Journal of Ecohumanism
2026
Volume: 5, No: 1 pp. 307 – 317
ISSN: 2752-6798 (Print) | ISSN 2752-6801 (Online)
https://ecohumanism.co.uk/joe/ecohumanism
DOI: https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v5i1.7244

Slavery in the System of Trans-Saharan Caravans: The Status of Slaves in the Commercial Caravans between the Sudan Region and the Islamic Maghreb during the Medieval Period

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Abstract

This study examines the status and experiences of slaves within the trans-Saharan caravan system linking the Islamic Maghreb and the Sudanese regions during the medieval period. It explores the organization and composition of commercial caravans, the routes connecting the Eastern, Central, and Western Maghreb with the Sudan, and the significance of the slave trade as an important component of trans-Saharan commerce. Drawing on medieval Arabic geographical and historical sources, including the works of al-Bakrī, Ibn Ḥawqal, al-Idrīsī, Ibn Battuta, and Ibn Khaldūn, the study highlights the natural and human challenges encountered by slaves during caravan journeys. It demonstrates that slaves occupied different positions within the caravans, either as guards and laborers or as commodities intended for sale, and that they endured severe hardships arising from the harsh desert environment, scarcity of water, extreme climatic conditions, attacks by bandits, and various forms of physical and psychological exploitation. The study concludes that the trans-Saharan caravan system imposed particularly harsh conditions on slaves, who represented the most vulnerable group within these commercial networks, and whose suffering constituted an integral yet often overlooked aspect of medieval Afro-Maghrebi trade relations.

Keywords: *Trans-Saharan caravans; slavery; slave trade; Islamic Maghreb; Sudan; medieval Africa; Sahara Desert; commercial networks; Ibn Battuta; al-Bakrī*

Received: 29/04/2025 ***Accepted: 12/12/2025*** ***Published: 09/02/2026***

Introduction

Following the arrival of the Muslim Arabs in North Africa, many Arab tribes gradually penetrated the desert regions and the lands of the Sudan. This Arab expansion continued until some tribes reached the regions of Senegal and Niger in Western Sudan. Accompanying this movement into the Sahara and the Sudanese lands was the activity of Arab merchants, who entered these regions through commercial caravans. Arab-Islamic influences also spread to Western Sudan as a result of the migration of large groups seeking to propagate the Islamic faith. Among these groups were numerous merchants, scholars, and jurists, who played a significant role in disseminating Islam throughout the regions of Western Sudan (1).

Contacts between Arab and Berber Muslim merchants and the lands of the Sudan began after their arrival in the Islamic Maghreb during the first century AH (seventh century CE). Sudanese gold appears to have been a major incentive for Muslim merchants to cross the Sahara and engage in trade with the Sudanese territories. To ensure the continued flow of Sudanese gold, Muslims organized trans-Saharan commerce. In the second century AH (eighth century CE), Governor Abd al-Rahman ibn al-Hijab ordered the digging of wells along the trade route passing through Sous to Awdaghust in order to facilitate the movement of commercial caravans (2).

The Sahara Desert played a major role in the history of the Sudanese lands. The trans-Saharan caravan routes served as channels through which Islamic civilization was transmitted from the Islamic Maghreb to the Sudan. At no time did the desert constitute an insurmountable barrier to fruitful cultural interaction between the two regions. Trade and the exchange of goods formed the direct foundations of this contact, through which cultural influences spread extensively (3).

The caravan represented the sole means of transportation and communication between the Islamic Maghreb and the Sudanese lands. Given the dangers and hardships faced by caravan travelers in the Sahara, the caravan system was characterized by complexity and meticulous preparation as a multi-faceted organization. Such arrangements were necessary to ensure the successful crossing of deserts and

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v5i1.7244

wildernesses and the delivery of the goods carried by these caravans. Therefore, it is essential to examine the composition of the caravans linking the Islamic Maghreb and the Sudan, as well as the preparations undertaken for these journeys, since they constituted the means by which merchants transported all exchanged commodities, especially slaves.

