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The Ottoman Africa and the Ottomans in Africa

An Introduction

Nicola Melis | ORCID: 0000-0001-7686-6204

Associate Professor of African History and Institutions,
Dipartimento di Scienze politiche e sociali, Università di Cagliari
nmelis@unica.it

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From the early sixteenth century, the Ottoman Empire encompassed African territories such as Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and the Red Sea region. These dependencies were not isolated but intricately linked to the global networks and the rest of the continent through trans-Saharan trade routes.¹ However, this chapter of Ottoman history remains neglected by mainstream history. In this regard, a few years ago, Alexis Wick rightly argued that:

the possibility of an ‘Ottoman Africa’ has not been properly envisaged in historical scholarship, whereas the categories of an ‘Ottoman Arab world’ and of the ‘Ottoman Balkans’ are ubiquitous to the field and require no explanation whatsoever (though the concepts of ‘the Arab world’ and ‘the Balkans’ are no more objective and no less anachronistic than that of ‘Africa’).²

1 Firges, Pascal, Graf, Tobias, Roth, Christian, and Gülay Tulasoğlu (eds.), *Well-Connected Domains. Towards an entangled Ottoman History* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

2 Wick, Alexis, *The Red Sea: In Search of Lost Space* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016): p. 56.

Nora Lafi made the same remark when she wrote that “[a]ujourd’hui encore, les réflexions tant sur l’histoire de la région que sur la notion d’empire peinent à revenir sur l’inertie de telles visions. La dimension africaine de l’impérialité ottomane continue d’être absente des discussions sur la notion d’empire comme sur l’histoire de la région”.³ This special edition of *Eurasian Studies* compiles a series of contributions aimed at exploring various facets linked to Ottoman approach to Africa. In many aspects, this volume addresses the notion of Ottoman Africa. Authors achieve this by considering or reevaluating material often neglected in prior scholarly works.

‘Ottoman Africa’ means those territories once part of the Ottoman Empire under various forms of political dominion or hegemony, as well as the rest of Africa, which had connections with or was influenced by the Ottomans.

In this sense, the so-called ‘Barbary regencies’, a term recurring in European sources but not in official Ottoman sources that refer to their Maghrebi provinces (*eyālet* or *Ġarb ocakları*), were undoubtedly part of the Empire.

Indeed, historians persist in portraying the Ottoman provinces of North Africa as semi-autonomous regions, notably detached from the direct authority of the sultans. The predominant discourse implies that, despite their formal inclusion within the Ottoman Empire for over three centuries, these territories displayed characteristics akin to those of independent sovereign entities. This discourse applies, a fortiori, to the Ottoman territories in sub-Saharan Africa.

One reason European sources perceived the Ottoman provinces in Africa as separate territories, lacking control from the central government in Istanbul, is likely due to the European incapacity to grasp the complexity of Ottoman institutions. Notably, the distinctive concept of devolution of powers plays a significant role in this perception: it was a significant facet of the Empire’s administrative history.

The Ottoman devolution entails the (un)formal delegation of governing powers from the central authority of the sovereign Ottoman Empire to regional or local levels – this practice, emblematic of administrative decentralisation, endured within the Empire until the mid-19th century. Specifically, the period following 1835 witnessed a notable change in action in the Ottoman administrative landscape as the central government deliberated on a reorganisation towards centralised governance. The results, however, were often disappointing. This resolution led to the revocation of devolved authority in Tripolitania, prompted by concerns regarding potential vulnerability to external pressures, epitomised by the French invasion of Algeria in 1830.

3 Lafi, Nora, “L’Empire ottoman en Afrique : perspectives d’histoire critique”, *Cahiers d’histoire. Revue d’histoire critique*, CXXVIII (2015): p. 59.

