

A REGION OF THE MIND:  
MEDIEVAL ARAB VIEWS OF AFRICAN  
GEOGRAPHY AND ETHNOGRAPHY AND  
THEIR LEGACY\*

JOHN O. HUNWICK

Much was at one time written about the European ‘discovery of Africa’ and in more recent times scholars have written about the ‘invention of Africa’—the imaging of the continent and its people by colonial administrators, theorists, journalists and novelists. But there was a much earlier ‘discovery’ of the continent and a similar ‘invention’ of it by Arabs—or at least those using the Arabic language to express their thoughts—a thousand and more years earlier and the picture that such writers drew of sub-Saharan Africa, at least in regard to its physical geography, certainly influenced Europeans of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century as they set out, mentally and physically to explore the interior of the continent. In 1788 when the Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa was founded in London, it noted in its ‘Plan’ that the map of inner Africa was ‘still but a wide extended blank on which the geographer, on the authority of Leo Africanus, and of Xeriff Edrissi, the Nubian author, has traced with a hesitating hand, a few names of unexplored rivers and of

\* I acknowledge my debt to Paulo de Moraes Farias for many stimulating discussions on aspects of this topic and for the inspiration provided by his article ‘Models of the world and categorial models: the “enslavable barbarian” as a mobile classificatory label’ in J.R. Willis (ed.), *Slaves and Slavery in Muslim Africa, I: Islam and the Ideology of Slavery*, London 1985, 27-46.

uncertain nations'.<sup>1</sup> The situation had scarcely improved over the half century which had passed since Jonathan Swift had written with biting satire:

Geographers, in Afric maps,  
With savage pictures fill their gaps,  
And o'er unhabitable downs  
Place elephants for want of towns.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, while the little that was known of the African continent away from the coast where European merchants had been trading was known principally from Arabic sources, it had to be admitted that that 'little' was itself only imperfectly known. The earlier work of Arab writers was, then, both a catalyst for the exercise of refining and expanding European knowledge of Africa and, because of the nature of the Arab geographical legacy, a source of quite considerable confusion, especially as regards West Africa. The element of confusion, however, cannot be laid solely at the door of medieval Arab writers. They, in turn, owed some of their confusion to even earlier theorists—the much-vaunted intellectual progenitors of Europe: the ancient Greeks!

We may therefore appropriately begin our exploration of the topic by looking at the nature of Arab writing about sub-Saharan Africa and its relationship to Greek (and other) learning and legend. The Arab encounter with Africa did not begin in the Islamic period; it antedated it, probably by a very long time. There were certainly individuals in Mecca of 'Ethiopian' (*ḥabashī*) origin during the Prophet Muḥammad's lifetime, including the freedman Bilāl who became the first muezzin in Islam. It is not entirely clear what the term 'Ḥabashī' meant at that time, but it probably simply meant an individual who originated from somewhere under

1 *Proceedings of the Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa*, 2 vols., London 1810, repr. London 1967, I, 6-7.

2 See Jonathan Swift, *On Poetry*, London 1733.

the control of the rulers of Axum. In the fifth year of the Prophet's mission (615 AD) he sent some of his followers who were suffering persecution to Ethiopia and they remained there (apparently under the protection of the Christian king) until after the Prophet and his followers had re-located to Medina. Largely on account of this, it would seem, there developed a literature of the 'good Ethiopian' in Arabic. Sayings attributed to the Prophet eventually appeared praising the good qualities of the Ethiopians and several treatises were composed on their merits, some even alleging that the Ethiopian king accepted the Prophet's message and converted to Islam.<sup>3</sup> In Arabic geographical literature the name Ḥabasha is sometimes applied to a much wider area than anything that could be encompassed within any definition of the Ethiopian kingdom, and includes anywhere south of the Fezzan and west of Lake Chad, echoing the Greek usage of the term Aethiopia as a generic name for territories and peoples to the south of Libya and Egypt.

During the great period of conquests in the century following Muḥammad's death in 632 Arab warriors and administrators soon began to obtain reports of sub-Saharan Africa through their bases in Egypt and the Maghreb. When they took Egypt in 639-41 they immediately came up against the Christian Nubian kingdom of Dongola which bordered the Egyptian domains and which was to remain independent of the Islamic *umma* until the thirteenth century. It was also to be a gateway for the entry of slaves into Egypt and presumably a filter through which geographical knowledge of the middle Nile valley came.<sup>4</sup> Arab knowledge of the upper reaches and sources of the Nile, however, was gained from Greek sources, as we shall see.

3 See Akbar Muhammad, 'The image of Africans in Arabic literature: some unpublished manuscripts' in Willis, *Slaves and Slavery in Muslim Africa*, I, 47-74.

4 Early Arab authors refer to °Alwa and Maqurra, two other Nubian Christian kingdoms.

By the beginning of the eighth century the whole length of the Mediterranean fringe of Africa had been brought within the Islamic *umma*, and there had been some penetration by Arab forces into or even beyond the Saharan confines; the Fezzan in the south of modern Libya had been subdued as had the Moroccan Sūs down to the Dra<sup>c</sup> valley. It was at points such as these that the incoming Arabs began to learn of the existence of peoples living beyond the sea of sand. The Fezzan had been the home of the Garamantes with whom the Romans had had some contacts and the Garamantes themselves raided troglodytic ‘Ethiopians’ who may have been ancestors of the Tebu of Tibesti. One of the earliest African ethnonyms to appear in Arabic writing is ‘Goran [Qurān]’ a name by which the Teda (Toubou) are known. No doubt following existing trails, Arab merchants soon opened up trade—mainly in slaves—with the Zaghāwa-inspired kingdom of Kanem to the north of Lake Chad.<sup>5</sup> In the far west some probes were made into the western Sahara and the names ‘Ghāna’ and ‘Kawkaw [Gao]’ make their appearance in Arabic writing with al-Khwārizmī, writing in Iraq some time between 813 and 842.<sup>6</sup> His contemporary al-Fazārī also knew of Ghana which he characterized as ‘the land of gold’.<sup>7</sup>

Al-Khwārizmī is, in fact, the first Arab<sup>8</sup> writer whose

5 Kanem is first mentioned by al-Ya<sup>c</sup>qūbī in 259/872-3, but the ethnonym ‘Zaghāwa’ was already known to al-Khwārizmī, thirty to forty years earlier, though he lists it apparently as a town. See J.F.P. Hopkins & N. Levtzion, *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*, Cambridge 1981, 7 (al-Khwārizmī) and 21 (al-Ya<sup>c</sup>qūbī).

6 Hopkins & Levtzion, *Corpus*, 7.

7 Hopkins & Levtzion, *Corpus*, 32. His work is only known fragmentarily from references in later writings. He appears to have prepared it during the caliphate of al-Ma<sup>o</sup>mūn (813-33) and it may have been part of the scientific effort encouraged by that ruler.

8 According to Hopkins and Levtzion, his name indicates he came from Kh<sup>w</sup>ārizm ‘on the Lower Oxus River south of the Aral Sea’ though he lived and worked in Mesopotamia.

work has anything to say about sub-Saharan Africa. He wrote at a time when ancient Greek works had begun to be translated into Arabic at the behest of the ʿAbbāsid caliphs, and his *Ṣūrat al-ard* [‘Depiction of the Earth’] is essentially a work of geographical co-ordinates that seems to have been instructions for making a map. The title declares that it was abstracted from the ‘Book of Geography’ of Baṭalmayūs al-Qulūdhī, that is, Ptolemy the Claudian, otherwise Claudius Ptolemaeus of Alexandria, who was active in the middle of the first century AD. Most of its information is thus merely an Arabic rendering of the Greek work, with the toponyms transliterated the best way he knew how, though he has added several names of towns, regions and peoples that had recently become known to the Arabs. Many of these Ptolemaic names continue to feature in Arabic geographical works over the next five hundred years, thus creating numerous red herrings for readers of Arabic interested in the African interior. Al-Khwārizmī also adopted the Greek *climata* (Ar. *iqlīm*) scheme under which the known world is divided up for reference purposes into seven roughly equal latitudinal bands from the equator to the Arctic regions. This system was to be used by several subsequent Arab writers and for some it goes beyond a mere reference function and becomes a framework for theories about skin colour and mental and moral qualities, as we shall see later.

