

Sahil

The term was coined in 1900 by the botanist Auguste Chevalier, who posited an opposition in West and Central Africa of increasingly humid zones called Saharan, Sahilian, Sudanian and Guinean. The Sahil zone thus includes several African states, from west to east: Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Fasso (Upper Volta), Niger, the northeastern extremity of Nigeria, Chad and the Sudan, with an area of about 4 million km².

The dominant characteristic of the Sahil surfaces is the importance of the ergs. These stretches of dunes are made up of extended parallel bands of terrain (several dozen km), and increasingly flattened by water erosion as one travels southwards. The ergs are the remnants of important climatic variations which have taken place over the last millennia, and have sometimes brought about an important advance of the desert southwards and the fixing of sand dunes, and at other times a retreat of the Sahara northwards accompanied by a considerable extension of Lake Chad and the overflowing of the Niger northwards.

Thus, the Sahil can be seen as the zone of transition between the Sahara and the more humid regions of tropical Africa. The Sahil in general is characterised by the alternation, in the course of each year, of a long dry season during which the northerly trade-winds (called *Harmattan* when they are continental) and a rainy season corresponding to the influx of humid air of the summer monsoons originating in the Atlantic Ocean (Gulf of Guinea).

In the 7th/13th century, a new empire, that of Mali, arose, from the Sahil to the tropical forest, in the bend of the Niger. In the 15th century, it was supplanted by the Songhay empire, whose capital Gao was destroyed by an expedition sent from Morocco in 1591. At the same time, around Lake Chad, the dynasty of the Safawa reigned from the 3rd/9th to the 13th/19th century with various fortunes.

In all these regions, the penetration of Islam was achieved in peaceful ways, favoured by the great empires based on commerce, and whose ruling classes showed themselves fairly tolerant. It was often the nobles and urban populations which became converts, whilst the rural populations, making up the mass of the people, remained animists. This penetration was equally the work of numerous Muslim traders involved in the trans-Saharan commerce, involving above all the export of gold and vegetation covering index, and which is, for which the Sudan was the main world producer, to the Mediterranean countries, and the slave traffic, which had for long been important to the lands of the Maghrib.

The present-day population of the Sahil shows a complex pattern of overlapping peoples, including societies often strongly hierarchical in social structure, which can be distinguished by their ways of life: the pure nomads, found especially in the northern Sahil, corresponding to the southwards extension of the great Saharan groups: Moors in the west, Touaregs in the centre and Tubus in the east.

The peoples of the Sahil have often been severely affected by the great droughts which have adversely affected their modes of life at a time when they have been demographically increasing—e.g. it has been estimated that the population of Senegal has increased

from one million at the beginning of this century to one of *ca.* 7.5 millions in 1990—and the increase in herds has damaged the environment.

Bibliography:

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