During these centuries, it has been impossible to identify a single trend that characterises the relations between the North African dependencies and the central administration in Istanbul. This difficulty in identifying a single approach led to a European failure to comprehend the individual contexts of Ottoman North Africa. For example, in the first half of the seventeenth century, the British, along with their French and Dutch rivals, viewed Algiers and Tunis as having completely renounced their allegiance to the Ottoman Empire. At that time, they lost confidence in the Ottoman central government's capability to control their *de jure* North African subjects. Therefore, they embraced a policy of direct diplomacy with the authorities of the port cities of North Africa.⁴

Centrifugal tendencies were a persistent feature in the North African provinces, Algeria to Egypt, leading provincial governors to often act with a considerable degree of autonomy. In the 19th century, as European assertions over North African Mediterranean cities escalated, the Ottoman administration encountered challenges in reinstating direct governance, as it had previously accomplished in Tripoli when the Karamanlı Tripolitan dynasty was supplanted by central authority from the Ottoman capital. Consequently, the era was marked by an ambiguous situation wherein regional dynasties, subservient to the Ottoman Empire, capitalised on European aspirations to reaffirm their relative independence from the central Ottoman authority. During this time, a notion of 'Ottoman Africa' emerged in the Ottoman elite's perception, marking a shift in geographical thought, and contributing to imperial foreign relations. Jonathan M. Lohnes' essay in this volume focuses precisely on this point. He shows that the Tanzimat reforms had heterogeneous effects, stemming from contradictory agendas across local, regional, and trans-imperial scales. His article evaluates the geopolitical economy of Ottoman provincialization in Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan from 1835 to 1876. Wars and rebellions during this period obscured the intersection of commercial and strategic interests. Mehmet Ali Paşa's rise threatened European influence, leading to varied European responses. British interests dominated Ottoman finance in the 1840s, prompting Istanbul to adopt constitutional measures and economic concessions. Provincial Libya became a testing ground for Ottoman developmentalism, resulting in resistance from indigenous communities.

During this epoch, considering the African provinces as not indeed Ottoman would have easily allowed the European powers to bypass the central imperial government. At the same time, the provincial dynasties would have been

4 White, Joshua M., *Piracy and Law in the Ottoman Mediterranean* (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 2018).

able to strengthen their autonomist instances, envisaging a possible future of complete independence. This distinctive dynamic also permeated urban governance, necessitating a comprehensive examination encompassing local intricacies and broader considerations about Mediterranean diplomacy.

Hence, during the latter half of the nineteenth century, European powers stubbornly exploited these aspirations for independence, treating the Ottoman territories in Africa as distinct political entities, thereby contravening Ottoman directives. The construction of the Suez Canal in the second half of the 19th century is a case in point. A large amount of historical literature of a diverse nature that has been published since that time tends to regard the operation as a strictly Franco-Ottoman affair, the Ottoman province of Egypt as a state entity and as a subservient partner, the Empire's governance structure as a state almost alien to the affair. Faruk Bilici's article in this collection offers a historical description of a pivotal moment in Ottoman-Egyptian relations, with Egypt's near-independence marked by financial troubles leading to the sale of shares in the Suez Canal to Britain. Egypt fell under Franco-British control in 1876, triggering a series of political shifts, including the deposition of Khedive Ismail Paşa. British and French ambassadors in Istanbul influenced Ottoman policy towards Egypt, eventually resulting in Tevfik Paşa's appointment. Ismail Paşa's exile ended in 1888, allowing him to return to Istanbul until his death.

The discourse on Ottoman Africa should not be limited to North Africa but expanded to other parts of the continent. However, it is a well-established historiographical cliché that the Ottomans in sub-Saharan Africa would have no role or interest. Nevertheless, Ottoman documents and even archaeological studies seem to prove otherwise, starting with Cengiz Orhonlu's old and now-dated work on the province of Abyssinia (*Eyâlet-i Habeş*),⁵ indeed, a part of the Empire. In a broader sense, important African kingdoms, such as Kanem-Bornu, also fell within the Ottoman hegemonic sphere for a long time.⁶ Rémi Dewièrè's contribution to this volume is particularly interesting because it deals with Borno in the Ottoman archives in the *longue durée* (1574–1903). Indeed, during his research, Dewièrè discovered ninety-two files on Borno in the Ottoman State Archives (*Başkanlığı Osmanlı Arşivi*) in Istanbul. These records span from 1574, with the first diplomatic contact between a Borno ruler and Istanbul, to 1903, at the height of the imperialist era, marking the French

5 Orhonlu, Cengiz, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun Güney Siyaseti Habeş Eyaleti* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 1974).

6 Dewièrè, Rémi, *Du lac Tchad à la Mecque. Le sultanat du Borno et son monde (XVI^e–XVII^e siècle)* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2017).

troop withdrawal and subsequent territorial partition between German and British Borno.