Veneration of earlier authorities is a common feature of Arabic writing of the pre-modern period, most especially in the religious sciences—the ‘transmitted sciences’ (*ʿulūm naqliyya*) as they are known—but also, as is noteworthy in geographical writings, in the ‘cognitive sciences’ (*ʿulūm ʿaqliyya*). Scholars were loathe to excise information derived from earlier authorities, but sought rather to fit any new empirical data into the older frameworks, and the fit was often uncomfortable and apt to create confusion. Celebrated scholars of the ancient Greek world, such as Plato, Aristotle, Euclid, Galen and Ptolemy, were granted a shaykh-like status in their own fields similar to that of the

great Muslim scholars in the sciences of Qurʾān, *ḥadīth* and *fiqh*.

Accounts of the Sahara and sub-Saharan Africa appear in a number of different types of Arabic work, not all of which have as their aim to impart geographical or ethnographic knowledge. Of those that have geographical pretensions, several use the Ptolemaian foundation—the ‘Geography’ *par excellence*—and add in whatever new material they have. Others divide the known (i.e. Muslim) world up on the basis of regions, such as the Arabian peninsula, Iraq, the Maghreb, Egypt, the ‘Land of the Blacks’, and so on. Some, like the works of Ibn Khurradādhbih (c. 885), Ibn Ḥawqal (c. 977) and al-Bakrī (1087) were conceived of as handbooks for travellers and incorporated the most up-to-date information (which in some cases may only have been a repetition of what an earlier writer had to say, or may by contrast have been based on actual observation); others such as Ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥakam (d. 871), al-Yaʿqūbī (wrote 891), or Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406), were essentially historians, whose information is thus oriented; yet others, especially later writers such as Abū ’l-Fidāʾ (wrote 1321), al-Dimashqī (d. 1321), al-ʿUmarī (wrote 1337) and al-Qalqashandī (d. 1418) were arm-chair encyclopædists, though al-ʿUmarī in particular gathered valuable oral information too. We have only a small handful of truly first-hand accounts of sub-Saharan Africa: the tenth-century historian-encyclopædist al-Masʿūdī visited East Africa and has left us a page or two, Ibn Saʿīd in the thirteenth century quotes passages from an apparently lost travel account relating to the Lake Chad area, while in the mid-fourteenth century the intrepid Ibn Baṭṭūṭa visited Mali, the Niger Bend and Tagidda (in present day Niger) and wrote up an account of the trip at in the last section of his travel memoirs.

*Construction of geography: Niger and Wangara*

Let us turn now to some of the ways in which ‘knowledge’ of the African interior was constructed or reconstructed by the medieval Arab writers, beginning with the physical geography. Cartography makes its appearance from the very inception of Arab geographical writing, presumably because Ptolemy’s work contained a map. In fact, most Arab world maps bear a fairly close resemblance to the Ptolemaic model. On Arab maps such as those of Ibn Ḥawqal in the tenth century or al-Idrīsī in the twelfth, Africa occupies almost half of the circular space, while Europe and Asia occupy the other half (conventionally the south is at the top of maps and the north at the bottom). The three continents are surrounded by water, usually called the ‘encircling sea’ (*al-baḥr al-muḥīṭ*). Not surprisingly, writers who lived in Baghdad or Cairo or Cordoba were best acquainted with the region in which they lived. Their maps of the Mediterranean bear at least some resemblance to physical realities, even though medieval maps are essentially diagrammatic, and features that their authors found important are disproportionately large. Correspondingly, the farther away from the Mediterranean they got, the vaguer was the knowledge of topography. Africa south of the Sahara, following Ptolemy, simply becomes a large blob, filling out the semi-circle of the map and extending eastwards until southern Africa, is shown ‘facing’ China. In Ptolemy’s map it even appears joined to Asia creating an ‘inland sea’ out of the Indian Ocean. The failure of Arab cartographers to correct Ptolemy (except for detaching Africa physically from east Asia) is not merely an artefact of the follow-the-master syndrome. It also reflects what Arabs ‘knew’ from the accounts of merchant seaman who plied sea routes between Mombasa, Kilwa and Sofala in East Africa and ports in Gujerat, Malabar, the Maldives, and beyond. To them it must have seemed that such places really were ‘opposite’ the East African coast.

Since the whole of the southern half of Africa was unknown to Arab merchants and travellers, except for the East African coast which, for them ran due east from Cape Gardafui (in present-day Somalia), it was represented as being essentially uninhabited. This posited lack of population was explained by the fact that the farther south one went, beyond the equator, the hotter the climate became. Even in the 'land of the blacks' just north of the equator people's brains 'almost boiled from the heat', as one author put it.<sup>9</sup> People were presumed not to be able to live in heat more intense than that; ergo, there could be no people living south of the equator! As we shall see later, the intense African heat, even in the inhabited first clime just above the equator, and to some extent the second clime to the north of it, was thought to affect both body colour and intelligence. Extreme cold in the seventh clime in northern Europe was thought to have similar effects, bleaching skins and numbing brains!

The dominant physical feature of Arab maps of Africa is the continent's hydrographical system as constructed from Ptolemy and complemented by further theorizing, informed (or as it turns out, mis-informed) by new 'empirical' knowledge. Ptolemy, living in Alexandria at the head of the Nile delta in Egypt was clearly able to obtain knowledge of the course of the Nile which, though it becomes stylized on his map and much more so on later Arab maps, bears a general resemblance to the physical facts. Later, Arab geographers came to know of what they thought was another great river in West Africa, though in fact it seems to have been a conflation of three separate rivers (the Senegal, the Niger and the Komadugu Yobe), and they assumed that it/they must be another branch or arm of the great Nile river system. Some also knew of a third large river—evidently the Wabi Shebelle—and they also related this to the Nile system, sometimes calling it the 'Nile of Mogadishu'.

9 Al-Dimashqī, see Hopkins & Levtzion, *Corpus*, 205.

The ‘Nile of the Blacks’ (*Nīl al-sūdān*) as the composite West African river came to be known, first makes its appearance in the literature with the *Kitāb al-masālik wa’l-mamālik* of the Andalusian scholar Abū ‘Ubayd al-Bakrī, who was not apparently indebted to Ptolemy. Writing in 1067, he made use of the work of al-Warrāq, a geographer of the previous century, but evidently drew extensively on oral accounts of merchants who had visited West Africa. He refers to ‘the Nile’ in several places: first as the river on which Takrūr and a number of other small states stood. This is clearly the river Senegal, which al-Bakrī indicates, but does not directly state, flows into the Encompassing Ocean (i.e. the Atlantic). Later when describing a route from ancient Ghana eastwards he remarks that at a certain point the traveller ‘meets the Nile coming out of the land of the Blacks’. One travels along it to Tiraqqā when it turns south into, once again, the ‘land of the Blacks’. Here he is clearly referring to the great bend of the river Niger which flows through the inland delta, along the Saharan fringes and then turns south near modern Bourem to continue on to its delta in modern Nigeria. Al-Bakrī, then, does not distinguish in his nomenclature between the river Senegal and the river Niger. Even though a close reading of his text would show that his first ‘Nile’ flows east-west and his second ‘Nile’ west-east, the implications of this were not grasped by later geographers. So strong was the theory that the ‘Nile’ was the mother of all African hydrography that when Ibn Baṭṭūṭa reached the Niger near Segou in 1352 he assumed it was the Nile (and did not apparently ask its name). Learning that it flowed on *eastwards* past Timbuktu and Gao he tells his readers that it flowed on eventually passing Dongola in Nubia, from which one would suppose that he thought it was either the ‘great’ (i.e. Egyptian) Nile or a tributary of it.<sup>10</sup>

