

Nineteenth-Century Co-Production of Knowledge about West Africa¹

The Case of D'Escayrac and West African Pilgrims

Abstract: Focusing on the cross-cultural interaction between a French traveller and pilgrims from West Africa, this study analyses the actors involved in the construction of European knowledge about West African societies in the mid-nineteenth century. It stresses the role of pilgrims, actors that were often considered peripheral to European knowledge production. The use of the concept of knowledge circulation allows me to explore dimensions of knowledge production such as power relations, resistance, or negotiation, described in the travel account. The paper argues that despite the asymmetries in the pilgrim-traveller relationship, pilgrims co-produced the traveller's knowledge about West Africa.

Keywords: knowledge, West Africa, pilgrims, traveller, travel account, power

At the end of the eighteenth century, the rise of European imperialism emerged in conjunction with modern and globalised science, one of the first manifestations

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of which was the development of the scientific exploration movement.² The ambition of Europeans was to discover the whole globe, particularly ‘unknown’ regions, in order to advance geographic sciences, including cartography, which allowed the appropriation of terrestrial spaces, the development of trade and related activities, and ultimately the expansion of political influence. Napoleon Bonaparte’s expedition to Egypt (1798–1802), which aimed to weaken England’s position in the Mediterranean by blocking the route to India, illustrates how imperialism was interlocked with scientific interest.³ Bonaparte was accompanied by a scientific team, including the French geographic engineer Edme Jomard, to realise “the description of Egypt”. Despite the eventual withdrawal of French troops from Egypt, the French influence remained through the presence of its nationals, especially scientific personnel. Their continued prominence is illustrated by the appeal to France by the Viceroy of Egypt, Muhammad Ali, in 1817 to modernise Egypt, followed in 1826 by the opening of a Franco-Egyptian school (*la mission égyptienne*) in Paris to train Egyptian students in the arts and sciences.⁴

The interior of Africa was also affected by the European scientific movement from 1795 onwards, the year of the first exploratory voyage down the Niger River by the Scottish Mungo Park on behalf of the London-based African Association, established in 1788.⁵ The association’s purpose was to “develop the interior of the continent for the trade and political authority of England”.⁶ Although Europeans were present on the shores of Africa through commercial *entrepôts*, settlements, and colonies (for example, in Algeria from 1830), the interior of the continent was almost unknown to them, and the knowledge they acquired was mainly based on fragmentary accounts by Greek and Arabic geographers.⁷ Europeans sought to unravel the mysteries of Africa by gathering geographical, linguistic, ethnic, and political information, essential to advancing their commercial and scientific interests. The con-

2 Qureshi Sadia, Science et mondialisation, in: Pierre Singaravélou/Silvain Venayre (eds.), *Histoire du monde au XIXe siècle*, Paris 2019, 254–273.

3 Catherine Chadeffaud, Edme-François Jomard (1777–1862) et la mission égyptienne dans la première moitié du XIXe siècle, in: *Documents pour l’histoire du français langue étrangère ou seconde* 49 (2012), 53–68; David Todd, An Imperial Nation-State. France and its Empire, in: Peter Fibiger Bang/C. A. Bayly/Walter Scheidel, *The Oxford World History of Empire. The History of Empires*, vol. 2, Oxford 2021, 941–963, 952.

4 Chadeffaud, Edme-François Jomard, (2012), 2–3.

5 Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch/Henri Monot, *L’Afrique noire de 1800 à nos jours*, Paris 1974, 51; Camille Lefebvre, *Frontières de sable, frontière de papier. Histoire de territoires et de frontières, du Jihad de Sokoto à la colonisation française du Niger, XIXe–XXe siècles*, Paris 2015, 41–42.

6 Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *L’Afrique et les Africains au XIXe siècle. Mutations, révolutions, crises*, Paris 1999, 161.

7 Isabelle Surun, L’exploration de l’Afrique au XIXe siècle. Une histoire pré coloniale au regard des post-colonial studies, in: *Revue d’histoire du XIXe siècle* 32/1 (2006), 11–17, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/rh19.1089>.

struction of new roads in Muslim territories was an important goal for French officials. Fulgence Fresnel (the French consul of Djeddah) aimed to take advantage of Eastern Saharan trade and strengthen France's influence in the region.⁸ He promoted the idea of an African caravan, placed under French authority, with the city of Ouara (Waday's capital) as a nodal point between Algerian roads and the Senegalese caravan. The collection of knowledge about Africa required exploratory voyages and interviews between European travellers/explorers and local informants, who can be considered as so-called "go-betweens" because of their crucial role "for mediation, brokerage, and cross-cultural communication in establishing sustained exchange between disparate and different cultures".⁹ The questioning of intermediaries also took place in cities that corresponded to what Louise Pratt defines as a "contact zone".¹⁰ The knowledge produced through these encounters was communicated to European audiences by means of travel accounts, particularly to the European geographical societies and the general public, who had demonstrated a growing interest in them.

This study deals with a cross-cultural encounter from a region and period rather neglected by the historiography of exploration in Africa. Historians have focused their attention on the study of the colonial period,¹¹ and, whenever they approach the period of European exploration, they tend to misconceive the Sahara as a barrier.¹² Considering the Sahara as a space of flows that connected the Maghreb, Sahe-lo-Sudan, Nile Valley, and sub-Saharan areas through trade, scholarship, and pilgrimage networks allows for a diversification of what scholars understand as the meeting points between travellers and natives. It is also a way of considering the context of European presence in the Mediterranean, of perceiving the imperial dimension to the exploration movement, rarely emphasised during the period of what David Todd has called "informal empire".¹³

8 Luc Chantre, *Pèlerinages d'empire. Une histoire européenne du pèlerinage à La Mecque*, Paris 2018, 45.

9 James Delbourgo/Kapil Raj/Lissa Roberts/Simon Schaffer, Introduction, in: eid. (eds.), *The Brokered World. Go-Betweens and Global Intelligence, 1770–1820*, Sagamore Beach 2009, IX–XXXVIII, XIV.