A caravan consisted of means of transport, merchants, and service personnel associated with trade. The number of camels in trans-Saharan caravans sometimes reached one thousand, while the number of merchants, attendants, and slaves amounted to several hundred individuals. A caravan was formed when merchants from a particular region gathered and organized themselves to travel with their goods toward a common destination. Such a caravan might include merchants originating from different regions rather than a single province (4).

Preparations began with the purchase or rental of camels, which were then taken to grazing areas for fattening so that they could withstand the hardships of crossing the desert. Essential supplies for the journey, such as water skins, ropes, and food provisions, were also acquired. In general, the caravan was composed of means of transport, an administrative organization, guards, and merchants.

Means of Transportation

As mentioned earlier, commercial caravans relied on camels because of their remarkable adaptation to the harsh desert environment, particularly the scarcity of pastures and water, high temperatures, and intense solar exposure, in addition to their ability to carry heavy loads over long distances. In this regard, two types of camels used in trans-Saharan transport can be distinguished:

- **Mahārī (riding camels):** camels reserved for transporting people.
- **Pack camels:** camels designated for carrying merchandise (5).

The **mahārī** carried riders and their provisions. They were distinguished by their speed, averaging about 60 km per day and, in some cases, exceeding this distance to reach up to 150 km per day. They were frequently employed to precede the caravan to its destination, returning with information regarding road conditions or agreements with tribes whose territories the caravan intended to cross. They were also used in combat when caravans came under attack from bandits.

Pack camels, on the other hand, transported goods weighing up to 180 kilograms in some cases. These camels could travel with their loads for approximately six hours a day, covering distances ranging between 25 and 30 km, and under favorable conditions between 50 and 60 km daily. The aim was to reach water points where the animals could rest for one or two days. Based on these figures, caravan journeys could last four months or even longer.

Although precise figures regarding the number of camels in caravans are lacking, some historical sources provide estimates from periods when the volume and density of trade between the Islamic Maghreb and the Sudan had declined. For example, Ibn Khaldun indicates that the annual caravan linking Egypt and the Sudan comprised around 12,000 camels (6), while ʿAbd Allāh ibn al-Hājj Ibrāhīm reported that a caravan departing from Shinqīt toward Zāra in the Sudanese Sahel consisted of 32,000 camels (7).

Given the enormous number of camels involved, such caravans required meticulous organization supervised by experienced individuals capable of providing effective and rapid solutions to the various difficulties encountered during the journey.

The Administrative Structure of the Caravan

Managing large numbers of merchants and transport animals in an orderly manner was no easy task. In order to safeguard their lives and wealth, caravan merchants, drawing on long experience in travel, developed during the medieval period a complex system of responsibilities entrusted to individuals who, in most cases, had no ownership stake in the goods being transported. Instead, these individuals devoted themselves to providing commercial services in return for wages, particularly with regard to caravan leadership, guidance, security, and other essential functions.

Among the principal elements of the caravan administration were:

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The Caravan Chief

The caravan chief was selected from among individuals experienced in leading caravans. In many instances, the desert tribe whose territory the caravan traversed was responsible for choosing the chief from among its own members.

His duties included organizing journeys and negotiating with the tribes and clans whose territories the caravan crossed in order to determine the taxes merchants had to pay on their merchandise. He also supervised the distribution of contributions among caravan members according to the wealth and possessions of each merchant and determined the times for the caravan's departure, travel, and rest.

The Guide

The guide's responsibilities were no less important or dangerous than those of the caravan chief. The desert routes used by caravans lacked clearly defined landmarks, and camel tracks left no permanent traces on the ground. As soon as a traveler lifted his foot, sandstorms would erase the footprints immediately.

Ibn Battuta, describing his journey with a commercial caravan crossing the desert north of Walata, wrote:

"It is nothing but sands blown by the wind, which pile mountains of sand in one place and then shift them elsewhere..."

Consequently, inhabitants of desert regions covered their wells with stone slabs to protect them from being filled with sand, uncovering them only when necessary. Sand often accumulated above these slabs, completely concealing the wells and leaving no visible indication of their location. This made it extremely difficult for outsiders to locate water sources.