10 Sultan Muḥammad Bello of Sokoto seems also to have subscribed to this theory; see the sketch map he gave to Capt. Clapperton in 1824 in *Missions to the Niger*, ed. E.W. Bovill, IV, Cambridge 1966,

Perhaps the most influential of all Arab geographers, both on Arab writers and later European geographers was al-Sharīf al-Idrīsī who wrote his universal geography *Nuzhat al-mushtāq fī ikhtirāq al-āfāq* [‘A Pleasure Trip for him who longs to penetrate distant Lands’—a sort of armchair tourism] for the Norman king Roger II of Sicily in 1150. The basis of al-Idrīsī’s physical geography of Africa is Ptolemy, but he has clearly been influenced by Arab writers on the hydrography of western Africa, even though he does not, for example, mention al-Bakrī among his sources. In al-Idrīsī’s work we find the full theoretical development of the two Niles river system and this reappears in several later writers down to Ibn Khaldūn who repeats it without question. The key passage reads as follows:

In this [fourth] section [of the 1st Clime] occurs the splitting of the two Niles. I mean the Nile of Egypt which cuts through the land and flows from south to north. Most of the towns of Egypt are on both banks of it and on its islands also. The second part of the Nile flows from the east to the far west, and on this part of the Nile are all the towns of the Blacks, or most of them. These two Niles have a common source in the Mountain of Q-m-r [? read ‘Qamar’—‘moon’, cf. Ptolemy’s ‘Mons Lunae’], the first part of which is sixteen degrees beyond the equator. The source of the Nile is in this mountain from ten springs. Five of these pour forth and gather in a large swamp; the other five also flow into another swamp. From each of these swamps three rivers flow, all of which empty into a single very large swamp.<sup>11</sup>

---

facing p. 698. The river Niger bears the legend (in Arabic): ‘This is the river Kwāra. It is the one that reaches Egypt and is called the Nile’. The nineteenth century French traveller René Caillié also noted that people in Timbuktu thought that the Niger ended up as the Nile; see his *Travels through Central Africa to Timbuctoo*, London 1830, II, 59.

11 Al-Idrīsī, *Opus Geographicum, sive ‘Liber ad eorum delectationem qui terras peragrarare studeant’*, ed. A. Bombaci, U. Rizzitano, R. Rubinacci & L. Veccia Vaglieri, Naples-Rome 1970-84, I, 32-3 (translation by JOH).

This very large swamp (which we might identify in reality with the Sudd [flood] region of southern Sudan) is soon called a 'lake' by al-Idrīsī and he says that at its lower end there is a mountain which splits the lake in two. One part of the mountain goes to the north-west taking along with it the 'Nile of the Blacks', while the other part follows the eastern half of the mountain and goes in a northerly direction to become the Nile of Egypt. The 'Nile of the Blacks' empties into the 'Sea of Darkness' (*Baḥr al-ẓulumāt*, i.e. the Atlantic Ocean). His hydrographic scheme is clearly illustrated in the map of Africa he drew up, which is also reproduced by Ibn Khaldūn in his *Muqaddima*.<sup>12</sup>

Medieval Arab scholars recognized four great rivers in the world, reflecting the Biblical tradition, though their identity varies among authors. Common to all lists are the Euphrates and the Nile.<sup>13</sup> It was natural, then, to suppose that a river such as the Niger, of similar grand proportions to the Nile, was just a branch of it. From this position it was perhaps but a small step to see the two other major rivers that Arabs came across in West Africa, the Senegal and the Komadugu Yobe as being part of this branch. No one, it would seem, ever saw all three, and the fact that two of them, the Niger and the Komadugu Yobe, flowed west-east was conveniently overlooked. The key factors seem to have been that one *did* flow east-west and empty into the Encompassing Ocean, just as the Egyptian Nile emptied into the Mediterranean and the Mogadishu 'Nile' emptied into the Indian Ocean (the eastern reaches of the Encompassing Ocean)—a fine example of the symmetry of nature. Another factor may have been the association of one of the rivers, the

12 See Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddima: an Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, Princeton 1967, I, map facing p. 110.

13 Favourites for the other two are the Tigris, the Amu-Darya and the Sir-Darya, these last two flowing into the Aral Sea in Central Asia. See André Miquel, *La Géographie humaine du monde musulman*, The Hague-Paris 1967-80, III, 118.

Komadugu Yobe, with a large, swamp-like lake—Lake Chad—even though the river flowed into it and not out of it.

This West African ‘Nile’ was more important as a symbol than it was as a physical fact, or series of reconstructed ‘facts’—just like the European geographers’ later construction of the so-called ‘mountains of Kong’ stretching from the Senegal river to Lake Chad at about 12° N which served to discourage consideration of the possibility that the Niger turned south and emptied into the Atlantic.<sup>14</sup> Using the comparative reality of the Egyptian situation and the partial evidence of some Arab geographers in relation to West Africa, al-Idrīsī plants almost all known towns of the region along this ‘Nile’. The river is shown as virtually a straight line and it is designed to represent not merely a physical but a psychological barrier. To the north of it on the frontiers of the ‘lands of Islam’ were the towns visited by Muslim merchants whose populations were by the twelfth century at least in part Muslim: Takrūr, Silla, Tiraqqā, Kawkaw and others.

There, on the banks of both the Senegal and the Niger, they met with West African merchants who exchanged their goods for gold, slaves and other items. They did not, so far as we can tell, venture across this ‘Nile’, the other banks of which were said to be inhabited by naked pagans (often reputed to be cannibals) known under the cant name of Lamlam, Damdam or Namnam, who seem to turn up wherever there is any ‘Nile’. On the one hand they had no real need to, unless they sought to discover the sources of gold; on the other hand, crossing the river would have taken them beyond the lands of Islam and beyond a point where they could mount their camels and simply head back home. It was dangerous country for both body and soul. In reality, most of the towns that the North African informants of al-

14 See Thomas J. Bassett & Philip W. Porter, “‘From the best authorities’: the mountains of Kong in the cartography of West Africa”, *Journal of African History*, xxxii, 1991, 367-413.

Idrīsī and his predecessors did business in were, in fact, on one of the great rivers. It is not very surprising, then, that al-Idrīsī should also place the ‘town’ of Ghana on the ‘Nile’ (indeed, on both banks) in conformity with his theory.<sup>15</sup> In fact, Kumbi Šāliḥ, the likely site of the merchant town of Ghana, close to the royal city, was several hundred kilometres from either the Senegal or the Niger.

This leads us to another geographical red herring for which al-Idrīsī seems to be responsible, but which proved to be of such longevity that British geographers were solemnly discussing it and trying to locate it on their maps in the early nineteenth century: that is the ‘island of Wangara’. The term ‘Wangara’ is first used (though with a confused spelling by al-Bakrī who applied it to a group of non-Arab long-distance traders who dealt in gold in ancient Ghana—essentially correct, for it is a term used until recently in the Middle Niger and Hausaland for Manding merchants otherwise known as Dyula. Al-Idrīsī, however, makes of ‘Wangara’ a piece of land, an island surrounded by the ‘Nile’ to the east of Ghana. In his text he tells us that it is inundated by the ‘Nile’ waters annually and that after the flood people swarm over it to search for gold. Susan Keech McIntosh has suggested that what al-Idrīsī was really describing was the inland delta of the Niger (in modern Mali) which stretches from about the vicinity of San in the south to the Goundam area in the north.<sup>16</sup> Certainly al-Idrīsī’s dimensions for the ‘island’—300 miles long and 150 miles wide—are close enough, and his statement that the flood begins in August

15 I have suggested elsewhere that al-Bakrī may have at one point confused Ghana with Ghiyaru which was on the ‘Nile’ (Senegal river) and it is possible that al-Idrīsī was heir to this confusion. See J.O. Hunwick, Claude Meillassoux & Jean-Louis Triaud, ‘La Géographie du Soudan d’après al-Bakrī: trois lectures’ in *2000 Ans d’Histoire Africaine: le sol, la parole et l’écrit. Mélanges en honneur à Raymond Mauny*, Paris 1981, ‘Troisième Lecture’, 420.