10 Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London 2008, 4.

11 A.S. Kanya-Forstner/Paul E. Lovejoy (eds.), *Pilgrims, Interpreters and Agents. French Reconnaissance Reports on the Central Sudan in the 1890s*, Madison 1997; Sophie Dulucq/Colette Zytnicki, Présentation. "Informations indigènes", érudits et lettrés en Afrique (nord et sud du Sahara) savoirs autochtones XIXe–XXe siècles, in: *Outre-mers* 93/352–353 (2006), 7–14.

12 Graziano Krätli/Ghislaine Lydon, *The Trans-Saharan Book Trade, Manuscript Culture, Arabic Literacy and Intellectual History in Muslim Africa*, Leiden/Boston 2011, 1.

13 Todd, *An Imperial Nation-State*, 2021, 954. The author applies the paradigm of "informal empire" to French imperialism between 1815–1880 due to the cultural and economic global projection of French informal power in Latin America, the Arab world, and Africa during this period.

Drawing on the concept of knowledge circulation, this article analyses the interaction between two groups of actors, a French traveller and pilgrims/students (*hujjaj/tulab*), both involved in the nineteenth-century production of knowledge about Africa. The study is based on the European travel account *Mémoire sur le Soudan* by Pierre Henri Stanislas D'Escayrac de Lauture (1826–1868), published by the *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie* in 1855–1856.¹⁴ The pilgrims/students were from Sudan, whose equivalent is Takrur, a region historically known in classical Arabic terminology as the Muslim regions of West Africa, which correspond to the areas between today's Senegal and Darfur.¹⁵ The term 'Sudan/Takrur', difficult to define because of its polysemic nature, was also used by both European explorers from the mid-eighteenth century onwards and indigenous actors. Although D'Escayrac used different terms such as "Black", "Takruri", and "Sudani" to refer to natives from this area, – the term Takruri rather denotes migrants and pilgrims from West Africa to Egypt, the Eastern Sudan, and the Hijaz.¹⁶ I will use West African and West Africa to refer to the people and the area respectively.

I argue that D'Escayrac's travel account is hybrid and complex. It represents forms of knowledge created in collaboration with West African pilgrims but codified and transmitted by the Paris Geographical Society and the French explorer.¹⁷ In my study, I rely much more on a European perspective due to the scarcity of African sources on this topic. However, I closely interrogate one of the three stages proposed by Basalla:¹⁸ the one in which "non-European (i.e. 'non-scientific') societies serve as passive reservoirs of data" for a period of scientific exploration.¹⁹ One way to subvert the Eurocentric narrative is to put the spotlight on the participation of African actors in the process of knowledge production and to emphasise the circulation of knowledge.²⁰ The concept of circulation is useful because it implies "a

14 Pierre Henri Stanislas D'Escayrac de Lauture, *Mémoire sur le Soudan. Géographie naturelle et politique, histoire et ethnographie, mœurs et institutions de l'Empire des Fellatas, du Bornou, du Baguermi, du Waday, du Darfour*, rédigé, d'après des renseignements entièrement nouveaux et accompagné d'une esquisse du Soudan oriental, Paris 1855–1856.

15 Umar Al-Naqar, Takrur. The History of a Name, in: *The Journal of African History* 10/3 (1969), 365–374, 365.

16 Stefan Reichmuth, Murtaḍāal-Zabīdī (1732–1791) and the Africans. Islamic Discourse and Scholarly Networks in the Late Eighteenth Century, in: Scott Reese, *The Transmission of Learning in Islamic Africa*, Leiden 2004, 121–153, 130.

17 Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge. The British in India*, New Jersey 1996, 16.

18 George Basalla, The Spread of Western Science, in: *Science* 156 (1967), 611–622.

19 Kapil Raj, *Relocating Modern Science, Circulation and the Construction of Knowledge in South Asia and Europe, 1650–1900*, London 2007, 3. Christian Joas/Fabian Krämer/Kärin Nickelsen, Introduction. History of Science or History of Knowledge?, in: *Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte* 42/2–3 (2019), 117–125, 120.

20 Kapil Raj, Beyond Postcolonialism...and Postpositivism. Circulation and the Global History of Science, in: *Isis* 104/2 (2013), 337–347, 343–344; Philipp Sarasin, More Than Just Another Specialty.

double movement of going back and forth and coming back” and offers an alternative narrative to the unilinear, mono-directional spreading of modern science from Europe to the rest of the world.²¹ What is more, the concept of circulation allows us to identify not only the movement of people, resources, various practices, and information involved in the exploration, understood “as a set of cultural practices which involve the mobilization of people and resources, especially equipment, publicity, and authority”,²² but also power relations, resistance, and negotiation.

Coming into contact with pilgrims in Cairo

In *Mémoire sur le Soudan*, the traveller D’Escayrac shares his knowledge of West Africa on the following topics: hydrography, flora and fauna, ethnography, history, political geography, government, art of war, religion, and magic. His account also includes itineraries, portraits, details of West African customs, and a map of the part of West Africa situated between Lake Chad and the Nile. This was not the first map of the area. Walter Oudney, Dixon Denham, and Hugh Clapperton’s 1822 expedition and the works of Johann Ludwig Burckhardt and Fulgence Fresnel provided previous cartographic information on the region.²³ D’Escayrac’s main goal was to correct errors in his earlier work and to fill gaps in knowledge on West Africa.