A quick review of the literature on African studies and the history of international relations allows us to verify that, concerning all these aspects, we are faced with a veritable historiographical vacuum, starting from the generalist and handbook literature to more specific in-depth case studies.

The hiatus is likely due to the lack of adequate specific training, which has meant that generalist, internationalist, and Africanist historians have ignored the massive amount of Ottoman bibliographical, archival, manuscript and printed sources. On the other hand, it is necessary to refrain from being enchanted by the dogma of the central Ottoman archival document, which, in any case, often represents a view from the centre of the Empire. It is also fundamental to exploit provincial sources, both written and oral, public, and private.

As Mostafa Minawi rightly pointed out recently, the political and intellectual history of the Ottoman Empire has frequently neglected non-Turkish Ottomans. Accounts of African Ottomans and other ethnoreligious communities that exerted notable influence in moulding the Empire across its diverse regions could be more extensive. Indeed, this lack can be attributed partly to an overemphasis on Ottoman state archives, which, though abundant and meticulously arranged, often prioritise the viewpoints of the imperial and successor states.⁷ The essays collected in this volume are important because scholars still need to consider an Ottoman history of Africa, either as an African history influenced and hegemonised by Ottoman institutions and culture or as an Ottoman history with African influences, involvements, and implications.

The chapters in the volume will not conclude the discussion. However, they will introduce the reader to new perspectives and explore intriguing pathways, especially for those already familiar with the subject.

Trans-national networks facilitated the gradual development of significant long-term contacts by Ottoman representatives in Africa, extending to South, East, and West Africa since the remote past. In this concern, Güneş Işıksele's article delves into Moroccan-Ottoman relations during the 16th century, highlighting their complex nature. These ties were often influenced by the *paşas* of the Algerian general governorate, with involvement from other regions such as Iberia and sub-Saharan Africa. Işıksele views these relationships within a broader context beyond political conflict, encompassing a struggle for caliphal legitimacy and spiritual authority over the Maghreb populace. More

⁷ Minawi, Mostafa, *Losing Istanbul: Arab-Ottoman Imperialists and the End of Empire* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2022): p. 210.

specifically, his article first examines the establishment of the Sa'dian dynasty and its internal and international dynamics before focusing on the intricate connections between Fez and Istanbul. It explores the relationships between various entities, including the Sa'dians, Wattasids, Zayyanids, Habsburg Spain, and the Ottoman Empire.

In the long term, an irreversible crisis of trans-Saharan trade developed, breaking the insularity of the Maghreb and facilitating greater European involvement in the continent, culminating in colonial occupation in the early 19th century.⁸ Meanwhile, travellers from Africa began to benefit from the burgeoning globalisation of trade, in which the Ottoman Empire played a part, expanding traditional pilgrimage routes, exile, and exploration to include Europe.

The response to the profound changes brought about by these interactions between continental and global crises significantly influenced the socio-political organisation of Africa, thereby impacting the Ottoman Empire. Political and intellectual figures of the Ottoman Empire actively engaged with and within these spatial and temporal contexts alongside other imperial powers.⁹ Consequently, the Ottoman presence in Africa evolved as Ottoman missionaries and emissaries travelled across the continent, propagating Islam, and advocating for Ottoman colonisation. Simultaneously, these provinces actively participated in debates regarding the reform of the Empire, while the caliph, who also held the title of Ottoman sultan, gained increased prominence across the continent.

On this very matter, Hatice Uğur's article in this volume assesses the interwoven relationships among local, European, and Ottoman actors in late nineteenth-century East Africa using Ottoman sources. The hundreds of East African documents in the Ottoman archive illuminated Ottoman-Empire-Zanzibar-Sultanate relations and interactions among Ottomans, colonials, and local powers. The Ottoman state endeavoured to establish direct relations with East African potentates, aligning with Sultan Abdülhamid II's pan-Islamist agenda, prioritising Muslim communities worldwide. While this policy aimed to counter nationalist movements within the Empire and intimidate European colonial powers, its effectiveness varied. Despite failing to quell nationalist

8 Medici, Anna Maria, "A sea change in the Mediterranean connections: the fall of Saharan networks (18th–20th c.)," in Benedetti, Andrea, van Luyen, Ulrich (eds.), *The idea of the Mediterranean as a Source of cultural Criticism. The Mediterranean Area between Myth, Literature and Anthropology* (Milano: Mimesis International, 2019): pp. 31–43.