Such circumstances explain the caravan's pressing need for a knowledgeable and experienced guide familiar with the hidden features of the regions through which the caravan passed. Any error could lead to the loss of wealth and the destruction of camels, merchants, and everyone accompanying the caravan. In most cases, slaves were the first victims before anyone else (8).

Like the caravan chief, the guide was usually chosen by the tribe whose territory the caravan crossed. He was expected to possess several skills, the most important of which were the ability to navigate by the stars when night travel became necessary, recognize regions through the nature of their soil and vegetation, and identify the location of water sources.

Ibn Hawqal describes the expertise of the Banū Masūfa tribe in guidance as follows:

"Among them are bravery, courage, and horsemanship upon camels, swiftness in running, endurance, knowledge of the terrain and its features, guidance within it, and the ability to indicate its water sources through description and recollection. They possess a skill in guiding that none can equal except those who resemble them and follow their ways." (9)

This is confirmed by **Ibn Battuta**, who noted that the leader of the caravan with which he traveled from **Sijilmasa** to **Walata**, as well as its guide, belonged to the **Masūfa** tribe. Likewise, the guide of the caravan that accompanied him to Mali came from the same tribe (10).

Among the important figures in the caravan's leadership was also the **faqīh** (religious scholar), whose role centered on leading prayers, serving as imam, and recording commercial transactions among caravan members in accordance with established Islamic legal formulas. He was also entrusted with resolving disputes that might arise among members of the caravan and supervising the conduct of commercial dealings. Furthermore, he oversaw the preparation and burial of the deceased, led funeral prayers, and managed the goods of deceased merchants, either safeguarding or selling them and holding the proceeds in trust until they could be delivered to the lawful heirs upon the caravan's return home (11).

The caravan administration also included a number of ordinary workers responsible for caring for the camels, carrying baggage, and performing other tasks required by circumstances. In addition, large caravans maintained armed guards whose duty was to protect the caravan in exchange for wages. These guards generally belonged to the class of slaves owned by the merchants. Such a situation placed slaves in a precarious position, since this work involved considerable danger, exposing their lives while rendering them expendable commodities in the service of protecting merchants' goods (12).

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Bandits frequently lay in wait for caravans, especially near water sources that largely determined caravan routes. Most routes passed through areas where water was available, or through narrow compulsory passages that prevented guards and caravan members from assembling effectively for combat. In such circumstances, merchants often preferred negotiation with bandits, offering reasonable sums of money in exchange for safe passage and thus avoiding armed confrontation. Sometimes, however, the goods handed over to bandits consisted of slaves carried in the caravan for sale or slaves belonging to merchants as servants or guards.

In addition to attacks by bandits, caravans faced numerous natural hazards. As will be shown later, slaves often paid the highest price in terms of casualties. Wealthy merchants enjoyed relatively better living conditions, whereas deprivation fell mainly upon the slaves, who succumbed to hunger, thirst, cold, or extreme heat. Under such circumstances, virtually every caravan suffered a considerable number of slave casualties.

The long distances separating water points in the Sahara further aggravated these difficulties. In this regard, **al-Bakrī** provides numerous references to caravans traveling through deserts devoid of water or pasture for four days or more. Such conditions prevailed along the route between **Tamdult** and **Awdaghust**, and for five consecutive days across the desert of **Warān**. To these hardships must be added the salinity of the already scarce water available at specific points along the desert routes.

Caravans were also exposed to intense heat and dry winds, which caused the evaporation and depletion of the water they carried in skins. Concerning this, Abū al-Fidāʾ states:

"The desert of Yasr, crossed by travelers between Sijilmasa and Ghana, is vast and extensive. They endure severe thirst and scorching heat. Sometimes a southern wind blows upon them and dries up the water contained in their skins. They therefore resort to the water contained in the stomachs of camels they slaughter and drink the liquid found in their entrails." (15)

For this reason, caravans carefully selected the seasons during which they crossed the Sahara in order to avoid such dangers. Ibn Hawqal, for example, notes that travel was possible only during the winter, taking advantage of the relatively lower temperatures (16). This corresponds with the caravan accompanied by Ibn Battuta, which departed from Sijilmasa in February and reached Walata in April 1352 (17). Leo Africanus likewise emphasizes the dangers associated with traveling outside the winter season (18).