The travel account draws on an intermediation that involves social interaction between pilgrims and D’Escayrac.²⁴ Members of distinct societies and cultures, these actors were mobile figures who undertook either of the two spatial movements that define mobility: a temporary one, consisting of back-and-forth movements, called “circulation”, which is opposed to a permanent or semi-permanent one, called “migration”.²⁵ By crossing territories and spaces, they met each other and established ongoing relations in Cairo, perceived as a social zone “where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of

On the Prospects for the History of Knowledge, in: *Journal for the History of Knowledge* 1/2 (2020), 1–5; James A. Secord, *Knowledge in Transit*, in: *Isis* 95/4 (2004), 654–672.

21 Johan Östling/David Larsson Heidenbald/Erling Sandmo/Anna Nilsson Hammar/Kari Nordberg, *The History of Knowledge and the Circulation of Knowledge. An Introduction*, in: eid. (eds.), *Circulation of Knowledge. Explorations in the History of Knowledge*, Lund 2018, 9–33, 20–21.

22 Felix Driver, *Geography Militant, Cultures of Exploration and Empire*, Oxford 2001, 8–9.

23 Coquery-Vidrovitch/Monot, *L’Afrique noire*, 1974, 52; Fulgence Fresnel, *Mémoire de M. Fresnel consul de France à Djeddah sur le Waday (1848–1850)*, Paris 1850, 8–9.

24 Kapil Raj, *Go-betweens, Travelers, and Cultural Translators*, in: Bernard Lightman (ed.), *A Companion to the History of Science*, Oxford 2016, 39–57, 50.

25 Nathalie Ortart/Monika Salzbrunn/Mathis Stock, *Chapitre I – Quels enjeux épistémologiques autour du mobility turn?*, in: eid. (eds.), *Migrations, circulations, mobilités. Nouveaux enjeux épistémologiques et conceptuels à l’épreuve du terrain*, Aix-en-Provence 2018, 15–42, 17.

domination and subordination like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today”²⁶ On the one hand, the city of Cairo saw the increasing presence and influence of Europeans, especially French, after Bonaparte’s occupation in 1798. On the other hand, it served as a nodal point for the Islamic pilgrimage (*hajj*), the religious and devotional journeying to the sacred places of Islam in Mecca and Medina for the observance of specified acts.²⁷ West African pilgrims who followed the northern pilgrimage routes crossed several West African cities before passing through Cairo on their way to or from the holy lands (Mecca and Medina),²⁸ whereas the explorer crossed several Mediterranean cities before venturing out in Cairo in order to meet the natives of the investigated areas.

The West African pilgrims in Cairo were a group consisting mainly of scholars/students in quest of scholarship (*talab al ilm*),²⁹ merchants, and rulers and their entourages.³⁰ They often combined travel with trade and religious purposes (including learning), following the example of Muslim travellers.³¹ It is difficult to quantify the anonymous individuals who performed the pilgrimage,³² as early records of pilgrimages concerned rulers’ pilgrimages,³³ and sometimes West African scholars in Cairo were overlooked by Egyptian scholars in their works.³⁴ Nonetheless, pilgrims were an important source of knowledge for French explorers (for example Jean Prax and Fresnel).³⁵ In addition to their knowledge of their own societies, pilgrims also developed a knowledge of the geography of the territories they crossed on their journeys.³⁶ Within this group, some pilgrims still held functions closely linked to travel, which enabled them to acquire cultural, geographical, religious, geopolitical, and political information. The French explorer trusted them when it came to acquir-

26 Pratt, *Imperial*, 2008, 4.

27 Umar el-Nagar, *West Africa and the Muslim pilgrimage. An historical study with special reference to the nineteenth century*, unpublished PhD thesis, SOAS University of London 1969, 2–9.

28 John S. Birks, *Across the Savannas to Mecca. The Overland Pilgrimage Route from West Africa*, London 1978, 8–10.

29 Houari Touati, *Islam et Voyages au Moyen Âge*, Paris 2000, 78.

30 Baz Lecocq, *The Hajj from West Africa from a Global Historical Perspective (19th and 20th Centuries)*, in: *African Diaspora 5/2* (2012), 187–214, 192. For the combination of travel and quest of knowledge see Reichmuth, Murtaḍāal-Zabīdī, 2004, 123–153; John O. Hunwick, Salih al-Fullani (1752–1803). *The Career and Teachings of a West African ‘Alim in Medina*, in: A. H. Green, *Quest of an Islamic Humanism. Arabic and Islamic Studies in Memory of Mohamed Al-Nowaihi*, Cairo 1984, 139–154. For rulers’ pilgrimages see El-Nagar, *West Africa*, 1969.

31 Dale Eickelman/James Piscatori, *Muslim travellers. Pilgrimage, migration, and the religious imagination*, Berkeley 1990, 5.

32 Birks, *Across*, 1978, 8.

33 C. Bawa Yamba, *Permanent Pilgrims. The Role of Pilgrimage in the Lives of West African Muslims in Sudan*, London 1995, 34.