16 See Susan Keech McIntosh, ‘A reconsideration of Wangara/Palolus, island of gold’, *Journal of African History*, xxii, 1981, 145-58.

also matches the reality of the river Niger's inundation regime. But the identification is not so simple as that, for theory and reality are inextricably intertwined in al-Idrīsī, and he combines two separate types of information to produce a hybrid and mythical third. The original area of 'Wangara' was undoubtedly the auriferous Bambuhu region situated between the Bafing and Bakhoy tributaries of the Senegal river and still known as Gangaran,<sup>17</sup> which probably gave its name to the merchants who visited it regularly in pursuit of gold to sell to North African merchants. Though it does not become inundated annually, it is, nevertheless, surrounded almost completely by rivers. On the other hand, it is likely that 'Wangara' merchants were establishing themselves in towns of the interior delta such as Dia and perhaps Kābara as early as the first half of the twelfth century.<sup>18</sup> 'Modern' Jenne, too, may have originally been settled by 'Wangara' merchants who made it their base while doing business with the non-Muslims of 'Old Jenne' (Jenne-jeno) until the ruler of that town converted to Islam c. 1200 and moved his court to the new site. Accounts of the area from such merchants of the area would have filtered back up the Saharan trails and into North Africa. Thus what we most probably have is a conflated description of the Bafing-Bakhoy 'Wangara' where people really did find gold, and the interior delta of the Niger where 'Wangara'

17 M. Delafosse, *Haut-Sénégal-Niger*, Paris 1912, I, 55. See also his *La langue mandingue et ses dialectes*, II: *Dictionnaire mandingue-français* (Paris 1955, 260), where he lists: 'gbā-gara ou gā-gara (litt. 'trou du terrain'), puits à or, région aurifère'.

18 When Ibn Baṭṭūṭa was on the Niger near, I believe, Sansanding in 1352 he obtained information about these two towns and was told that the inhabitants of Zāgha (read: Diakha) were Muslims of long standing. See Hopkins & Levtzion, *Corpus*, 287. In fifteenth-century Timbuktu there seems to have been a tradition of learned Kābara scholars migrating there, again indicative of an ancient tradition of Islam, see al-Sa<sup>c</sup>dī, *Tar<sup>2</sup>īkh al-sūdān*, ed. O. Houdas, Paris 1898 [repr. 1964], 47-8, and J.O. Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, Leiden 1999, 69.

merchants were operating, and which really did become inundated annually. It is even possible that al-Idrīsī's 'Ghāna', which he describes as consisting of two towns on opposite banks of the river ['Nile'] near the land of 'Wangara' may be a conflation of accounts relating to an earlier 'capital' of ancient Ghana and more recent accounts of old and new Jenne.

As noted earlier, al-Idrīsī was the Arab geographer who seems to have most influenced European geographers down to the nineteenth century, and the reason for this is very simple. His was the earliest work of its kind to be published in Europe. An Arabic text of a shortened version was published in Rome in 1592; an Italian translation of this appeared in 1600 followed by a Latin translation in 1619, published in Paris.<sup>19</sup> The other Arab writer whose work was to have a lasting influence was the early sixteenth century Moroccan-Andalusian al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad al-Wazzān al-Zayyānī, better known in European writings as Leo Africanus. He had actually traveled in West Africa—though to less places than he claims—and obtained his Latin name when a ship in which he was travelling in the Mediterranean was seized by pirates, and he wound up being presented as a gift to Pope Leo X. Whilst in Rome (it is not clear whether he ever returned home) he wrote an account of North Africa, Egypt, and West Africa, mainly based on his own personal knowledge and what he had learned from his contemporaries, but influenced, nevertheless, by earlier Arab writers to whom he occasionally refers, including al-Idrīsī. He wrote in Italian which was then polished up by his publisher Ramusio for inclusion in his collection of travels, published in 1550.<sup>20</sup> A French translation followed in 1556 and in the same year a Latin translation was published in Antwerp. Finally, an English translation was published in London in

19 It was entitled *Geographia Nubiensis*, since the anonymous text was erroneously thought to be by a 'Nubian'.

20 G.B. Ramusio, *Delle Navigazioni et Viaggi*, Venice 1550-59, vol. X.

1600.<sup>21</sup> Thus Europe acquired an actual description of Timbuktu (whose existence had been known to at least some European scholars from the maps of the Jewish cartographers of Majorca since the late fourteenth century), Gao, Agades, several of the Hausa city states and Borno. What they also acquired was further confusion on the question of the West African 'Nile', to which Leo gave the name 'Niger' which it still bears, and on 'Wangara'.<sup>22</sup>

Leo's Niger seems to flow out of Lake Chad, and although he alludes to another view (perhaps he had read Ibn Baṭṭūṭa), namely that it starts in mountains in the west and flows eastwards, he disowns it, based on what he claims to be personal experience:

In the middle of the Land of the Blacks flows the river Niger which begins in a desert called Seu<sup>23</sup> where it emerges from a great lake. According to what our geographers claim, the Niger is a branch of the Nile which disappears under ground and re-emerges to form a lake. Some say that the river originates in mountains in the west and flows eastwards to turn into a lake. That is not correct. In fact we have travelled along it, starting in the east in Timbuktu and followed the flow of the current to Ghinea [Jenne] and the kingdom of Mali, both to the west of Timbuktu.<sup>24</sup>

This apparent eye-witness testimony did a great disservice to European geographers, as did his placing of 'Guangara'

21 The English translation was republished by the Hakluyt Society in 1896 (2 vols., ed. R. Brown). The best available version of Leo's work is the French translation by A. Épaulard & al, *Description de l'Afrique*, 2 vols., Paris 1956. I have recently published a new English translation of some West African sections of his '*Description*' as a supplement to *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, pp. 272-91.

22 The name is probably taken from the river named Nigeir by Ptolemy, perhaps to be associated with the Berber word 'ghir', meaning 'river'.

23 I.e. So, a generic name given to non-Kanuri peoples in Borno.

24 *Description de l'Afrique*, I, 5.

among the Hausa states and calling it a 'kingdom'.

Cartographers such as the Dutchman Blaeu (1664) and the Frenchman d'Anville (1750) struggled to make sense of such conflicting information. Blaeu shows the Niger flowing out of a lake in central Africa close to the upper reaches of the Egyptian Nile, flowing into and out of a second lake and then into a third lake close to 'Guangara' before passing on to yet another lake and finally to the Atlantic in a delta, of which the river Senegal is but one channel. D'Anville, who had the benefit of French exploration up the river Senegal and English knowledge of the river Gambia, shows these as two distinct rivers flowing east-west into the Atlantic. The Niger appears to have its source in the west, not far from the source of the river Senegal and to end in a lake to the east of Wangara and towards tributaries of the Egyptian Nile.<sup>25</sup> Here, then, is a river that flows from nowhere to nowhere, and is joined in Hausa country by the river of Lemlam, a throw-back to al-Idrīsī.<sup>26</sup> This was still essentially the position when Arrowsmith showed the Niger or 'Nile el Abeed' (Ar, *nīl al-ʿabīd*—'slaves' river') flowing past Timbuktu, past 'Burisa' (i.e. Bousa) and near Youri (Yaouri), both known to d'Anville, after which its course reflects Idrisian geography complete with an island of Wangara that is 'said to be overflowed in August', and ancient long since forgotten towns such as Tirka [Tīraqqā], Yarassna and Sekmara [Saghamāra].<sup>27</sup> Only after the mission of Denham

25 For a discussion of these geographers, see R. Hallett, *The Penetration of Africa, I: To 1815*, London 1965, 92-6.

26 D'Anville had apparently read a translation of Ptolemy who likewise shows a river in the interior of Africa which does not flow into the sea.