Al-Idrīsī indicates that caravans often crossed the Sahara during the autumn (19), when temperatures were milder and occasional rainfall could occur. Nevertheless, the severe cold of the season affected all members of the caravan, particularly the slaves, who lacked adequate shelter during the night, as well as slave guards. Describing the caravan's method of travel during this season, al-Idrīsī writes:

"Travelers cross this desert during the autumn season. Their manner of travel is to load their camels in the last part of the night and proceed until sunrise and the intensification of the sun's heat. They then unload their baggage, tether their camels, and arrange their belongings to create shade protecting them from the midday heat and scorching winds. They remain thus until early afternoon, when the sun begins to decline toward the west. They then resume their journey for the remainder of the day and continue until nightfall. Wherever they arrive, they set up camp and spend the rest of the night until the last dawn, after which they depart again. Such is the practice of merchants traveling to the lands of the Sudan, and they never depart from it, for the sun destroys with its heat whoever walks at midday amid intense heat and the burning ground." (20)

It is most likely that caravan movements during the winter season were more frequent than during any other time of the year, notwithstanding what al-Idrīsī reported. This is because the autumn season was unsuitable for transporting certain goods, especially those liable to spoil when exposed to rain, such as foodstuffs and salt. Autumn caravans were therefore more likely to travel from the Sudanese lands northward to the Islamic Maghreb, since the commodities exported in that direction—such as gold, ivory, and slaves—were not greatly affected by moisture.

Second: The Slave Trade between the Sudan and the Islamic Maghreb

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The slave trade between the Sudanese lands and the Islamic Maghreb constituted a flourishing, active, and highly profitable commercial activity during the medieval period. It generated considerable wealth for merchants. Caravans traveled deep into Africa carrying various goods, whether locally produced or imported, and returned loaded with products largely originating in Africa, including gold, ivory, and slaves.

Slaves, in particular, possessed characteristics that made them highly sought after in the Islamic Maghreb and elsewhere, especially their perceived capacity for labor, endurance, obedience, and submission. African slaves were generally employed in domestic work, crafts, and agriculture, which distinguished their use from that of other categories of slaves, such as European slaves. Although historical sources provide relatively few explicit references to the extensive scale of the trans-Saharan slave trade toward the Islamic Maghreb, numerous indirect indications leave little doubt that this trade existed and operated on a wide scale (21).

One example is provided by al-Bakrī, who referred to the prices of Sudanese female slaves in Awdaghust, stating:

"There are Sudanese slave women there, skilled cooks, each of whom is sold for one hundred mithqāls or more, being proficient in the preparation of excellent foods."

Many studies also indicate that slaves in the city of Awdaghust constituted the principal productive social class. Upon their labor depended various economic activities and services, including horticulture, livestock breeding, caravan services, house construction, and domestic work. In addition, significant numbers of slaves were exported northward to the Islamic Maghreb (22).

This is further confirmed by al-Bakrī, who wrote:

"This city was inhabited by the Zanāta together with the Arabs … They possessed immense wealth and numerous slaves; one among them might have a thousand servants or more."

The figure of one thousand servants or more owned by a single individual appears remarkably high. It may be interpreted by assuming that the persons referred to by al-Bakrī were merchants who gathered slaves for the purpose of reselling them through caravans bound for the Islamic Maghreb.

The acquisition of slaves by Maghrebi merchants was facilitated by the active participation of the indigenous populations of the Sudan in the slave trade. They employed various methods—which fall outside the scope of this study—such as kidnapping, captivity, detention, and purchase. Consequently, commercial groups originating from among the local populations themselves actively engaged in procuring African slaves as a commodity in demand among foreign merchants visiting the Sudanese lands.

As a result, local merchants and slave dealers adopted numerous measures aimed at restricting the movement of slaves and preventing them from obtaining or demanding freedom, especially during the early stages of enslavement. Similar precautions were also taken by merchants from the Islamic Maghreb during their stay in the Sudan or during the initial stages of the caravan's departure toward the Maghreb.