34 El-Nagar, *West Africa*, 1969, 311. Reichmuth, Murtaḍāal-Zabīdī, 2004, 122–123.

35 Chantre, *Pèlerinages*, 2018, 41–42; Fresnel, *Mémoire*, 1850.

36 Reichmuth, Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī, 2004, 174.

ing knowledge or compiling maps, as shown by the two natives quoted, who were described as follows:

“One of my Africans, Sheikh Abdallah, from Afnou, head of the chamber of black students at El-Azhar, when questioned by me one day about the Sudanese who were in Cairo, mentioned a relative of the Sultan of Baguermi, named Sheikh Ibrahim; he told me that this personage, having made the pilgrimage last year, was still in Egypt for some time and had gone down to Cairo to stay with Ismayl-Pasha. Abdallah spoke to me of Ibrahim as an intelligent man, well aware of all that concerned the Sudan and very eager to learn.”³⁷

The first native is Abdallah from Afnou (current Niger), a merchant and student at the al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo. Abdallah was the head of the student lodge at al-Azhar, the Takarna riwaq, which corresponds to the “accommodation of the Blacks”. The second was Ibrahim, a relative of the sultan of Baguermi (current Chad), who received the title of *hajji* after his pilgrimage to the holy lands. Ibrahim had participated in several wars against Bornu during Muhamad el Kanemi’s reign (1776–1837) and had travelled to several places in West Africa, including Wadai, Darfur, and Dar Sila. The first group favoured by the French traveller was that of desert guides and merchants who ventured into and traded in the hard-to-reach parts of West Africa. Ibrahim belonged to the group of ‘princes’ or ‘rulers,’ “the people who ruled the kingdoms, inspected the provinces, moved armies in enemy countries”³⁸. The members of these two groups were involved in trade, religious, information, and cultural networks that spanned from the holy lands (and beyond) to West Africa.³⁹ Their knowledge of Arabic – the “Latin of Africa”, the language that connected Africa and the Middle East – allowed them to exchange, converse, and expand their access to information with other Muslims.⁴⁰ The reception of Ibrahim by the viceroy of Egypt, Ismail Pasha, illustrates that ruling groups associated pilgrimage with diplomacy, crucial for acquiring knowledge of wars and political changes in different areas of the Muslim world and regional geopolitics.⁴¹ Another group probably highly valued by explorers, given the large number of travel accounts that mention them, were the students/scholars or former students/scholars of al-Azhar

37 D’Escayrac, *Mémoire*, 1855–1856, 12–13.

38 *Ibid.*, 12.

39 Georg Klute, *The coming state. Reactions of nomadic groups in the western Sudan to the expansion of the colonial powers*, in: *Nomadic Peoples* 38 (1996), 49–72, 53–55; John Slight, *The British Empire and the Hajj, 1865–1956*, Cambridge 2015, 8.

40 Ghislaine Lydon, *A thirst for knowledge. Arabic literacy, writing paper and Saharan bibliophiles*, in: Krätli/Lydon, *Trans-Saharan Booktrade*, 2011, 35–72, 38; Pratt, *Imperial*, 2008, 6.

41 Birks, *Across*, 1978, 10; El-Nagar, *West Africa*, 1969, 169–170.

Mosque.⁴² In Cairo, the scholars/students were immersed in an environment where, unlike their counterparts in West Africa, they had easy access to an Islamic scholarly culture that included geography classes, maps, geographical treatises, and empirical practices.⁴³ Barth, for instance, was impressed by the considerable degree of knowledge of Faki Sambo, a Fulbe scholar from Waday who had made the pilgrimage to Mecca.⁴⁴ At an early age, his father sent him to al-Azhar to study. Sambo distinguished himself by his knowledge of instruments such as the astrolabe and the sextant. He was also familiar with the writings of Aristotle and Plato. Above all, Sambo “possessed the most intimate knowledge of countries which he had visited”, Barth reports. Undoubtedly, his contact with Abdallah, the head of West African students at al-Azhar, was at least beneficial in providing him with the profile that D’Escayrac was looking for in his interviewees.

Indeed, the establishment of multiple networks was a fundamental *desideratum*, given that interaction with pilgrims was not an easy matter. D’Escayrac enjoyed and benefited from the trust and esteem of the highest Egyptian figures; he had close relations not only with the viceroy of Egypt but also with many Europeans established in Cairo, through whom he made further acquaintances.⁴⁵ Learning Arabic was essential to communicate with the pilgrims.⁴⁶ D’Escayrac, who was accustomed to alterity, spoke several foreign languages including English, Portuguese, Spanish, Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, and had travelled extensively during his diplomatic and military career. In 1844, he had participated in a military expedition against the natives of Madagascar.⁴⁷ When he decided to embark on a new career and dedicate himself to the exploration of the African continent between 1846 and 1848, he was already familiar with several places in Africa, such as Zanzibar, Madagascar, Morocco, and Algeria. From 1846 onwards, he improved his language skills on several trips to Algeria, Italy, and Tunis.⁴⁸

42 Ulrich de Seetzen, *Nouvelles recherches sur l’intérieur de l’Afrique. Nouveaux renseignements sur le Royaume ou Empire de Bornou, recueillis au Caire par M. Seetzen*, in: *Annales de voyages* 19 (1812), 164–167; Heinrich Barth, *Travels and Discoveries in North and Central Africa. Being a Journal of an Expedition Undertaken under the Auspices of H.B.M.’s Government, in the Years 1849–1855*, vol. III, Cambridge 2011, 373–376, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511996832.026>.

43 Barth, *Travels and Discoveries*, vol. I, 2011, 428–429, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511996818.018>; Lefebvre, *Frontières*, 2015, 111–113.

44 Barth, *Travels and Discoveries*, vol. III, 2011, 373–376, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511996832.026>.

45 Paul Durand-Lapie, *Le comte d’Escayrac de Lauture, voyageur et explorateur français commandeur de la Légion d’honneur. Sa vie et ses ouvrages*, Paris 1899, 25–80.

46 Lefebvre, *Frontières*, 2015, 47.

47 Durand-Lapie, *Le comte*, 1899, 16–19.

48 Victor Adolphe Malte-Brun, *Notice sur les voyages et les travaux de M. le comte Stanislas d’Escayrac de Lauture*, in: *Bulletin de la Société de géographie* 17 (1869), 168–193, 170.