27 See *Missions to the Niger*, II, facing p. 82. The exact date of the map is not mentioned, but it seems to be based on an earlier one by Rennell (1798), of which a revised version dated 1802 is included in *Proceedings of the Association*, I, folding map at p. 209. According to Bassett & Porter, 'From the best authorities', 408, Arrowsmith's only map before 1825 was published in 1802. Al-Bakrī (writing in

and Clapperton from Tripoli through Bornu to Sokoto in 1822-24 and the Lander brothers' exploration of the Niger from near Yaouri to its delta in 1830 was the map to be straightened out and the course of the Niger traced from its source in the Futa Jallon highlands of Guinea to its mouth on the Atlantic coast of Nigeria.

### *Construction of ethnicity*

Returning now to the medieval Arab writers, I would like to move on to look at their construction of ethnicity—a term we are now all so wary of in the wake of the notion of *métissage*. Earliest Arab attempts to draw up an African ethnography, relating 'peoples' they had encountered to some scheme of humanity they were familiar with, were grounded in Biblical genealogy. Thus Ibn Qutayba, a ninth-century man of letters from Baghdad quotes an earlier source, Wahb b. Munabbih (d. 728), a south Arabian of part Persian origin who was considered an expert in Jewish legend (*isrā'īliyyāt*):

Genealogists who had no knowledge of the true nature of things imagined that Negroes are the children of Ham, the son of Noah, and that they were singled out to be black as a result of Noah's curse, which produced Ham's colour and the slavery God inflicted upon his descendants. It is mentioned in the Torah that Noah cursed his son Ham. No reference is made there to blackness. The curse included no more than that Ham's descendants should be the slaves of his brother's descendants. To attribute the blackness of Negroes to Ham, reveals disregard of the true nature of heat and cold and the influence

---

1067) first mentioned these towns. They were all placed on the 'Nile', Yaresnā apparently somewhere on its western reaches (probably on the Senegal river) and Tīraqqā and Saghāmāra on its middle reaches (Middle Niger). I have attempted to plot al-Bakrī's locations on a 'modern' map of West Africa. See my 'Troisième Lecture' in Hunwick, Meillassoux & Triaud, 'Géographie du Soudan d'après al-Bakrī', 416-24.

they exert upon the air and upon the creatures that come into being in it.<sup>28</sup>

The names of African 'peoples' given by Ibn Qutayba presumably reflect names that Arabs came across during the conquests or through trade, though it is quite an odd list: Nūba is a term familiar to us primarily in reference to peoples living immediately to the south of Egypt but particularly to the inhabitants of the Christian kingdom based on Dongola with the rulers of whom the Muslim rulers of Egypt maintained security and trade exchange agreements down to the thirteenth century; the Zaghāwa are mentioned by other writers as nomads who roamed an area north of Lake Chad and had a hand in founding the Kanem state, and people known by this name still exist as nomads or semi-nomads in northern Darfur (Sudan) and in eastern Chad Republic. Qurān/Goran we have already noted as a name for the Tubu.

The term 'Zanj' on the other hand, is a generic term for Africans who were imported into the central Islamic world from the East African coasts of what are now Kenya and Tanzania and who formed the core of a huge anti-caliphate revolt in southern Iraq in the late ninth century. Although Arab writers treat the term Zanj as if it were the name of a specific group it is clear that nothing unites the Zanj other than stereotyped characteristics (which we shall examine later) and a common area of origin which, wide though it may in fact be, probably seemed small and specific from the perspective of Baghdad. A similar remark applies to the term Ḥabash ('Abyssinians') which included peoples of diverse languages and cultures, though probably with some predominance of Oromo (Galla), while 'Barbar' is wandering nomenclature which turns up in north Africa (the Berbers) and in both East and West Africa and is no doubt

28 My translation from the text in L.E. Kubbel & V.V. Matveev, *Arabskiye istochniki*, I, Moscow-Leningrad 1960, 21.

derived from the Greek *barbaroi* ('barbarians').<sup>29</sup>

It is no doubt significant that many of the 'ethnic' names given in this early genealogical explanation of the peopling of Africa are the same as those given to 'races' (*ajnās*) of slaves in the central medieval Arab world. Two centuries later in his treatise on the purchasing and evaluation (*taqlīb*) of slaves, a Christian physician of Baghdad, Yawānīs (al-Mukhtār b. al-Ḥasan b. °Abdūn al-Baghdādī), generally known as Ibn Buṭlān, discussed the physical attributes and moral qualities of the Zanj, the Ḥabash, the Zaghāwa and the Nūba. These four designations would appear to coincide with the four principal gates through which African slaves entered the eastern Mediterranean world at that period, to wit: the East African coast (Zanj), the Horn of Africa (Ḥabash), the Lake Chad region (Zaghāwa) and the Nile valley (Nūba).<sup>30</sup> He discusses these 'races'—or to be more precise, the women of these 'races'—in Chapter 4 of his treatise, as well as the characteristics of female slaves from other 'races' of Europe and Asia. He first makes a general distinction between slaves according to their general geographical provenance: the 'easterners' (Turks, Indians) he praises most highly and contrasts them with the 'westerners'. The 'northerners' and 'southerners' are also compared. The northern men are characterized as broad-chested and brave, and their women as sterile, because they do not cleanse themselves after menstruation; the southerners have 'cold stomachs and bad digestions. By character they are docile and their lives are short'.

His stereotypical characterizations of the women of the various 'races' are interesting and are, in one way or another, echoed in literature and popular perception down to

29 On these names, see Farias, 'Models of the world and categorial models', 31-41.

30 Ibn Buṭlān had visited Egypt and so his list need not be taken as representing only the 'races' of slaves known in Baghdad.

the nineteenth century. He has little good to say of the Zanj women: ‘The blacker they are, the uglier they are, the more pointed (filed?) their teeth are, the less use they are and the more it is to be feared they will harm you. They are generally of bad character and much given to running away’. They are further stereotyped as being of merry disposition and born dancers and rhythmists—a not unfamiliar stereotype in popular representations of African-Americans:

Their dispositions know no gloom. Dancing and rhythm are inborn in them and natural to them. Because of their inability to speak Arabic correctly (*‘ujūmat alfāzihinna*) people turned to them for music (*zumr*) and dancing. It is said that if a Zanj fell down from heaven to earth he would surely do so to a beat. Their women have the most sparkling front teeth because of the abundance of their saliva produced by their bad digestions. They endure drudgery. No sexual pleasure is to be had from them because of their smelly armpits (*lisunānihinna*) and coarse bodies.<sup>31</sup>

‘Zaghāwa’ women—in fact probably slaves obtained from somewhere in the Chad Basin—fared even worse under his pen: ‘Of bad character, foul-mouthed (*dhawāt damdama*), they are worse than the Zanj or any other type of Blacks. Their women are no good for sexual pleasure and their men no use for service’. Elsewhere he pontificates: ‘They are the worst of the blacks, just as the Armenians are the worst of the whites’.<sup>32</sup>

Nubian and the ‘Abyssinian’ women on the other hand received high praise. Nubian women have ‘dry bodies and soft skin’, their physical features are agreeable, they are religious, benevolent, modest and chaste. They are submissive to their masters, as if they were created for

31 See Ibn Buṭlān, *Risāla fī shirā’l-raqīq wa-taqlīb al-‘abīd* in ‘Abd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn (ed.), *Nawādir al-makḥṭūṭāt*, Cairo 1951-5, IV, 384.

