

## C H A P T E R 1

### ECOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL ORIGINS OF REGIONALISM AND PASTORALISM: THE MYTH OF THE HILALI CONQUEST

*"If Abu Zayd the Hilalian did not cultivate his own land,  
then why would he care if another land became a desert?"*

—Libyan proverb

The purpose of this chapter is to trace the ecological and social origins of regionalism and pastoralism in Ottoman Libya, known as the Regency of Tarabulus al-Gharb, in the nineteenth century. This requires looking back to the eleventh century in order to determine why regionalism and pastoralism persisted into the nineteenth century. Of course, one is not doing justice to earlier periods; nevertheless, such a discussion will help set the historical background for the nineteenth century. This chapter will focus on three specific issues: the nature of regionalism and pastoralism; the geography of the Regency, that is, climate, rainfall, soil, and underground water; and the origins of pastoralism.

In 1911, Italian colonialists encountered in Ottoman Libya a pluralistic society. Strong tribal alliances competed with each other and contested the central state in Tripoli. These grew from roots in nineteenth-century Ottoman Libya, the most salient characteristics of which were regionalism and pastoralism as modes of social organization. These characteristics emerged out of a long process of interaction between desert ecology—soil, rain, underground water—and nomadic migrations and conquests.

Regionalism refers to the political and economic autonomy of the regions of Cyrenaica and Fezzan from the weak state in Tripoli. The Qaramanli state (1711–1835) and the Ottoman state after it (1835–1911) was confined to the coastal towns. Nineteenth-century Ottoman state formation was characterized by a weak central state and the power of the tribes, as demonstrated by their ability to carry arms, in contradistinction to European feudalism, where the

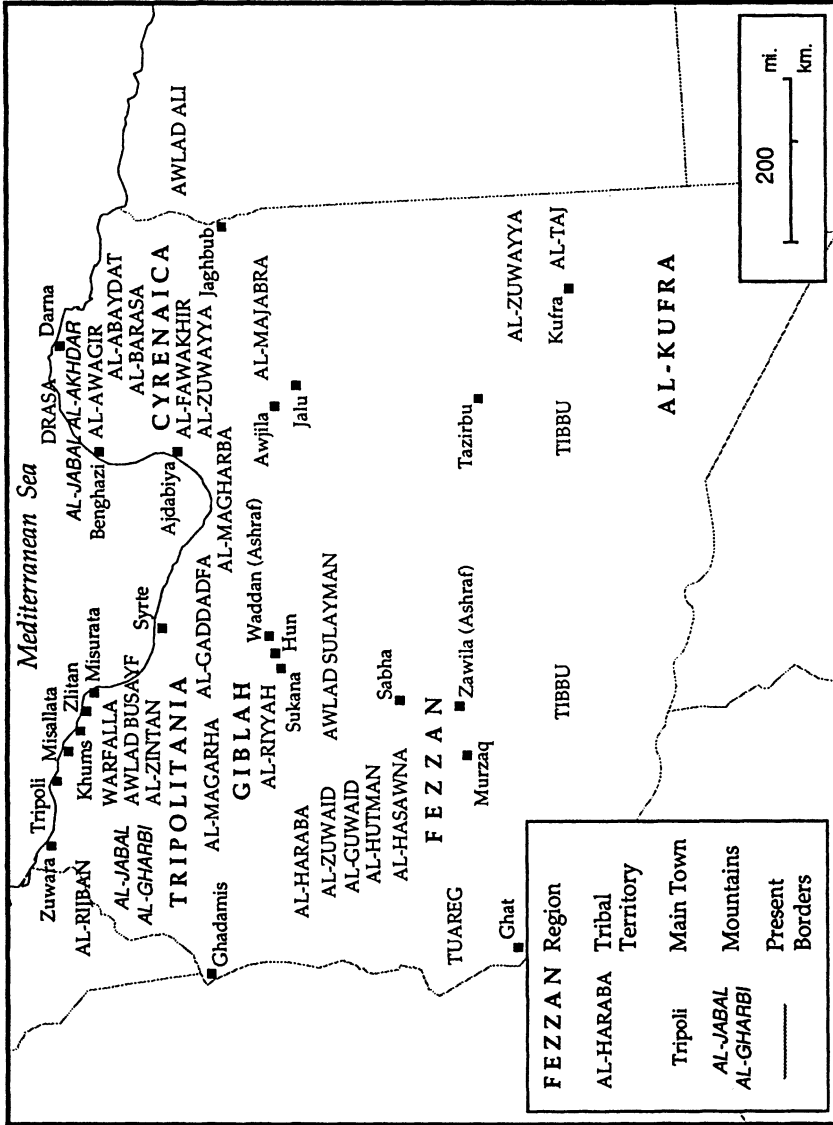
use of arms was monopolized by the professional warrior class. Further, the Ottoman state since 1551 had to compete not only with armed tribal confederations but also with regional states such as the Awlad Muhammad in Fezzan (1550–1812) and the Sanusi state in Cyrenaica (1870–1911).