In the literature, pilgrims are often categorised as “go-between”, people “who articulate relationships between disparate worlds or cultures by being able to translate them” to the traveller.⁴⁹ The category of “go-between” can also be applied to D’Escayrac due to his relationship with the Geographical Society of Paris and African informants. Even if D’Escayrac joined the *Société de Géographie* in 1851 of his own free will to serve its interests, he was not entirely free in the process of exploration. The framing and monitoring of the knowledge produced by the Geographical Society led D’Escayrac to adopt different strategies to make the knowledge he had collected in Africa acceptable.⁵⁰

Production validates knowledge

D’Escayrac acted as an intermediary on behalf of the *Société de Géographie*. He was also a “go-between”, someone who represented the respective “other” culture through texts, images, and maps to both the European public and the Africans.⁵¹ His role was mainly to make the knowledge of Africa’s interior comprehensible to a European audience.⁵² In other words, the *Société de Géographie* requested that the collected information be transformed into certified knowledge in the European metropolis before it could be disseminated.⁵³ The position of the traveller was not independent. In this regard, D’Escayrac was involved in a process of negotiation; the rules and ideas of the Geographical Society had to be adopted and incorporated by the traveller in order to produce certified knowledge.

Geographical organisations had several means of control or influence at their disposal.⁵⁴ Correspondence, instructions, and the awarding of prizes were the main tools of the *Société de Géographie*, as it was not until 1866 that travellers’ missions were funded. D’Escayrac corresponded regularly with the French organisation through the geographer Jomard.⁵⁵ The award of a prize was not only a recognition of a traveller’s efforts but also a means of establishing a personal relationship between the society and the traveller, and of maintaining competition between can-

49 Delbourgo et al., Introduction, 2009, XIV.

50 Lefebvre, *Frontières*, 2015, 43.

51 Raj, *Go-between*, 2016, 42.

52 Samuel Moyn/Andrew Sartori, *Approaches to Global Intellectual History*, in: eid. (eds.), *Global Intellectual History*, New York 2013, 3–30, 9.

53 Raj, *Go-between*, 2016, 49.

54 Isabelle Surun, *Les sociétés de géographie dans la première moitié du XIXe siècle. Quelle institutionnalisation pour quelle géographie?*, in: Hélène Blais/Isabelle Laboulais (eds.), *Géographies plurielles. Les sciences géographiques au moment de l’émergence des sciences humaines (1750–1850)*, Paris 2006, 113–130, 124–127.

55 D’Escayrac, *Mémoire*, 1855–1856, 65.

didates, who were judged based on the materials they brought back on their return.⁵⁶ D'Escayrac distinguished himself by becoming a deputy member of the *Société de Géographie's* central commission. He also received the Cross of the Legion of Honour, France's highest order of merit, in 1853 after the publication of *Le Désert et le Soudan*,⁵⁷ the result of several journeys to the shores and the interior of Africa (Tunis, Tripoli, Kairouan, the Sahara, Nubia, Sennar, and Kordofan) from 1849 onwards. His explorations were also recognised outside France, for example in an article in the *Augsburger Allgemeine Zeitung* on 10 July 1851.⁵⁸

In addition to this official recognition, D'Escayrac employed legitimisation strategies in his travel account. He used his previous experience in Africa to present himself as an authority on Africa, the perfect investigator to provide a description of the continent.⁵⁹ His need for legitimacy also manifested itself in a description of his methodology, in which he stressed his supposed objectivity: "The limited success of a large number of badly planned and badly executed expeditions discouraged governments from trying new ones, and the geographers were left to try to solve by survey what they could not solve *visu*."⁶⁰ D'Escayrac denounced the findings of other travellers mainly due to their lack of training as explorers, the source of poor science.⁶¹

In adopting the method of exploration assisted by natives, he seems to have followed Conrad Malte Brun, a cabinet geographer, who supported the travel approach in the heated debate within the *Société de Géographie* about travel accounts vs. memoirs (sparked by critics of travel accounts).⁶² From 1822 onwards, the society was divided between those in favour of *mémoires*, a concept of geography as a practical discipline rather than a speculative or a cabinet science, and those in favour of travel as an essential instrument for gathering facts and developing geographical knowledge. The latter also perceived travel accounts as a tool to reach a wider audience. Brun impressed his critics with the possibility of transforming geography into a positive science through exploratory travel, although in 1822 he initially defined travel as a tool for establishing geography as an empirical science. There were several reasons for his change of mind, the most important of which were the risks involved in travelling to distant or unknown territories, the uncertainty of the findings, and the condition and nature of the journey itself (timeliness, superficiality). However,

56 Surun, *Les sociétés*, 2006, 126.

57 Durand-Lapie, *Le comte*, 1899, 66–67.

58 *Augsburger Allgemeine Zeitung*, 10 July 1851, 3053.

59 Elikia M'Bokolo, *Afrique Noire. Histoire et Civilisations* tome II, XIXe et XXe siècles, Paris 1992, 249; D'Escayrac, *Mémoire*, 1855–1856, 7.

60 D'Escayrac, *Mémoire*, 1855–1856, 7 (emphasis in original).

61 *Ibid.*, 6.

