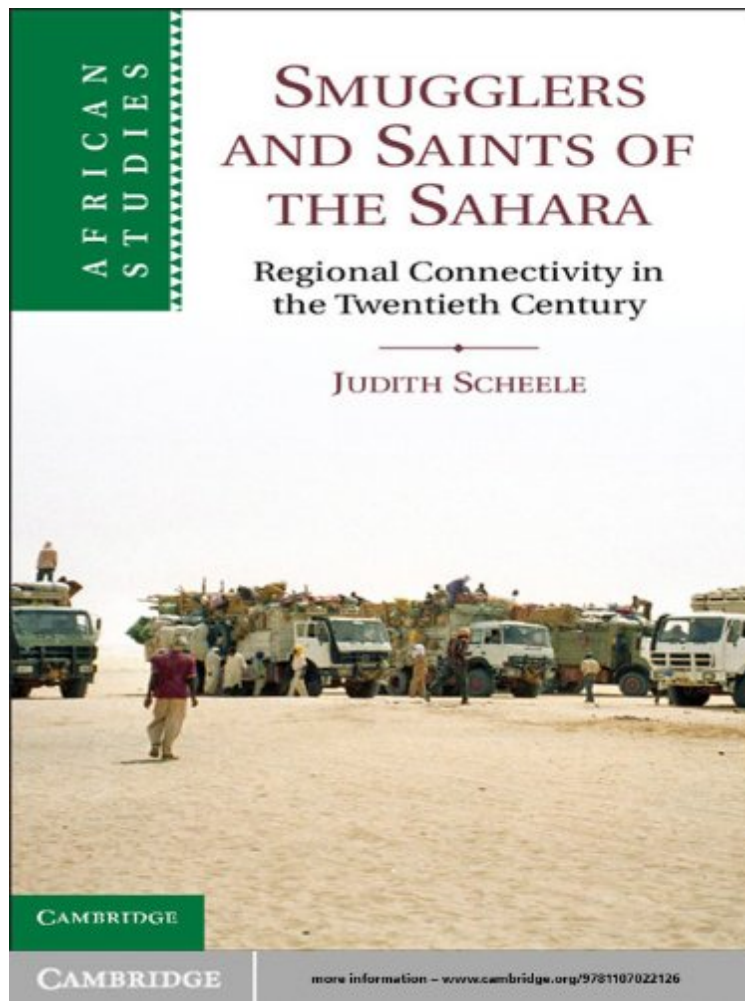


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## Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara: Regional Connectivity in the Twentieth Century (African Studies)

*Judith Scheele*

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**Judith Scheele : Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara: Regional Connectivity in the Twentieth Century (African Studies)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara: Regional Connectivity in the Twentieth Century (African Studies):