32 Ibn Buṭlān, *Risāla fī shirā’l-raqīq*, 378.

slavery.<sup>33</sup> Abyssinian women ‘generally have soft bodies, pliant and delicate. They are prone to consumption and pulmonary fevers, and are not suitable for singing and dancing. ... They are submissive and docile and may be trusted to look after people. ... Their lives are short because of their poor digestions’.

Some writers attempted to justify certain stereotypes with ‘scientific’ support based either on zodiacal and planetary influences or, rather later, with theories about the influence of climate on skin colour and temperament. As an example of the zodiacal/planetary school of thought, we may take the tenth century geographer al-Hamdānī (d. 945), who claims for his theories an origin in the writings of Ptolemy. The world may be divided into four sectors, each of which comprises three zodiacal signs influenced by one of the four elements: fire, earth, air and water. In this scheme sub-Saharan Africa lies in the fourth or south-western quadrant which comprises Cancer, Scorpio and Pisces and is under the influence of the element water. Ghana, and what he called ‘the land of the naked blacks’, are modelled on the triad of Cancer and are under the influence of Venus and Mars.

Because of the joint influence of these two planets it happens that many of the peoples of these two lands are ruled by a king and a queen who are brother and sister, the man ruling the men and the queen ruling the women. ... Their temperament is very ardent. . . [Their men] like ornamentation and endeavour to make themselves attractive, dressing themselves like women. This is because of the influence of Venus. Nevertheless, they are virile and manly. They plunge into perilous situations and expose themselves to danger and this is because of the influence of Mars. They are men of malevolence, malice, lying, duplicity and violence.<sup>34</sup>

33 *Ibid.*, 376.

34 Al-Ḥasan b. Aḥmad al-Hamdānī, *Ṣifat jazīrat al-‘arab*, Riyāḍ 1974, 48.

On the other hand 'the Nūba and the Zanj and their neighbours to the south of India are all under the influence of Scorpio and Mars. For this reason their character is more akin to that of wild beasts. They are given to quarrelling, enmity, disputes and hatred. They hold life cheap and are without pity for one another'.

It is, perhaps, interesting to compare what al-Hamdānī says about Africans with what he says about Europeans. His zodiacal theories spare them no less than the Africans. Europeans live in the north-west sector comprising Aries, Leo, and Sagittarius, and are dominated by Jupiter and Mars. Hence they are 'generally unsubmitive people, loving liberty ... and are hostile to proponents of law and order'. Because some of the zodiacal principles are masculine and some feminine, the men of this region show little jealousy about their womenfolk, but are 'more desirous of males and show more jealousy over them'. Some more northern Europeans—people of Brittany, Galicia, 'Germany' and Dacia (in northern Romania)—come under Aries and are influenced by Mars 'which renders their people savage and reckless on the whole. Their character is close to that of wild animals, that is they are irresponsible and have no religious system'.<sup>35</sup>

Another later writer, the great social theorist of history, Ibn Khaldūn, also shared this notion about northern Europeans and lumped them together in regard to their 'natures' with Africans from the equatorial zones. His reasoning for why peoples of such far-flung regions should display similar characteristics, however, is based on theories quite different from those of al-Hamdānī, but which again go back to Ptolemy and, probably, in some form or other to long before him.<sup>36</sup> Ibn Khaldūn fully accepted the theoretic-

35 *Ibid.*, 39.

36 E.H. Bunbury thinks that a rudimentary system of *climata* was devised by Hipparchus (d. 126 BC). See his *A History of Ancient Geography among the Greeks and Romans from Earliest Times to*

cal division of the world into seven *clima*, and his geographical account of Africa faithfully follows al-Idrīsī. He also basically accepted that this system had built into it a hierarchy of value judgements about the inhabitants of the various areas of the world, though he grappled with how most ‘scientifically’ this could be explained.

Mediterranocentric theory had long taught that extreme heat in *clima* 1 and extreme cold in *clima* 7 produced distorted and savage human beings. As one got farther away from these regions, so climates became more moderate and people more civilized. It is not difficult to see where this is leading to. The fourth zone, which was right in the middle of the seven, and hence the most moderate in its climate and the most civilized in its inhabitants, was the Mediterranean zone.

This view of the world can be illustrated by two quotations from earlier authors. The first is a Persian geographer of the early tenth century who quotes someone whom he merely describes as ‘a man of discernment’ in regard to the Iraqis:

The people of Iraq have sound minds, commendable passions, balanced natures, and high proficiency in every art, together with well-proportioned limbs, well-compounded humors, and a pale brown colour, which is the most apt and proper colour. They have been well baked in wombs that do not expel them [prematurely] with a blondish or reddish colour, with grey-blue eyes and whitish eyebrows such as occurs to the wombs of the Slav women or those like them or comparable to them. The wombs of their women do not overcook them until they are burnt, so that the child comes out something black or pitch-black, malodorous and pungent-smelling, with peppercorn hair, unbalanced limbs, a deficient mind, and depraved passions, such as the Zanj, the Ethiopians, and other blacks

---

*the Fall of the Roman Empire*, London 1883, II, 441. J.H. Kramers goes further, claiming that the system ultimately derived from Persian-Babylonian thought, see his chapter ‘Geography and Commerce’ in T. Arnold & A. Guillaume (eds.), *The Legacy of Islam*, Oxford 1931, 84.

who resemble them. The Iraqis are neither unbaked dough nor one cooked and burnt, but between the two.<sup>37</sup>

Europeans, then, are unbaked (or half-baked), and Africans are burnt; but while our author seems to hold only the Europeans' colour against them, his description of Africans reveals prejudices which go beyond colour and are formulated by racial stereotypes. Descriptions such as 'mal-odorous ... with unbalanced limbs, a deficient mind and depraved passions' include indictments of moral character, but they are not uncommon in writers of the medieval period. Al-Dimashqī, a fourteenth-century Syrian writer (d. 1327) who draws copiously on earlier writers and adds little which is original, echoes some of these prejudices:

The equatorial region is inhabited by communities of Blacks who are to be numbered among the savages and beasts. Their complexions and hair are burnt and they are physically and morally deviant. Their brains almost boil from the sun's excessive heat ... The human being who dwells there is a crude fellow, with a very black complexion, burnt hair, unruly, with stinking sweat, and an abnormal constitution, most closely resembling in his moral qualities a savage, or animals. He cannot dwell in the 2nd zone, let alone the 3rd and 4th, just as the people of the 1st zone live not in the 6th, nor those of the 6th in the 1st, or the equatorial region, because of the difference in the quality of the air and the heat of the sun. God knows best!<sup>38</sup>

Later he expands upon this:

We shall now give an account of what has been said about the inhabitants of the seven zones in regard to their physique and their moral

37 Ibn al-Faqīh al-Hamadhānī, *Mukhtaṣar Kitāb al-buldān*, ed. M.J. De Goeje, Leiden 1885, 162. Translation by JOH, partly based on that of Bernard Lewis in his *Islam from the Prophet Muhammad to the Capture of Constantinople*, Oxford 1987, II, 209.

