

James McDougall and Judith Scheele, *Saharan Frontiers: Space and Mobility in Northwest Africa*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), pp. 291, 10 maps.¹

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McDougall and Scheele's volume is a contribution to both the regional study of the Sahara and the theoretical construct of the 'frontier.' The term, 'frontier,' has been used to describe multiple regions in many different time periods and often with very little reference to it as a theoretical construct: it thus is refreshing that a volume of this kind has been made with a deep consideration for its semantic meaning. This volume, therefore, is at the analytical vanguard of a growing historical field.

The theoretical basis for McDougall and Scheele's arguments hinge on the McDougall-authored Chapter 4: 'Frontiers, Borderlands, and Saharan/World History.' In making the case for a specifically 'Saharan' frontier, McDougall naturally and explicitly puts his arguments against those of Kopytoff (*The African Frontier: the reproduction of traditional African societies*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), who argued for a type of 'African' frontier that was applicable to the whole continent. While Kopytoff's theories have been evaluated and criticised countless times over the last quarter-of-a-century, McDougall is particularly successful when he incorporates the growing body of work on 'borderlands' into his analysis. The fact that theoretical 'borderlands' and 'frontiers' overlap considerably in geographical terms meant that an evaluation of the interaction between the two was necessary. This text fulfils that demand, and situates the broader volume in current historical

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debates successfully (it does bring into question why this volume is called *Saharan Frontiers*, rather than *Saharan Borderlands*, however).

McDougall's ideas are also supported by what is also an incredibly coherent set of case studies. As a collective, they are as ground-breaking for the historiography of the Sahara as they are relevant to the theoretical themes of the book. Even though contemporary phenomena dominate what is a book about history, each case study is grounded in a context that gives credence to the historical importance of frontiers. For example, the relevance of the dramatic growth of Al-Khalil (described by Scheele in Chapter 13), a trading town on the Mali-Algerian border, to the understanding of emergent trading posts in the Sahel in previous eras, is both original and persuasive. Similar analyses are made with reference to continuity and change in culture (and cultural interaction), migration and other urban areas. While a conclusion or epilogue from the editors may have been appropriate considering the abruptness at which it finishes, the nature of what McDougall attests is relevant to understanding the Sahara in Chapter 4 is pervasive throughout the book. It is such coherence that characterises the strength of McDougall's theories.

However, this does not mean that McDougall's 'Saharan frontier' entirely stands. While he opposes Kopytoff's ideas in principle, their respective theoretical frameworks have more in common than McDougall would perhaps like to admit. They both, for example, emphasise the instability and fluidity of frontier relations. Furthermore, these terms imply variety and change. Even though there may be an overriding sense of rigidity in Kopytoff's theories (McDougall rightly criticises Kopytoff's use of the term 'self-replicating,' as a way to describe all African societies), his views are certainly more adaptable than what are given credit for here. Thus, the conclusion of this chapter, that 'the history of Africa's Saharan borderlands since the sixteenth century at least is one of constant fragmentation and the reinvention of new norms,' (pp. 88) should not be seen as a rejection of Kopytoff's original ideas as

McDougall puts it, but rather as something that has built on these ideas to make a dynamic analysis of the Sahara.

Moreover, to construct a chapter that is, for a large part, a response to a text published twenty-five years ago is, perhaps, misguided. The citation of Horden and Purcell (*The Corrupting Sea: a study of Mediterranean History*, Malden: Blackwell, 2000) notwithstanding, more references to the wider historiography of frontiers should have been made considering that this is a chapter with 'World History' in its title. Horden's uneasiness over the linkages between the Sahara and the Mediterranean contained in this volume (Chapter 1) should have been the catalyst to cite other analyses of frontiers. This would have created a more rounded and worldly view of the Sahara in this theoretical context. The growing historiography emanating from the school of Medieval Islamic History, for example, has debated at length the nature of frontiers before the existence of fixed geographical boundaries, while also incorporating other regions and periods to understand them more fully. These debates could easily have been inserted into the construction of Saharan frontiers. The same can be said regarding more recent and current political frontiers and borderlands all over the world. Thus, instead of dedicating so much effort to discrediting an already-heavily-criticised volume made over two decades ago, if this chapter were to fully represent an attempt to place Saharan frontiers into *World History*, more varied and current texts should have been referred to.

Nevertheless, this volume's strength lies in the use of case studies to back up McDougall's wider theories. There is also no doubt that the case studies are also made stronger by the context that McDougall provides in Chapter 4. Thus, even though its theoretical core may fall short of setting *Sahara Frontiers* (or *borderlands*) in *World History* as it claims to do, further studies on frontiers with a theoretical context in mind will be obliged to refer to this seminal volume.