Before discussing in detail the condition and suffering of slaves within the caravans that traversed the Sahara and linked the Islamic Maghreb with the Sudanese lands, it is necessary first to examine the routes followed by caravans transporting slaves from the various regions of the Sudan to the Islamic Maghreb.

Third: Routes of the Sudanese Slave Caravans

Historical sources contain numerous references to the commercial relations between the Islamic Maghreb and the Sudanese lands. Despite the harsh environment and the dangers to which caravans were exposed, these caravans continued to travel between the two regions. Moreover, they endured the wars and political conflicts that affected both areas throughout the medieval period. The caravan routes were diverse and may be classified into three principal networks corresponding to the traditional division of the Islamic Maghreb into the Eastern Maghreb (al-Maghrib al-Adnā), the Central Maghreb (al-Maghrib al-Awsaṭ), and the Western Maghreb (al-Maghrib al-Aqṣā).

The Eastern Maghreb–Sudan Route

The caravan traffic linking the Eastern Maghreb and the Sudan was highly active, particularly in the trade of Sudanese slaves. This route connected the regions of Barqa (Cyrenaica) and Tripoli with the Central

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Sudan through the Fezzan Desert. It originated from Tripoli, proceeded toward the Saharan commercial center of Fezzan, and then reached the region of Kanem and its surrounding territories in the Central Sudan (24).

Another branch of this eastern route departed from Tripoli toward Jabal Nafūsa, then continued to Ghadames, eventually reaching the kingdom of Ghana in the Western Sudan (25).

The Central Maghreb–Sudan Route

This route connected the Central Maghreb with the Sudanese lands. Caravans departed from Tlemcen, passed through Oujda, Fez, Sijilmasa, Drâa, Tamdult, and Awdaghust, before reaching the Western Sudan (26).

Another branch began from Tahert, the capital of the Rustamid state, and headed toward Wargla (Ouargla). It then crossed the neighboring regions before continuing to Tādmakka, subsequently passing through the important commercial center of Kuku in the Sudanese territories, and finally reaching the kingdom of Ghana in the Western Sudan (27).

The Western Maghreb–Sudan Route

This route linked the Western Maghreb with the Sudan. It originated from Sijilmasa, located on the northern edge of the Sahara in the Far Maghreb, and proceeded toward Awdaghust, eventually reaching the kingdom of Ghana in the Western Sudan (28).

Another branch started from Tarqala, in the Sous region of southern Morocco, and headed toward the Drâa Valley, then to the Adrar Mountains in the territory of the Sanhaja, where water sources necessary for caravans were available. From there, it passed through the village of Madūkan before continuing toward Ghana in the Western Sudan (29).

Fourth: Types of Risks Encountered by Slaves within the Caravans

The slaves traveling within the caravans that crossed the Sahara between the Islamic Maghreb and the Sudanese lands were exposed to numerous dangers. These risks varied according to their position within the caravan. Slaves might constitute part of the caravan's personnel, serving as guards or laborers, or they might themselves be merchandise transported from the Sudan to be sold in the Islamic Maghreb.

The hardships and suffering endured by slaves in the caravans may be divided into two categories. The first category comprises the dangers and difficulties shared by all members of the caravan, including the merchants themselves. These were common risks associated with long-distance travel across the Sahara. The second category consists of hardships that affected slaves specifically and distinguished their experience from that of the other members of the caravan.

The Sufferings of Slaves within the Caravan

These dangers and hardships were common to all members of the caravan, including slaves. Caravans crossing the Sahara between the Islamic Maghreb and the Sudanese lands faced numerous difficulties, the most important of which were the following:

Natural Hazards

The desert routes were characterized by their harshness and danger, resulting in exhaustion and fatigue for slaves during the journey. Among these natural hardships, the sun constituted one of the most significant challenges. Prolonged exposure to the sun during travel had a severe impact, compelling caravans to avoid moving during the hottest part of the day, when temperatures reached their peak. Consequently, caravans halted their march until the heat subsided, allowing both the camels and the members of the caravan to rest (30).