38 See Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Abī Ṭālib al-Dimashqī (d. 1327), *Nukhbat al-dahr fī 'ajā'ib al-barr wa'l-baḥr*, ed. A. Mehren, Leipzig 1923, 15-17.

qualities, and the reasons for this. The 1st zone is from the equator, extending to what lies beyond it and behind it. It contains the following nations: the Zanj, the Sūdān, the Ḥabasha, the Nūba, etc. Their blackness is due to the sun. ... Since its heat is extreme and it rises over them and is directly over their heads twice in a year, and remains close to them, it gives them a burning heat, and their hair, pursuant to the natural processes, becomes jet-black, curly and peppercorn-like, closely resembling hair that has been brought close to a fire until it has become scorched. The most convincing proof that it is scorched is that it does not grow any longer. Their skins are hairless and smooth, since the sun cleans the filth from their bodies and draws it out. Their brains have little humidity for similar reasons and hence their intelligence is dim, their thoughts are not sustained, and their minds are inflexible, so that opposites, such a good faith and deceit, honesty and treachery, do not coexist among them. No divinely revealed laws have been found among them, nor has any divine messenger been sent among them, for they are incapable of handling opposites together, whereas divine laws consist of commanding and forbidding, and creating desire and fear. The moral characteristics found in their belief systems are close to the instincts found naturally in animals, which require no learning to bring them out of the realm of potentiality into that of reality, like the braveness to be found in a lion, and the cunning in a fox.<sup>39</sup>

In an attempt to grapple with some of these stereotypes and explain them in a more scientific fashion, Ibn Khaldūn had this to say:

We have seen that Negroes are in general characterized by levity, excitability, and great emotionalism. They are found to dance wherever they hear a melody. They are everywhere described as stupid. ... Al-Mas<sup>c</sup>ūdī<sup>40</sup> undertook to investigate the reason [for this]. However, he did no better than to report on the authority of ... al-Kindī<sup>41</sup> and Jālinūs<sup>42</sup> that the reason is a weakness of their brains which results in a weakness of their intellects. This is an inconclusive

39 *Ibid.*, 273.

40 An early tenth-century encyclopaedist who actually visited East Africa.

41 A philosopher and contemporary of al-Mas<sup>c</sup>ūdī.

42 I.e. Galen, a second-century Greek physician.

and unproven statement. ... The real reason is that ... joy and gladness are due to the expansion and diffusion of the animal spirit. Sadness is due to the opposite.<sup>43</sup>

He goes on to explain that heat expands the 'animal spirit' (i.e. the emotional side of human nature) and gives the example of the merry drunkard whose animal spirit is heated by wine and the man who breaks into song when immersed in a hot bath. Hence it is to be expected that people who live in hot climates will be merrier than those who live in colder climates and to make his point he contrasts the 'cheerful' Egyptians with the 'gloomy' Moroccans. So, though he endorsed the stereotype of the light-hearted, light-footed emotional black African, he sought to deny that such characteristics are due to inherent mental inferiority and to give these alleged racial characteristics a 'scientific' explanation related to climate.

Earlier on in his discussion of the effects of climate upon human characteristics, he had sought to refute the genealogical arguments for blackness of skin which originate in the Hamitic myth:

Some genealogists who had no knowledge of the true nature of beings imagined that the Blacks are the descendants of Ham, the son of Noah, and that they were characterized by black colour as a result of a curse put upon him by his father (Noah), which manifested itself in Ham's colour and the slavery that God inflicted upon his descendants. Concerning this they have transmitted an account arising from the legends of the story-tellers. The curse of Noah upon his son is there in the Torah. No reference is made there to blackness. His curse was simply that Ham's descendants should be the slaves of his brothers' descendants.<sup>44</sup> To attribute the blackness of Negroes to Ham, shows disregard for the nature of heat and cold and the influ-

43 *The Muqaddimah*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, 2nd edn., Princeton 1967, I, 174-6. The quotation has been slightly rearranged, though the sense has not, of course, been altered.

44 The brothers being Shem and Japheth. Shem is considered to be the ultimate ancestor of the Arabs, and Japheth of the Europeans.

ence they exert upon the air and upon the creatures that come into being in it.<sup>45</sup>

We have come some way from theories about Slavs being undercooked in the womb and black Africans being overdone, but these ‘scientific’ explanations for colour or other characteristics (for their authors certainly thought they were scientific, whatever we may think), do not alter the fact that in medieval Arab eyes extreme whiteness and extreme darkness of skin were considered aberrations from the norm and were to be connected with extremes of climate. These extremes, in turn, were thought responsible for other departures from the ‘golden mean’ which was, by definition, what prevailed in the Mediterranean lands.

For all his inquiring mind and his attempt to apply scientific and materialistic principles to the explanation of human behaviour and social organization, Ibn Khaldūn still could not escape from the clutches of the ancient theory of the division of the world into seven climatic zones, and in fact sought to use this as a basis for what he thought was a scientific explanation for the alleged characteristics of different peoples. But this was, in reality, nothing more than a new way in which to rationalize stereotypes and to make prejudices respectable. In his celebrated *Muqaddima*, or ‘Prolegomena’ to his universal history, he gives an explanation for what he (and no doubt his Arab contemporaries) considered to be the barbarous characteristics of the black Africans of the first *clima* and their reflection in northern Europeans of the seventh:

Their buildings are of clay and reeds, their foodstuffs are *durra*

45 *Muqaddimah*, I, 169-70. Ibn Khaldūn does not, however, seem to have rejected the genealogical explanation for the ‘origins’ of African peoples. In his *Kitāb al-‘ibar*, which the *Muqaddima* forms an introduction to, he names Ḥabash, Nūba and Zanjī as sons of Kūsh [b. Kan°ān] b. Nūḥ, on the authority of al-Mas°ūdī and Ibn °Abd al-Barr. See the Beirut edition of 1956-61, IV, 410.

[sorghum] and herbs. Their clothing is the leaves of trees which they sew together to cover themselves, or animal skins. Most of them go naked. The fruits and seasonings of their countries are strange and inclined to be intemperate. In their business dealings they do not use the two noble metals [silver and gold], but copper, iron, or skins, upon which they set a value for the purpose of business dealings. Their qualities of character, moreover, are close to those of dumb animals. It has even been reported that the Negroes of the first zone dwell in caves and thickets, eat herbs, live in savage isolation and do not congregate, and eat each other. The same applies to the Slavs. The reason for this is that their remoteness from being temperate produces in them a disposition and character similar to those of dumb animals, and they become correspondingly remote from humanity.<sup>46</sup>

From this we might understand that Nigerians and Norwegians share parallel traits. He then contrasts the characteristics of the people of these outer zones with those of the middle zone—the Mediterranean lands—and the two zones adjacent to them:

The inhabitants of the middle zones are temperate [i.e. balanced] in their physiques and character and in their ways of life. They have all the natural conditions necessary for a civilized life, such as ways of making a living, dwellings, crafts, sciences, political leadership, and royal authority. Thus they have [the various manifestations of] prophecy, religious groups, dynasties, religious laws, sciences, countries, cities, buildings, horticulture, splendid crafts, and everything else that is temperate.<sup>47</sup>

This passage is remarkably self-congratulatory and, by implication, very dismissive of the peoples whose lands lie outside the middle zones. However, its strict application created paradoxes that forced Ibn Khaldūn into some rethinking and the formulation of a rider to his theory. There were two problems. First, Ibn Khaldūn knew from both personal experience and historical investigation that his

46 *Muqaddimah*, I, 168-9.

47 *Ibid.*, I, 172.

theory about the barbarism of black Africa and its peoples simply did not hold water. He had gathered a great deal of information about the kingdom of Mali and had met men who had had close contacts with the great ruler of Mali, Mansa Mūsā, during his pilgrimage. He had also met other West Africans in various places in North Africa including emissaries of rulers and could not comfortably dismiss them and their countries as barbarous. Secondly, it must have been something of an embarrassment to have to admit that the Arabian peninsula, the home of the Arabs and the cradle of Islam, lay partly in the first *clima* and partly in the second *clima*—regions that were supposed to be, by reason of their harsh climates, zones of barbarism whose people were remote from civilisation and humanity.

What new theories could he propound to deal with such contradictions? In regard to the Arabian peninsula he produced a climate modification theory under which it was argued that because the Arabian Peninsula was surrounded by water on three sides, this reduced the dryness of its air and hence the intemperance of character that the dry heat would otherwise cause. As we have seen, a combination of heat and dryness in the air was thought to desiccate brains and produce perverted temperaments.