62 Surun, *Les sociétés*, 2006, 118–119.

he considered the contact with the natives essential and preferred “to trust natives themselves in countries where some are ‘very well educated and very well able to write about their native country’”.⁶³

Faced with the debate within the Geographical Society, D’Escayrac had to prove not only his contact with the natives but also the reliability of his informants, as the certification of knowledge was linked to trust, authority, and moral order.⁶⁴ Establishing and maintaining systems of knowledge is based on the recognition of trustworthy people. Cabinet savants who relied on travel accounts to produce scientific knowledge were also concerned about the reliability of informants.⁶⁵ D’Escayrac therefore demonstrated how he tested the pilgrims he relied on, especially Ibrahim. Having hosted him for several days, the traveller demonstrated his skill and cleverness in playing the role of a European investigator, asking his guest and informant predetermined questions. He tested Ibrahim’s reliability by asking him about areas of West Africa he already knew.⁶⁶ He made comparisons and connections between his own knowledge of the region and the findings of explorers such as Denham or Clapperton, as it was part of an explorer’s training to read the works of his predecessors who had visited the region or surrounding areas. The reliability of the explorers also depended on their ability not to spread hearsay or common accounts such as those of “anthropophagous Christians and long-tailed men”.⁶⁷ Such beliefs were at the core of the imaginary of European learned societies of Africa between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries.⁶⁸ Commissioned by the French Academy of Sciences in 1855 to investigate the long-tailed men, D’Escayrac denied their existence, stating that the tail represented the “tails of beasts tied to the kidneys”.⁶⁹

The appropriation of knowledge acquired through the help of pilgrims was a two-step process. The favourable environment for the French allowed D’Escayrac to begin writing his travel account in Cairo, which he completed in Paris, making the two cities sites for the transformation of knowledge. In terms of security, D’Escayrac’s situation was much more advantageous than that of the explorers of the interior of Africa, who often owed their survival in non-acquired territories to the relations with local societies.⁷⁰ Cairo was not a place of information extraction for the Euro-

63 Ibid., 121.

64 Raj, *Relocating*, 2007, 24.

65 Qureshi, *Science et mondialisation*, 2019, 262–263.

66 D’Escayrac, *Mémoire*, 1855–1856, 19.

67 Ibid., 11.

68 Abiola Félix Iroko, *Hommes à Queue Et Traditions En République Du Bénin*, in: *Africa. Rivista Trimestrale Di Studi e Documentazione Dell’Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente* 47/3 (1992), 413–423, 413.

69 Jean-Dominique Pénel, *Homo caudatus. Les hommes à queue d’Afrique centrale. Un avatar de l’imaginaire occidental*, *Société d’études linguistiques et anthropologiques de France*, Paris 1982, 187.

70 Surun, *L’exploration*, (2006), 29–30.

pean metropolis, but can be seen as something of a semi-periphery, a place where “an important part of the work of translation, adaptation, and even publication took place”.⁷¹ The appropriation of knowledge about Africa continued in Paris, where D’Escayrac consulted, quoted, and corrected previous works in order to increase the scientific value of his own study.⁷² Although using the term *mémoire* in the title, he seemed to qualify his work as a travel account since he submitted it to geographers for review:

“I hope this work, imperfect though it may be, will not be deemed unworthy of the attention of geographers, that its main conclusions will be appreciated by a learned critic, confirmed by the examination of facts, and finally that it will not be useless for the progress of the science.”⁷³

Unlike the *mémoire*, the travel account sought both to contribute to progress by providing a working basis for the geographer and to disseminate geographical knowledge to a wider audience.⁷⁴

Authors who paid tribute to D’Escayrac testified to the excellent reception of his publications, at least within the *Société de Géographie*. According to Malte Brun, who described D’Escayrac as having dedicated his life to “the study and progress of geographical science”, the *Mémoire sur le Soudan* contained “many useful and valuable documents”.⁷⁵ Whether on its own or in combination with the learned critiques of cabinet geographers, D’Escayrac’s travel account contributed to the development of European scientific knowledge during the nineteenth century. However, his contribution alone won the recognition of the Geographical Society, even though the knowledge D’Escayrac produced was a co-production and the result of a dialogue process with the pilgrims.⁷⁶ The French explorer was rather reluctant to reveal how Ibrahim contributed to the development of his knowledge. Ibrahim used drawings and dictation to share his knowledge, which was in return appropriated by D’Escayrac in the form of notes, triangulating, and map-making. The map included in his travel account reinforced the circular perspective in this process of knowledge production. The map served two purposes.⁷⁷ It first configured and represented space

71 Peter Burke, *What is the History of Knowledge?*, Cambridge 2016, 34; Qureshi, *Science et mondialisation*, 2019, 270.

72 Lefebvre, *Frontières*, 2015, 51.

73 D’Escayrac, *Mémoire*, 1855–1856, 18.

74 Surun, *Les sociétés*, 2006, 120.

75 Malte-Brun, *Notice*, (1869), 168–175.

76 Raj, *Relocating*, 2007, 101.

77 Isabelle Surun, *Espace projeté, espace parcouru. Le terrain des explorations en Afrique (1790–1860)*, in: Jean-Marc Besse/Hélène Blais/Isabelle Surun (eds.), *Naissances de la géographie moderne (1760–1860). Lieux, pratiques et formation des savoirs de l’espace*, Lyon 2010, 111–128, 111–112.

through the graphic formatting of accumulated and ordered knowledge, and was thus a mediation between the traveller and the pilgrim. The second purpose was to provide a miniature version of the represented space that could be grasped by the eye. Finally, the traveller transformed the unknown space into one that could be recognised by his audience in Europe. A circular process, consisting of an open flow back and forth is undoubtedly one of the key characteristics of the interaction between D'Escayrac and the pilgrims, especially Ibrahim.⁷⁸ As with much of the knowledge produced in places of asymmetrical relations, including those of subordination, such as Cairo, asymmetrical power relations are evident throughout the process of knowledge production, from the gathering of information to the dissemination of knowledge in Europe.