What deserves particular attention, however, are the tasks that followed these halts, which fell largely upon the slaves, whether they were laborers or merchandise being transported. Despite their exhaustion, they were responsible for pitching the tents, unloading all the goods carried by the camels, and preparing the conditions necessary for the comfort of the other members of the caravan. These operations had to be

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v5i1.7244

repeated two to four times each day, involving the unloading of merchandise and provisions and then loading them again onto the backs of the camels (31).

The intensity of the sun in the desert also produced extreme fluctuations in temperature between day and night. The daily thermal range was considerable: temperatures could rise to as much as 50°C during the day and then fall sharply during the night (32). In this regard, al-Idrīsī states:

"Travelers cross this desert during the autumn season. They load their beasts in the last part of the night and proceed until sunrise … and when the heat intensifies upon the earth, they unload their baggage, tether their camels, spread out their belongings, and erect shelters to protect themselves from the midday heat and the scorching winds…" (33)

Similarly, Ibn Hawqal writes:

"Vast wastelands, isolated, with little water and scarce pastures, are traversed only during the winter; and whoever travels through them at the proper time must maintain uninterrupted movement from one watering place to another…" (34)

Another hardship confronting caravans, including slaves, was the scarcity of water. The Sahara's climate is arid and rainfall is rare; consequently, guides directed caravans along routes where water sources were available. If access to water was delayed for any reason, the consequences for the members of the caravan could be disastrous. The effects of thirst appeared first among the weakest individuals. Merchants and the administrative personnel of the caravan generally reserved for themselves whatever water remained, often at the expense of slaves and animals.

As a result, when caravans encountered such difficulties, slaves frequently died of thirst and were abandoned in the empty desert, where they became prey to wild animals and birds of prey. **Al-Bakrī** recorded the scarcity of water in certain Saharan regions, particularly along the route connecting **Ghadames** and **Tādmakka**, stating:

"To the fourth station there are eleven days through barren sands where there is neither water nor vegetation…" (35)

Ibn Battuta, the geographer, provides a vivid testimony to the hardships often experienced by caravan travelers crossing the Sahara to and from the Sudanese lands. He recounts how his caravan encountered another caravan in the desert, whose members informed them that several of their companions—most of them slaves—had gone in search of water and disappeared. As Ibn Battuta's caravan continued its journey, they came upon one of these men:

"...one of them was found dead beneath a tree, clothed and with a whip in his hand, while water was only about a mile away." (36)

To prevent such losses, the administrative staff of some caravans ensured that a large proportion of the camels were laden with water in order to preserve the lives of slaves, who were particularly vulnerable to death from thirst before reaching the Islamic Maghreb (37). This concern also encouraged certain tribes to provide water along caravan routes. Among them were the **Banū Wārith** of the **Sanhaja** confederation, who dug several wells, including a large well located near the borders of their territory. Similar examples can be found along the routes connecting **Sijilmasa** with **Awdaghust**, and **Drâa** with **Ghana (38)**.

Slaves traveling within caravans crossing the Sahara were also exposed to the hardships caused by sudden dry and sand-laden winds. These storms inflicted severe physical harm through the dust and gravel they carried and damaged the animals and merchandise transported by the caravans. The burden of dealing with these consequences—cleaning, reorganizing the camp, and tending the animals—fell largely upon the slaves. Consequently, they suffered additional hardships on top of their existing burdens, leading to disease and extreme exhaustion, which often resulted in permanent disabilities or, in the worst cases, death during the journey.

Indeed, dense clouds of flying sand could directly cause death. For this reason, experienced desert travelers recommended increasing the pace of travel during sandstorms to minimize their effects on the human body. One can only imagine the plight of slaves, who were generally denied the use of camels and forced to travel on foot over long distances, deprived of many of the comforts enjoyed by merchants, guides, and other

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caravan personnel. These latter groups traveled with their belongings and protective equipment, whereas slaves often lacked such provisions.