The ability of regional states and tribes to contest the power of the central state in Tripoli derived not only from an ecological distance from the central state, but also from strong socioeconomic ties with other regional markets and tribes in neighboring countries. One has to keep in mind that prior to the colonial period and the colonial conquest in 1911, strict borders were nonexistent, as were local ties to just one state. The tribes of western Tripolitania and southern Tunisia had strong confederations and were tied to the larger Muslim community of the Maghrib and the Sahara. The state of Awlad Muhammad in Fezzan was linked to the Lake Chad region for trade and the recruitment of soldiers. It also formed a strategic refuge from the Ottoman state in time of war. Equally important to note are the strong socioeconomic ties between the tribes of Cyrenaica and western Egypt. Cyrenaican tribes viewed western Egyptian cities and the desert as both sanctuaries to escape wars and as markets for agropastoral products. The development of these markets was due to ecological and social processes prior to and during the nineteenth century.

A review of the Regency of Tripoli's geography may provide some answers to the question of the origins of regionalism and pastoralism. The country is predominantly arid desert, without major rivers. The climate of the northern coast is Mediterranean. The interior is part of the huge desert of North Africa, *al-Saharā al Kubra*. Along parts of the coast, like the Gulf of Syrte, the desert and the sea come face to face, making a natural barrier between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. (See Map 1.)

Rainfall is scant and inconsistent: The coast of Tripolitania averages only 300 millimeters annually; the Green Mountain of northern Cyrenaica receives up to 500–600 millimeters; Fezzan and southern Cyrenaica receive less than 10 millimeters.<sup>1</sup> Thus, only 5 percent of the entire country is suitable for cultivation. During the last century, settled agriculture was limited to the coast of Tripolitania, parts of the Jafara plain, the western mountain (al-jabal al-Gharbi, or Nifusa), the Green Mountain (al-jabal al-Akhdar), the Marj plain in Cyrenaica, and oases in Fezzan and Cyrenaica.

The geography of western Libya (Tripolitania) includes three major divisions: the coast, the plain, and the mountains. The



**Map #1:** Main Towns, Tribal Territories, and Regions (1910 - 1911).  
 Source: E. De Agostini, "Le popolazioni della Tripolitania," 39, and "Handbook of Libya," 97.

coastal area from Zawiya to Misurata was called the Sahil and the Manshia. Along this area settled agriculture was practiced in the form of sharecropping and small peasantry in the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> The plain of the Jafara expands to southern Tunisia and varies in width from 8 miles to 40 miles toward the coast. During the nineteenth century, the Jafara plain was partly covered by sand dunes and had only a few plots of cultivated land and green pastures. The plain is crossed by dry valleys (*widiyan*) which, during the rainy winter season, channel water runoff from the mountains to the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond the Jafara plain appears the western mountain range of Libya, *al-jabal al Gharbi*. The Jabal receives more rainfall than the plain; in addition, the Jabal has many springs which have allowed settled agriculture to take place. The Jabal nears the coast at Misurata, yet its southern sides are dry and rocky until it becomes part of the vast plateau of the *Hamada al-Hamara*. The Hamada plateau covers around 40,000 square miles; beyond that is the region of Fezzan. The eastern part of Tripolitania, the *Gibla*, stretches to the Syrte desert, and was inhabited up until the late nineteenth century by nomads and seminomads.

Fezzan, the southern region, is mainly desert crossed by *widiyan* where underground water is accessible and abundant. The population of Fezzan is either settled in major oases located along the *widiyan*, especially Wadi al-Shatti and al-Ajal, or is nomadic and seminomadic. The four major seminomadic tribal confederations were the Arab tribes of Wadi al-Shatti, those of the Gibla and Syrte, the Tuareg tribes of the southwest, and the Tebu tribes of the southeast. These groups interacted with each other and exchanged pastoral and agricultural products.<sup>4</sup>

Cyrenaica, the eastern region, extends to the north as a peninsula jutting into the Mediterranean Sea. It is separated from Tripolitania in the west by 403 miles of desert which reaches to the sea. That camels were the major means of travel in the desert in the nineteenth century indicates how much of a barrier the desert posed between the two regions. In the east and south, Cyrenaica is bordered by deserts—the western Egyptian desert in the east and the south Cyrenaican plateau, which eventually becomes part of the great Sahara, the largest desert in the world. Unlike the geography of Tripolitania, Cyrenaica has no large plains like the Jafara. Instead, the coast of Cyrenaica is narrow, with *al-jabal al-Akhdar*, the Green Mountain, rising almost immediately from the sea. Beyond the mountain there is the plain of *Marj*, followed by a

plateau, but with limited underground water. The southern Cyrenaican desert, like Fezzan, restricts life to a few oases such as Jalu, Awjila, Jikhara, Tazirbu Jaghbub, and Kufra.

