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H.T. Norris: Saharan Myth and Saga. Oxford Library of African Literature. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1972. 240 pp, £ 6.00.

The enormous semi-circular belt of lowland desert stretching from the Western Desert of Egypt to the Senegal river has certain interesting but inadequately explored social features in common. It is of course a region given to nomadism, and it is distinguished both from the less arid mountains to the North, and the Tuareg Saharan heartlands to the South, by the fact that within it, Arabs or at any rate the Arabic language have largely, but not entirely, displaced the Berbers. This was one greater corridor through which Arab pastoralists and/or the Arabic language drifted westwards, leaving Berber islands on either flank. This movement or drift occurred substantially later than the original Muslim conquest of North Africa.

The social consequences of this drift, permeation, assimilation and conquest (and all these occurred, no doubt in varying proportions) are curious. It has tended to lead to social stratification in terms of tribal units, at least ideally: in terms of local conceptions, the tribes are often ranked in order of precedence and authority, and, ideally, are allocated distinct social functions. In practice, one may gravely doubt whether this subjectively ideal variant of a caste system really corresponded to the realities of power, labour and of social control. For one thing, given the weakness or absence of an effective central power, the maintenance of order, such as it was, inevitably developed on the usual mechanisms of a segmentary tribal society, which are no respectors of ideal rank. Demonstrably, conflict occurred within strata as much as it did between them. For another thing, when a given stratum is ideally ascribed a role which in practice cannot be widely diffused, such as religious leadership, then in actual fact the role may be filled from within that stratum, but

not by the stratum (as a whole). Then again, by mechanisms familiar from the Maghrib proper, religious leadership in an anarchic society leads through mediation to political leadership, whatever the ideal 'caste' ranking of the diverse tribes may maintain to the contrary.

The outsider would not be surprised by the fact that the top rank in this ideal tribal stratification is ascribed to tribes speaking an Arabic dialect and claiming an Arab origin. (It is only in the extensive central Sahara that the Tuareg have retained such an ascendancy for tribes of Berber speech.) But he may well be surprised by the fact that throughout this extensive belt, religious specialism is ascribed to a stratum or tribes who are often credited with Berber ancestry and sometimes retain Berber speech. Here the Arabs did not come as carriers of religion; they tend to be pupils rather than teachers. One can only speculate why the Berbers should, like the mediaeval Irish, be such apt carriers of a faith which they did not originate. A tempting supposition is that pre-Islamic Berber tribal society was richer in religious specialists than are the Arabs of the desert, and when the Arabophone nomads came, these pre-existing specialists knew how to adjust their wares to the new faith.

The heart of the book under review is two not very long texts brought by the author from Mauritania, and translated, annotated, and padded out by some four chapters of commentary, which are intended to provide their context. The texts are obviously of considerable interest to students of Muslim and African societies but, notwithstanding the use of the word "saga" in the title of the book, they will only have limited appeal as literature. The two authors, who died in 1924 and 1944/5, were evidently scholars/scribes rather than bards: when they write, they seem more concerned to establish points rather than to entertain or to move. This historico-legal bias does not make for great writing. Nevertheless, some

passages spring to life as ethnographic documents, as does the following account of the religious stratum, the Zwaya:

The Zwaya, even though they be in need of an increase in righteousness, especially in these times, are all the same the responsible custodians of learning and religion in this country... No section of the community disputes with them over this... Although the arabs possess both sovereignty and military might, it is the Zwaya who hold the posts as laid down in the Sharia... and in the performance of prayers, the post of Qadi, and in teaching, in witnessing, the bestowal of baraka... The superior 'Arabs' appoint the superior Zwaya to be Shaykhs of theirs...

Despite all this, the Zwaya continue to be afflicted by dissensions harmful both to religion and to their secular life. The gravest of these are the wars between them...

This passage illustrates admirably much that one may suspect both about the ideal and the real role of these religious specialists.

It is difficult to be very satisfied with the author's presentation of these manuscripts. The four chapters which precede them should perhaps have given one an intelligible account of the society within which this literature occurs. This they do not do, and anyone desiring such an account must turn to the admirable recent Islam and Social Order in Mauritania (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1973) by C.C. Stewart and E.K. Stewart.

The background in the book under review only gives us a potpourri of interesting but uncoordinated facts drawn from incommensurate sources. The author speaks derisively of Ibn Khaldun as "that smug despiser of dubious tales..." Well, I think Ibn Khaldun had a point. Of course it is possible and desirable to be interested in stories for the light they throw on the society in which they occur, irrespective of their literal accuracy. But to interpret them in this way we must ^{know} or at least ask, just who tells them to whom under what circumstances. They must have had a reality as stories. But an account of the vision of the Sahara which invokes the Arabian Nights, the Vinland map, a Saharan Shaykh speaking to Julio Caro Baroja in 1952, a Tuareg expressing his views to the author,

and a large number of similarly disparate sources ranging from antiquity to contemporary anthropologists, only provides a collage which not merely does not purport to depict the Sahara as it actually is, but also cannot depict it as it appeared to any real person or group that ever lived - but which merely leaves the reader's head reeling.

Ernest Gellner