Moreover, slaves were sometimes forced to march in chains, which further aggravated their suffering. Merchants resorted to this measure out of fear that slaves might escape, especially when approaching populated areas or oases. Most slaves had originally been free individuals who had been captured or kidnapped by organized groups and bands in the Sudan and elsewhere—groups that had practiced this trade for generations. Such circumstances naturally made slaves eager to regain their freedom. Although the sources of Sudanese slavery lie beyond the scope of the present study, it may reasonably be argued that the majority of Sudanese slaves originated from kidnapping and captivity. (39)

Heavy winds in the desert also posed a serious problem to commercial caravans by reducing visibility. Dust storms obscured landmarks and impaired vision to such an extent that travelers could scarcely open their eyes. Under such conditions, tracing paths and following established routes became extremely difficult, resulting in the inevitable loss of many caravan members, especially those carrying out solitary tasks.

These duties were often assigned to slave guards or even to slaves intended for sale. Such tasks included hunting, collecting firewood, fetching water, and obtaining supplies for merchants or other important members of the caravan administration. In this regard, Ibn Hawqal states:

"...The winds repeatedly struck their caravans and isolated travelers, destroying many caravans and lone travelers. Therefore, merchants maintained the unity of the caravan to avoid this danger, linking the tail of the first camel to the head of the second with a rope..." (40)

Slaves traveling in trans-Saharan caravans were also exposed to numerous natural dangers posed by wild animals, harmful insects, snakes, and scorpions, especially near ponds and water reservoirs where animals tended to congregate. Although these dangers threatened all members of the caravan, slaves were disproportionately exposed to them. As noted earlier, slaves generally traveled on foot, either in chains or while performing duties as guards and laborers, placing them in closer proximity to such hazards. Merchants and other caravan members, by contrast, rode camels and were therefore relatively protected (41).

Furthermore, slaves often lacked adequate clothing to protect their feet and bodies. This condition subjected many of them to injury, suffering, and disease during the journey and, in some cases, caused death on the spot. Whether employed as guards or transported as merchandise, slaves were compelled to undertake numerous individual and collective tasks—gathering firewood, fetching water, hunting, and other duties—which made them particularly vulnerable to attacks from wild animals and venomous creatures and consequently exposed them to a constant risk of death.

Human-Induced Hazards

Slaves within the caravans that traversed the Sahara between the Islamic Maghreb and the Sudanese lands were exposed to a considerable number of human-induced dangers (42). These threats originated both from within and outside the caravan and often caused severe suffering and, in many cases, death. Among the most serious of these dangers were attacks by bandits. Certain regions became notorious for the frequency and intensity of their activities (43). In such circumstances, slaves constituted the weakest element within the caravan, becoming particularly vulnerable to torture, murder, or recapture and resale in other markets.

Security was frequently unstable, and many roads were considered dangerous. In this regard, **al-ʿAbdarī**, describing the desert region southwest of Tlemcen, wrote:

"It is among the most harmful places on earth for travelers, for those living nearby are among the vilest of God's creatures and the most harmful…" (44)

Consequently, merchants were compelled to carry weapons and hire guards for their protection. They also relied on tribes renowned for their expertise in navigating roads, deserts, and wildernesses. Many medieval states of the Islamic Maghreb sought to limit or eliminate the activities of these groups in order to secure trade with the Sudan. In this context, the **Sanhaja** tribes of the Sahara acquired a reputation for reliability and solidarity among the tribes inhabiting the regions extending from Sijilmasa in southern Morocco to Awdaghust, the northern gateway to the Western Sudan. The Sanhaja often provided water by digging and

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maintaining wells and supplying guides for caravans, although these services were not free, as caravans were required to pay taxes in return for passage (45).

Among the dangers specifically affecting slaves was their own social condition. Slaves received inadequate food and little medical care when ill, since merchants naturally sought to minimize expenses and maximize profits. As a result, slaves suffered hunger in addition to severe exhaustion. Matters frequently escalated to beatings and corporal punishment administered without mercy, followed by the imposition of the most arduous tasks. Their owners possessed virtually unrestricted authority over their lives, with the power to preserve, starve, torture, or mistreat them.