Processes of power and resistance

D'Escayrac's use of a predetermined questionnaire when interviewing the pilgrims clearly reveals the relation of power between them. Far from being merely an instrument of observation (the most fundamental practice of all modern sciences),⁷⁹ the questionnaire was also a process of government – anchored in the *longue durée*.⁸⁰ It had proved its worth in the field of travel and imperial conquest.⁸¹ Knowledge production also relied on the circulation of useful information as a method of exploration in areas under French influence. D'Escayrac cited the example of Ernest Carette, who mapped trans-Saharan trade and pilgrimage routes in Algeria by interviewing pilgrims.⁸² There was therefore a collaborative network of consular and diplomatic staff on the periphery of the area to be explored, to which travellers could turn for information and methods for their own exploration.⁸³

In *Mémoire sur le Soudan*, D'Escayrac provides the personal details of two pilgrims, including their first names, origins, experiences, functions, and biographical and intellectual qualities, while the personal details of the other 38 pilgrims/students involved in the production of knowledge are omitted. This marginalisation can be understood as the subjugation of local knowledge, the process during which members

78 Raj, *Beyond Postcolonialism*, (2013), 344.

79 Lorraine Daston/Elizabeth Lunbeck, Introduction. *Observation Observed*, in: eaed. (eds.), *Histories of Scientific Observation*, Chicago 2011, 1–9, 1.

80 Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits, 1954–1988*, vol. II, 1970–1975, Paris 1994, 584.

81 Vera Keller, *Into the Unknown. Clues, Hints, and Projects in the History of Knowledge*, in: *History and Theory* 58 (2020), 86–110.

82 D'Escayrac, *Mémoire, 1855–1856*, 8; Chantre, *Pèlerinages*, 2018, 41–42.

83 Surun, *Les sociétés*, 2006, 125; Chantre, *Pèlerinages*, 2018, 41–42.

of dominant groups “wrote about or mapped the non-Western world but had little to say about what they had learned from indigenous informants”.⁸⁴

D’Escayrac’s emphasis on European superiority in his travel account is also a way of manifesting his position of power. What would the description of non-Europeans look like through the lens of D’Escayrac, who believed in the theory of evolution, according to which “all peoples, starting from the lowest level (savagery), would arrive, after many stages (barbarism), at a point of civilization”⁸⁵? He worked at a time when the Paris Geographical Society was concerned with classifying races and investigating the concept of savagery using the methods of emergent natural history.⁸⁶ “But, as I have said and repeat, we must ask of each African only what he can give; we must not burden him with questions about facts he cannot know, we must not tire his mind, which is little accustomed to reflection.”⁸⁷ D’Escayrac considered Black people – used by him as a homogeneous category – as an inferior species, mainly due to their supposedly lower intellectual capacity. The traveller also spread a discourse that animalised “the Black” and reinforced Hegel’s idea of the exclusion of Black people from history.⁸⁸ “Unfortunately their mind is naturally futile and they are more inclined to ape our foolery than to imitate what makes us great.”⁸⁹ The use of the term ape is significant because it reveals D’Escayrac’s familiarity with some racial theories, such as that of the natural history teacher Jules-Joseph Viroy, who argued that “Blacks were a different species more closely related to apes”.⁹⁰ The imaginary used by the traveller was derived from the literature of geography and ethnography, which shows the connection between the two disciplines.⁹¹ Over the course of the mission, these theoretical assumptions were confirmed or, in some specific cases, invalidated, as in the case of Ibrahim, whose intellectual capacity was emphasised to prove his reliability. D’Escayrac’s findings certainly fostered a certain current within the Geographical Society, which, by the late 1830s and 1840s, was developing the idea of the unequal potential of human development (polygenism) and the indelibility of racial characteristics (monogenism).⁹²

84 Burke, *History of Knowledge*, 2016, 35.

85 Pénel, *Homo caudatus*, 1982, 93.

86 Bruce Buchan/Linda Andersson Burnett, *Knowing Savagery. Humanity in the Circuits of Colonial Knowledge*, in: *History of the Human Sciences* 32/4 (2019), 3–7.

87 D’Escayrac, *Mémoire*, 1855–1856, 10.

88 Jean Pierre Chrétien, *L’Afrique subsaharienne*, in: Singaravélou/Venayre (eds.), *Histoire du monde*, 2019, 605–618, 607.

89 D’Escayrac, *Mémoire*, 1855–1856, 109–110.

90 Martin S. Staum, *The Paris Geographical Society constructs the Other, 1821–1850*, in: *Journal of Historical Geography* 26/2 (2000), 222–238, 227.

91 Claude Blanckaert, *Géographie et anthropologie. Une rencontre nécessaire (XVIIIe–XIXe siècle)*, in: *Ethnologie française* 34/4 (2004), 661–669, 662.

92 Staum, *The Paris Geographical*, (2000), 232.

As well as being instrumental in articulating the new racial boundaries that marked the turn of the nineteenth century, D'Escayrac adopted an imperialist stance that portrayed himself, or Europe, as culturally and technologically superior to Africans.⁹³ This is not surprising for a man who had a military and diplomatic career, and who was exposed to imperial and diplomatic politics abroad.⁹⁴ Here is an example of his views of Africans:

“The genius of Europe is forced upon them, everything they see here fills them with wonder and admiration. The steamships they have seen on the Nile, the railway that runs on that river, the English troops that have recently crossed Cairo, make them see that Europe is as superior to Turkey or Egypt, as Turkey or Egypt themselves can be superior to Nigritia, they begin to feel that we are their masters, and it becomes easy for us to lead them.”⁹⁵