9 Oualdi, M'hamed, *A Slave Between Empires. A Transimperial History of North Africa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

influences internally, the Sultan fostered closer ties with the broader Muslim world, including East Africa.

The narrative that African territories were only nominally part of the Empire is functional to the various national (African and Turkish Republican) and colonial discourses persisting in European historiographies. European diplomats and later colonial authorities exaggerated the Maghrebi dynasties' desire for autonomy with narratives aiming to prevent Ottoman intervention in Algeria, Tunisia, Tripolitania, and elsewhere.

In other words, despite the effort to deconstruct the traditional colonial narrative, different historiographies must address the history of Ottoman Africa. One of the leading causes has been the nationalist narratives in the single states that achieved independence in the Maghreb and in the parts of sub-Saharan Africa that were, more or less directly, affected by the Ottoman presence. Furthermore, nationalist reinterpretations of history have sidelined the significance of multi-ethnic and multi-religious political formations in historical progress.

More generally, disregard for the Ottoman past lingers, with few exceptions, in regions like the Balkans, North Africa, and the Arab lands. Conversely, there has been a recent surge in studies on the Ottoman period in certain Arab states. Post-Ottoman regimes undertook language purification campaigns, systematically removing Ottoman influences from newly adopted national languages. These purges stemmed from the negative perception of the Ottoman past prevalent among politicians in these new states, reflecting their determination to forge distinct national identities.

The vilification of the Ottoman past characterised the formation of all successor states, from Serbia to Bulgaria, Turkey, Syria, and Iraq. The Ottomans were perceived as 'others', having suppressed cherished 'national' values during their reign.

In the post-Ottoman era, Balkan, Arab, Maghrebi, Turkish, and sub-Saharan states rejected the Ottoman legacy while searching for their identities. However, it is essential to remember that the imperial system's abandonment is a relatively recent event.

The Ottoman legacy evokes varied emotions, from aversion to admiration, in former Ottoman territories and beyond. Different interpretations of the Ottoman state – whether secular, nationalist, or Islamist – further complicate matters.

This special issue seeks to provide a fresh perspective on the intertwined histories of Africa, Maghreb and the Ottoman Empire. Recent scholarship challenges the traditional separation of these spheres, revealing complex connections between North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Ottomans.

While Maghrebi historians have often painted a nationalist narrative influenced by colonial perspectives, new scholars recognise the Ottoman Empire's significant role in shaping North African history. Conversely, Turkish scholars have tended to overlook Africa's importance, considering it peripheral to the very core of the Empire. However, a new trend has given much more consideration to Ottoman Africa. However, political considerations and soft power issues heavily conditioned this new historiography.

This special issue challenges these entrenched views by spotlighting Africa's integral role. By shifting focus from traditional East-West narratives and centring discussions on the interconnectedness of the Islamic world. In this regard, the important Nora Lafi's contribution proposes an approach that challenges static perceptions of the Ottomans in Africa, often imposed by colonial geography and its lasting effects. This approach enables a deeper understanding of the region's evolution beyond traditional geopolitical narratives and territorial controls, prompting a reassessment of the Ottoman Empire beyond the Anatolia-Balkans-Levant framework.

With the onset of colonisation, the dynamics shaping the relationship between the Ottoman Empire and Africa were disrupted and undermined. Despite this, the Ottomans attempted to reinvigorate these dynamics to resist European imperialism, which fundamentally differed in its concept of Empire. The Ottoman central archives contain numerous petitions from cities, villages, and various groups seeking assistance against the aggressive domination and repression imposed by European colonial powers on former Ottoman territories or areas previously integrated into Ottoman networks.

Nora Lafi explains in her contribution that while the Ottoman Empire could not always respond effectively to these calls for help, they nonetheless influenced its nature during its final phases. The form of imperialism imposed by colonisation markedly diverged from the Ottoman model, as colonial powers denied local participation in governance. However, colonisers exploited pre-existing networks, albeit altering their essence, to advance their interests.

To conclude this brief introduction, I would like to thank Michele Bernardini, and the editorial board for having accepted the submission of the present volume and, especially, for their patience, as well as the anonymous readers, during the editorial process leading to the present publication.