Pastoralism in this region, as in other parts of the world, developed as a human reaction to arid-zone and desert climates. Historically, water and land were owned collectively by tribes united by common descent. The tribe moves from one area to another, usually herding animals and in rainy seasons cultivating cereal. Such harsh climatic conditions demand mobility and militarism to ensure reproduction and defend the tribal homeland in the face of attacks from other tribes. In short, the tribe became a socioeconomic and political organization. Each tribe produced and exchanged with other tribes and peasants and had political and legal counsels; hence the tribes were able to survive in such arid-zone areas.<sup>5</sup>

Nineteenth-century Ottoman Libya was dominated by various nomadic and seminomadic types of social organization. In 1850 the urban population was very small. Tripoli City and Misurata in Tripolitania had only 12,000 inhabitants each; Murzaq in Fezzan had 5,000, as did the major towns of Cyrenaica, Benghazi, and Darna.<sup>6</sup>

The population in these areas had not changed much by 1911. In fact, the entire regency had only between 1 and 1.5 million inhabitants. Tripolitania had around 570,000 inhabitants of whom 126,000 were seminomads and 86,000 were nomads. The rest of the million were not counted in the official Ottoman census due to lack of resources and political control outside the main towns and cities. The urban towns' population had increased somewhat by this time. For example, Tripoli City's population rose to 29,000. But the population of major Fezzani oases such as Murzaq, Ghat, and Sukana was limited to just a few thousand each.<sup>7</sup> Cyrenaica's population was estimated around 200,000, pastoralists comprising the majority. The urban population continued to be marginal—Benghazi had only 19,000 inhabitants and Darna 10,000 by the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> In short, pastoralists dominated the Regency's social structure with the exception of the people who lived in Tripoli City. Why is this so? And when did it become the case for these populations? These questions are inviting, especially since many historians bring to bear on their studies the settled agriculture in northern Libya during the Roman period (A.D. 145–450).<sup>9</sup>

The standard interpretation of the origins of pastoralism in North Africa stresses ideological and religious factors in the migration of 200,000 to 300,000 "lawless" and "Mongol-like" tribesmen from Arabia to North Africa in the eleventh century. These tribes-

men destroyed agricultural irrigation systems and urban life and consequently perpetuated nomadism as the dominant type of social organization up to the time of European colonialism.

According to this standard view, the eleventh-century Bani Hilal conquest was motivated not only by the politics of North Africa at that time, but by religious zeal. Their conquest of the region was enabled by a plan of the Fatimid Khalifa al-Mustansir who invited them from Arabia and sent them to Ifriqiyya to punish al-Mu'iz Ibn Badis al-Sanhaji, who rebelled against the Fatimid and declared his allegiance to the Abbasid Khalifa in Baghdad.<sup>10</sup> In short, the Hilali conquest was responsible, in this view, for destroying irrigation systems and settled agriculture, ushering in the process of desertification and nomadization in North Africa.

This interpretation was advanced by French colonial historians such as E. F. Gautier, a colonial officer in Madagascar and later in Algeria. He and other French and Arab historians popularized the so-called myth of the Hilali invasion of the Maghrib. The tribes of Bani Hilal and Salim came from Arabia, manipulated by the Fatimid Khalifa al-Mustansir's desire to punish his governor al-Mu'iz Ibn Badis in Ifriqiyya in the middle of the eleventh century. The Bani Hilal, motivated by religious zeal, advanced to the Maghrib, devastated settled agriculture and urban life, much as the Mongols did in Baghdad and West Asia in the thirteenth century. The Maghrib did not recover from the Hilali "catastrophe" for centuries; ostensibly, only the coming of European colonialism restablized the area and made settled life possible once again. Oddly, this interpretation of North African history was based on a selective reading of Ibn Khaldun, the famous fourteenth-century Muslim historian.<sup>11</sup>

Recently, other scholars have begun to challenge colonialist historiography. British archeologist Robert Goodchild points out that settled agriculture has been on the decline since the third century, long before the Hilali conquest. This, he argues, was due to Roman economic policy and the Vandal invasion. J. Poncet and C. Cahen agree with Goodchild and demonstrate that settled agriculture declined as a result of trade route changes and the weakening of the Ziri State before the Hilali. They call for revised analyses of the Hilali migration.<sup>12</sup>

