production of what is consumed in the markets of the different Sahel markets will easily create the magic. At this point there is need for a comprehensive study by merchants in businessmen in Kano, Kaduna, Katsina, Borno and Daura of what is consumed in the markets of Timbuktu, Gao, Sijilmasa, and cities and markets in the different Sahel states. And if the newly created emirates in Kano together with its government and people become creative enough, Kano might find itself in the spotlight, and become a center of tourism for the world and influx of people as is recorded in places like Timbuktu, Istanbul and other places will happen in Kano and could be a source of revenue generation and will impact on the economy of not only Kano but Nigeria as a whole.

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