Although these conditions cannot be generalized to every circumstance, they were common in the caravans of the Islamic Maghreb and elsewhere throughout history. Slaves were treated as commodities rather than as human beings deserving of dignity. Furthermore, as previously noted, they were forced to travel on foot and undertake the most difficult tasks required by the caravan, including loading and unloading merchandise from camels two or four times daily whenever the caravan halted or resumed its march (46).

A distinction may be drawn between two categories of slaves within the caravans. The first consisted of slaves employed as guards or service personnel who formed part of the caravan's administrative structure. The second consisted of shackled slaves who were themselves commodities transported for sale in various markets and cities. Generally, the condition of the first category was better than that of the second. Since they were indispensable to the functioning and mobility of the caravan, they were provided with food, weapons, and clothing and benefited from a certain degree of medical care, albeit limited.

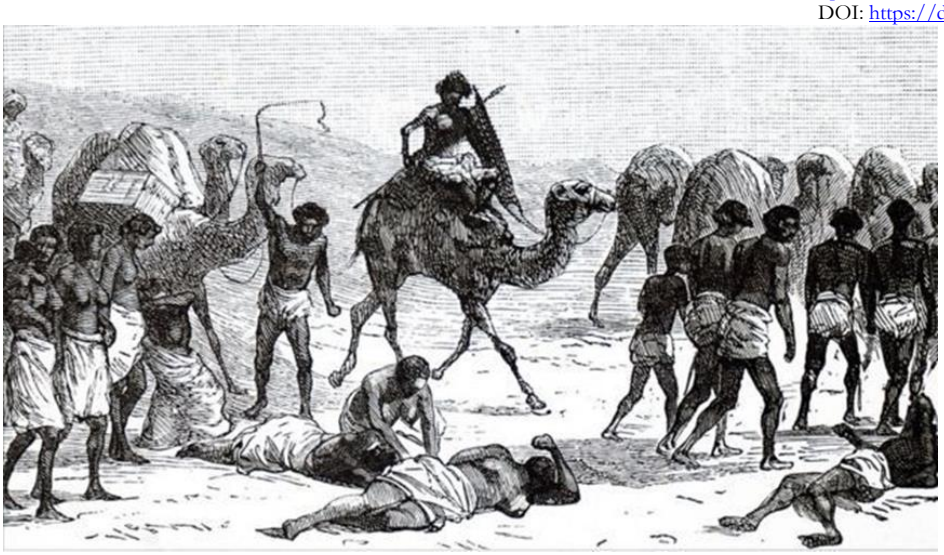
An exception may also be made for some female slaves (concubines), who were often treated less harshly than male slaves because of the functions they might perform for future owners. Some were singers, dancers, or educators. Excessive harshness might impair their physical appearance and increase defects, thereby reducing their market value. Moreover, women were generally regarded as physically less capable of enduring the hardships imposed upon male slaves. Consequently, merchants had a purely commercial interest in preserving the health of female slaves. Nevertheless, other practices that could be considered harmful to female slaves also existed, particularly sexual exploitation and their use for the pleasures of their owners.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the condition of slaves within the caravans traversing the Great African Sahara and linking the countries of the Islamic Maghreb with the Sudanese lands was extremely harsh. The difficulties of desert travel exposed slaves to numerous natural and human dangers that directly affected their lives and well-being.

This situation was aggravated by the fact that slaves often traveled on foot across the inhospitable desert while being deprived of adequate food, medical treatment, and clothing capable of protecting them from heat, cold, and other environmental conditions. In addition to these physical hardships, slaves were subjected to various forms of exploitation and physical and psychological servitude, making their experience within the trans-Saharan caravan system one marked by profound suffering and vulnerability.

Journal of Ecohumanism
2026
Volume: 5, No: 1 pp. 307 – 317
ISSN: 2752-6798 (Print) | ISSN 2752-6801 (Online)
https://ecohumanism.co.uk/joe/ecohumanism
DOI: https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v5i1.7244



An Approximate Representation of the Condition of Slaves in the Caravans

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Journal of Ecohumanism
2026
Volume: 5, No: 1 pp. 307 – 317
ISSN: 2752-6798 (Print) | ISSN 2752-6801 (Online)
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DOI: https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v5i1.7244

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