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favorites of social scientists for decades. The region has become even more popular given the inflated theses and divergent findings of scholars in every corner on the region's relationship with terrorism, or violent Islamist extremism. Granted, while Judith Scheele has set off to write a very interesting account of commerce trends and social cleavages in the region, she herself cannot refrain from her two cents on the "terrorism" debate either. Scheele explores, through extensive travel, local archives and first-hand research, the trade networks of Northern Mali, Southern Algeria and parts of North/Western Niger. Scheele looks at the family lineages that dominated different networks, how monopolies on commerce changed hands through political and historical events and to what extent the religious establishments influenced the process. Trade hubs in Algeria were often supported through Islamic zawiyas, or centers of learning. In the author's analysis, the zawiyas were not always Sufi affiliated. They were hubs with spokes reaching from city centers to austere trading posts and cross-border connections where religious knowledge flowed next to commercial systems. Family and zawiya influence were ways of dominating trade routes. The specific locations that the author describes in Algeria include: Alouef, the Ahaggar region, Tamanrasset, Timimoun, In Salah and closer to the Malian border; Bordj Badji Mokhtar, Timiaouine and Tin Zaouaten. Prior to 1962, Scheele argues that Algerian families and networks dominated the region's trade where the "bilad as-Sudan" was the Algerian playground. Scheele exercises an attention-grabbing strategy in the book's initial pages, however, describing the peculiar life in al-Khalil, Mali. Contrary to popular belief, the trade system was not connected by beautiful oasis gardens, lush with life in contrast to a scorching desert. Numerous cities in Northern Mali, Kidal and al-Khalil included, would barely exist apart from illicit border trade with Algeria. Al-Khalil is like a "Wild West" where decent women should never venture, morality is second to youth vigor, and where unsavory trader relations and Haram (forbidden) merchandise pragmatically support the harsh life of the competitive merchant. Trade is a way of life. It does not have to be illicit or illegal but it is certainly contained in an area of gray corruption where border guards, road blocks and city police all find their delicate balance in the vast network. Trade relations and dominance of routes and goods evolved through two world wars, marriages, droughts, weather patterns and internal battles. The French colonizer enforced their own pragmatic agenda supporting slavery when "necessary" to provide the much needed work-force to maintain the water systems. It is even suggested that since the desert trade is built in loans and debts, the French colonizer could have "bought" the commercial rights by paying off dozens of debtors. It never did. Learned Muslim scholars and judges, or qadis, were invaluable. Villages and local elders sought the assistance of qadis in order to institute shari'a rule of law and mediate water disputes and establish fair access to the limited resources overall. The legal registries still available for research are overwhelmed with water issues and pronouncements. The hierarchy that was established apart from the shari'a prescriptions were deeply intertwined with baraka, or blessings obtained from renowned religious figures, Sufi saints or otherwise. The region's inhabitants were no less spiritual or religious than other parts of Africa if practicing their beliefs in the context of ethnic diversity, linguistic stigmas and commercial competition. Special amulets could even be obtained in order to protect the smuggler. The region, as the author explains, is stereotypically divided into Arab, white, non-Arab and black classes. Those who learned Arabic, and better yet, maintained a fluency in Arabic were often recognized as more virtuous than those who preferred or chose to maintain their non-Arabic mother tongue. The religious divides were much more fluid than simple color indications. Clothing was also an indicator not only of religious "piety" for some families but also of cultural identification, for others. The veil, or hijab, is interpreted as a religious requirement by the more Arab or non-black populations whereas the Soghay or Bambara of Mali retain their cultural turban and do not interpret the hijab in a religious fashion. Judith Scheele has written a very important book for any researcher, explorer or political analyst of this region. The book is detailed and could be overly burdensome for those not familiar with the region at all. Finally, Scheele's "two cents" on terrorism in the region is that the reality is found somewhere in the middle between Jeremy Keenan's conspiracy theory of America's "land grab" and a pious sublime Islamic oasis of exotic desert commerce. There are political actors, familiar with the desert spaces who seek to manipulate the trade networks for their own personal aspirations. The terrorist threat is overplayed. The Sahel is not an extremist homeland. The region's trade systems are currently dominated by the Kel Tamasharq, often generally labeled as "Tuaregs". Yet the Kunta, Soghay, Fulani, Hausa and Arab traders have all laid claim to one hub or spoke. In a place where religious observance is overly pragmatic and political connections easily manipulated it is very difficult to pin down a "map" of the region. Scheele is one of the few who has a shot.

*Smugglers and Saints of the Sahara* describes life on and around the contemporary border between Algeria and Mali, exploring current developments in a broad historical and socioeconomic context. Basing her findings on long-term fieldwork with trading families, truckers, smugglers and scholars, Judith Scheele investigates the history of contemporary patterns of mobility from the late nineteenth century to the present. Through a careful analysis of family ties and local economic records, this book shows how long-standing mobility and interdependence have shaped not only local economies, but also notions of social hierarchy, morality and political legitimacy, creating patterns that endure today and that need to be taken into account in any empirically-grounded study of the region.

"The Sahara is neither a romantic land of luxury-laden camel caravans nor a vast empty darkness hiding the likes of al-

Qa'ida. Judith Scheele's Sahara is the most dynamic 'space' in today's Africa, one brought alive by ceaselessly expanding and contracting human networks that invest in 'place' even as mobility defines 'community'. Scheele brings us into al-Khalil, the infamous Malian-Algerian-frontier trans-shipment centre where "men are men", virtue non-existent and 'family-loyalty' the definition of survival. She introduces us to the multi-national work teams of enormous transport trucks that criss-cross the desert with foodstuffs, cigarettes and cocaine, licit and illicit loads side-by-side, protected by always-present AK-47s. During sixteen months, Scheele - as itinerant as her informants - observed, questioned, interviewed; in sedentary moments, she accessed family-held Arabic documents revealing these contemporary 'business networks' to have deep historical, Islamic roots. Scholarship is impressive, arguments convincing; this is the book many who know the Sahara will wish they had written." - E. Ann McDougall, University of Alberta

"Smugglers and Saints is a dynamic and informative book based on tireless multisite research in local and colonial archives and among long-distance entrepreneurs, dispersed families and itinerant communities. Scheele approaches Saharan truck stops and oasis towns as dynamic nodes dependent on constant interchange with other nodes that together form a web of 'Saharan connectivity'. This is a must-read for anyone interested in the region and in carrying out trans-Saharan fieldwork." - Ghislaine Lydon, University of California, Los Angeles

About the Author Judith Scheele is Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at All Souls College, Oxford University. She is a social anthropologist who has conducted extensive fieldwork in North Africa and the Sahel. She is the author of *Village Matters: Knowledge, Politics and Community in Kabylia, Algeria* (2009).