His explanation for the evident fact that the peoples of Sahelian West Africa (the only ones he had direct knowledge of) were civilized people with kingdoms, dynasties, crafts, and so on—in short all those attributes that made for a balanced, ‘temperate’ way of life—relies on a completely different type of argument. Indeed, the whole theory of the effect of climate on human character and culture is thrown overboard in favour of an argument based on religion. Following the passage quoted earlier on the barbarity of the inhabitants of tropical Africa and northern Europe, he further castigates these peoples for being ‘ignorant of prophecy’ and lacking in a religious law, meaning they are not Muslims nor do they belong to a religion recognized by Muslims as being of divine inspiration, such as Christianity

or Judaism. For al-Dimashqī the very barbarism of such peoples, induced by climatic factors, was the reason why they had not been favoured with prophecy. Ibn Khaldūn, however, does not view their barbarism as irredeemable; on the contrary, they may escape it through the adoption of a revealed religion. Hence he could then make exceptions to the rule of barbarism for denizens of the climatically extreme *climata* who had adopted Christianity, such as the Ethiopians and certain peoples of Europe or those who had become Muslims, such as the people of Mali, Takrūr,<sup>48</sup> and Kawkaw (i.e. the region around Gao on the Middle Niger). In short, faith was to be the touchstone of civilized humanity and, as far as West Africa was concerned, what served to exclude some of its peoples from their otherwise ‘natural’ categorization as barbarians was, in the eyes of Ibn Khaldūn, their profession of the faith of Islam.<sup>49</sup>

The bond of the brotherhood of the faith not only meant that a black man/woman who was a Muslim ought no longer to be regarded as a barbarian, but that s/he should no longer be regarded as an inferior in any way when compared to an Arab. In practice, however, blackness, at least combined with cultural non-Arabness, has tended to continue carrying some social stigma within the Arab world, as is evidenced in

48 Takrūr, whilst originally used to name a kingdom in what is now called the Futa Toro region of Senegal, was later used much more broadly by Arab writers for Muslim territories in West Africa. Ibn Khaldūn defines it as lying between the Middle Niger and Lake Chad; see J. Hunwick, art. ‘Takrūr’, *EI* (2), X, 142-3.

49 Cf. the conclusions reached by Drissa Diakité, reviewing medieval Arab authors writing about black Africa: ‘[L]a religion, les coutumes et mœurs des peuples Sudan [sont] généralement présentées ... comme une négation de la vie, sans valeur, signe d’ignorance, de sauvagerie, de malédiction divine. Les valeurs réelles suivent les traces de l’Islam qui ... élève les Sudan ... au nombre des hommes civilisés. [L]es Sudan n’ont acquis les vertus fondamentales de l’Homme que par l’influence du monde arabo-islamique.’ See his ‘Le “pays des noirs” dans le récit des auteurs arabes anciens’, *Notre Librairie*, 95, oct-déc. 1988, 16-25.

the continuing usage in several Arabic dialects of the word °*abīd* (‘slaves’) to refer to black Africans. Because from the sixteenth century onwards the vast majority of slaves who came into the Mediterranean Islamic world were black, blackness became inevitably associated with slavery.<sup>50</sup> In Morocco in the nineteenth century, according to the historian al-Nāṣirī, ‘many common folk believe that the reason for being enslaved, according to the Holy Law, is merely that a man should be black in colour and come from those [Sudanic] regions’.<sup>51</sup> He had to argue vigorously that sub-Saharan Africa—more especially West Africa—contained a large number, perhaps a majority, of Muslims and that many had belonged to the faith for centuries.

The fact that he needed to make such arguments is indicative of a certain image of Africa as no more than a reservoir of enslavable barbarians, which neither the travels of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa nor the Timbuktu scholar Aḥmad Bābā’s carefully argued treatise on slavery,<sup>52</sup> nor centuries of commercial contact and conversion had done much to dispel. Slavery itself was a product of (or, in the medieval Muslim view, a punishment for) ‘heathendom’. Since black Africans in the Mediterranean world were by and large slaves, freed slaves or descendants of slaves, it would follow that they had at one time been ‘heathens’ and hence, according to the conclusions come to by the medieval writers, ‘barbarians’. Thus while pre-modern Arab ethnographic discourse never propounded theories of the innate ‘inferiority’ of any

50 See further J.O. Hunwick, ‘Islamic law and polemics over slavery in North and West Africa, 16th-19th century’, in Shaun Marmon (ed.), *Slavery in the Islamic Middle East*, Princeton: Markus Wiener 1999, 43-68.

51 Aḥmad b. Khālīd al-Nāṣirī, *Kitāb al-istiṣḡāʾ li-taʾrīkh duwal al-maghrib al-aqṣāʾ*, Casablanca, 1955, V, 131, trans. in J.O. Hunwick, ‘Black Africans in the Islamic World: an understudied dimension of the Black diaspora’, *Tarikh*, v, 4, 1978, 38.

52 His *Miʿrāj al-ṣuʿūd*, written at the request of persons in Tuwat, but well known in Morocco (al-Nāṣirī quotes it).

particular group of human beings, black, brown or white, a combination of theories relating to the effect of climate upon temperament and intelligence and the enslavability of the 'heathen' did place black Africans in a peculiarly disadvantageous light.

Even in the late nineteenth century some folk still assumed that blackness was the symbol of slavery. A West African who visited Morocco made the following observation:

When I travelled to the land of the Farther Maghrib [Morocco]...I found some of the uncouth Maghribīs claiming that all blacks without exception were slaves who did not deserve to be free, for how should they deserve that, being black of skin? On this matter they relate fantasies that have no foundation to them in law or the natural order. As for the law, nothing came down from the Law-giver<sup>53</sup> that would explain why among all peoples they should be enslaved rather than others. With regard to nature, [such an argument is unacceptable] because the natural order rejects blacks being slaves without a compelling legal reason.

\*\*\*\*\*

Other than Bernard Lewis's *Race and Slavery in the Middle East* there are scarcely any studies of perceptions of race and colour in the Arab/Mediterranean world.<sup>54</sup> Only a few case studies of the practice of slavery in the Arab/Islamic world and the role of black Africans in it have appeared in learned

53 I.e. the Prophet Muḥammad.

54 Lewis's book was published by Oxford University Press in 1990 and is based on earlier work which appeared under the title *Race and Colour in Islam*, New York 1971 (and earlier in *Encounter*, Aug. 1970). A recent localized study by L. Blin, 'Les noirs dans l'Algérie contemporaine', *Politique africaine*, 30, 1988, 2-31, though superficial, is suggestive. See also the tantalizingly brief article of Cherifa Benabdessadok, 'La négresse dans les contes populaires maghrébins', *Notre Librairie*, 95, oct-déc. 1988, 74-7.

journals.<sup>55</sup> At some time, one would hope, scholars will address such issues and link them to the construction of images of sub-Saharan Africa and Africans in Arab writing across the ages. The geographic and ethnographic discourses examined above are not, of course the only Arab discourses on Africa and Africans. There is a need to look at and evaluate others such as the ‘pietist’ discourse, and discourses to be found in folklore, proverbs, poetry and popular literature such as the ‘Thousand and One Nights’ and the ‘Antar’ epic, and beyond this studies of contemporary discourse on Africa in Arabic novels, print and visual media and on the lips of speakers of Arabic in the Mediterranean lands. Here, indeed, are regions of the mind that call for a new chapter of African ‘exploration’.

55 For some references to such studies, see my ‘Black Slaves in the Mediterranean World: Introduction to a Neglected Aspect of the Black Diaspora’ in Elizabeth Savage (ed.), *The Human Commodity: Perspectives on the Trans-Saharan Slave Trade*, London 1992, 5-38.