Yves Lacoste has taken this critical approach further by showing that the Hilali myth is based on questionable evidence. It is motivated by an ideology that attempts to justify colonialism by disparaging the precolonial period as "barbaric and stagnant." It also

ignores the complexity of Ibn Khaldun's history and politics, which do not promote themselves as being "value-free."<sup>13</sup> Ibn Khaldun came from a wealthy urban family and served as a judge and advisor in many states.<sup>14</sup> But the colonial view of the Hilali destruction ignores the fact that the Hilali migration was not Ibn Khaldun's major focus and that he praised nomads as state builders.<sup>15</sup>

Two recent historians go beyond methodological criticism of the myth of the Hilali invasion to reconstruct social history. Mahmud Abu-Swa and Radi Daghfus rely on original Arabic sources from the seventh and eleventh centuries. Abu-Swa shows the inadequacies of idealist and religious interpretations of the spread of Islam into North Africa. He points out that the rapid Islamization and Arabization of North Africa were due to the fact that both Berbers and Arabs practiced nomadism as a means of social organization. This mutual practice of nomadism facilitated their intermixing and eventually led to the Islamization and Arabization of the Berbers.<sup>16</sup>

Radi Daghfus's reading of al-Maqrizi and Ibn Thaghr-Bardi shows that the Hilali migration to the Maghrib was not motivated by Fatimid's political decisions to punish rebellious al-Mu'iz Ibn Badis alone, but was actually forced by severe droughts and famines in upper Egypt. In other words, the Hilali migration to the Maghrib was mainly motivated by economic needs.<sup>17</sup>

The decline of settled agriculture and the spread of different types of pastoralism were, then, the results of a long process of change in the climate, conquests, nomadic migrations, and the weakness of the central state. Interpretations of the Hilali migration must take into account these socioeconomic factors prior to, during, and after the eleventh century.

This eclectic interpretation of the Hilali migration does not deny the socioeconomic impact of the Hilali on North Africa; rather, it situates the migration as the result of the broader impact of climate, trade, other nomadic conquests, and state policies—whether Roman, Fatimid, or Ziris. Indeed, the Hilali conquest added new energy to pastoralism in North Africa. Its impact was a turning point in the eleventh century. The Hilali tribes took most of the land and water resources and turned many Berber and Arab tribes of the seventh century into clients and vassals. Further, Islam and the Arabic language replaced other religions and languages by the turn of the fourteenth century. Finally, the oral narrative of the Hilali Migration from Arabia to North Africa became the most popular epic in the precolonial modern history of the region. During the anticolonial resistance in Libya, leaders of the resistance, such as

Umar al Mukhtar, were compared to Abu Zaid and Dhiyab, legendary knights of the Hilali tribes.<sup>18</sup>

In 1908 a scientific expedition arrived in Cyrenaica, sent by the Jewish Territorial Organization in Europe. The aim of the expedition was to study the possibility of settling European Jews in Cyrenaica. A number of British and French university-affiliated scientists were financed by this organization and asked to evaluate the ecological and economic conditions of the region. Their findings shed new light on the previous debate over settled agriculture and pastoralism.

The scientists concluded their study of Cyrenaica by stressing that first, rainfall was scantier than had been believed. Second, the underground water in Cyrenaica was very limited even though most of the rainwater was concentrated in Cyrenaica rather than the rest of the region. Moreover, Tripolitania had more underground water than Cyrenaica. The solution to this puzzle was found in the nature of the soil in each region. Cyrenaican soil did not retain rainwater but allowed it to escape into the sea. Thus, the geology of Cyrenaica limited the quantity of reservoir water in the ground.<sup>19</sup> These findings suggest the possibility that there was a significant climatic change after the sixth century A.D., which may have reduced the amount of rainfall and consequently forestation. Further, it seems that both climatic change and pastoralist nomadic migrations contributed to the persistence of pastoralism in the period between the eleventh and mid-nineteenth centuries.

From this discussion of the geography of Ottoman Libya, two crucial conclusions must be drawn. First, regionalism and pastoralism persisted as a result of ecological and socioeconomic factors.<sup>20</sup> The nature of the soil, rain, and underground water limited the choices available to social groups, determining their mode of production. Also, the introduction of the camel by the Romans in the third century B.C. provided pastoralists with a remarkable resource, since camels endure desert harsh environment and go without water for 2 weeks. Camels became the major means of transportation as well as a source of milk, meat, and clothing. But equally important is the nature of the central state, the interaction with settled communities, trade routes, and regional economics outside of the Regency.