Based on technological progress, D'Escayrac established a hierarchy in which Europe was at the top and the land of Blacks (Nigritia) was at the bottom, an instrumental adaptation of the theory of stages of development.⁹⁶ In this quote, he points out the possibility of Europeans subjugating Africans, the consequence of the lack of development being the submission of less advanced people. The description of technological domination over the rest of the world was no exaggeration. Muslim pilgrims witnessed the conflicts between empires (French, British, Russian and Ottoman) in Cairo, and Africans acknowledged the technological and military superiority of Europeans.⁹⁷ In his travel account, the explorer Hugh Clapperton wrote about Muhammed Bello's (the ruler of Sokoto) suspicions towards British imperialism: “You are a strange people, the strongest of all Christian nations; you have subjugated all of India.”⁹⁸ Against this backdrop, it was highly likely that the West African pilgrims had a sense of symbolic domination, particularly in the context of France's policies towards Muslim territories (which were under its influence), following the conquest of Algiers in 1830 and France's attempt to gain a commercial foothold in

93 Johannes Feichtinger/Johann Heiss, *Interactive Knowledge-Making. How and Why Nineteenth-Century Austrian Scientific Travelers in Asia and Africa Overcame Cultural Differences*, in: Johannes Feichtinger/Anil Bhatti/Cornelia Hülmbauer (eds.), *How to Write the Global History of Knowledge-Making. Interaction, Circulation and the Transgression of Cultural Difference*, Cham 2020, 45–69.

94 *Ibid.*, 52.

95 D'Escayrac, *Mémoire*, 1855–1856, 10.

96 Blanckaert, *Géographie*, (2004), 662.

97 Chadeffaud, Edme-François Jomard, (2012), 7; Georg Klute, *The coming*, (1996), 55.

98 Dixon Denham/Hugh Clapperton, *Narrative of Travels and Discoveries in Northern and Central Africa in the Years 1822, 1823, and 1824*, London 1985, 314–315; Muhammad S. Umar, *Islamic Discourses on European Visitors to Sokoto Caliphate in the Nineteenth Century*, in: *Studia Islamica* 95 (2002), 135–159, 148–149.

West Africa.⁹⁹ West African pilgrims experienced the impact of a new French regulation on pilgrimages, as illustrated by the interrogation of Ahmad ibn Tuwayr al Jana (a scholar from today's Mauritania) by the French after he was quarantined in Algiers on his way from Mecca following the conquest of Algiers.¹⁰⁰ Yet, the French traveller's power was not beyond challenge. On the contrary, D'Escayrac's perspective on cross-cultural interaction also reveals elements of resistance by the pilgrims. As he pointed out, they were not merely a source of information:

“[...] he was very happy to be able to spend a few hours each day in my garden, to talk to me about his country and to gather information from me about the rest of the world, about the great discoveries of modern science, and even about the teachings of Islam, information that he would have found difficult to obtain elsewhere.”¹⁰¹

As a rich and influential man, Ibrahim agreed to share information about West Africa. In return, he was able to gather information that he needed for his own purposes, and probably for African rulers who often followed European politics and developments with interest.¹⁰² Ibrahim was not only D'Escayrac's informant; the traveller was a representative of modern science and could answer important scientific questions.¹⁰³ The valuable information that he provided to Ibrahim was probably appropriated by the latter according to his own knowledge order. These reciprocal effects of communication confirm that “the concept of connection implies something more than just physical contact; it includes more influence of thoughts.”¹⁰⁴

The pilgrims' resistance manifested itself in the use of lies, manipulation, and distortion of information, especially with regard to Trans-Saharan routes.¹⁰⁵ The French explorer described the pilgrims as “liars” or “less reliable” for the production of geographical knowledge, despite their awareness of geographical realities:¹⁰⁶ “Some of them try to deceive us, but their lack of intelligence does not allow them to succeed.”¹⁰⁷ The German traveller Ulrich Jasper Seetzen, who had also interviewed West African pilgrims, notably Abdallah from Affadeh (Niger), reported that his informants exaggerated and distorted facts.¹⁰⁸ The pilgrims' resistance left the trav-

99 Slight, *The British Empire*, 2015, 41; Chantre, *Pèlerinages*, 2018, 61.

100 H.T. Norris, *The Pilgrimage of Ahmad, Son of the Little Bird of Paradise*, Warminster 1977, 86.

101 D'Escayrac, *Mémoire*, 1855–1856, 13.

102 Klute, *The coming*, (1996), 53.

103 Raj, *Go-betweenes*, 2016, 49.

104 Dag Herbjørnsrud, *Beyond decolonizing. Global intellectual history and reconstruction of a comparative method*, in: *Global Intellectual History* 6/5 (2021), 614–640, 628.

105 D'Escayrac, *Mémoire*, 1855–1856, 11.

106 Raj, *Go-betweenes*, 2016, 45; El-Nagar, *West Africa*, 1969, 281.

107 D'Escayrac, *Mémoire*, 1855–1856, 8.

108 Ulrich de Seetzen, *Nouvelles recherches*, (1812), 175.

ellers with no other option but to adopt strategies to detect lies or manipulation. In light of France's intention to gain a foothold in the West African market, the attempt of pilgrims to keep Trans-Saharan routes from French actors can be seen as a means of controlling the information given to the traveller. This strategy echoes the diplomatic measures taken by West African rulers to keep foreign powers out in order to prevent foreign domination.¹⁰⁹

Conclusion

This paper has investigated the cross-cultural interaction between a French traveller and West African pilgrims in the context of nineteenth-century European knowledge production, analysing the complex rhetoric of a travel report. By also considering the African side, I have argued that this knowledge was co-created by the pilgrims and the French traveller. A circular understanding of knowledge production stresses the asymmetrical power relations that underlie this co-production. Rulers, merchants, and scholars/students were the most privileged groups of local informants among the pilgrims owing to their mobility, their knowledge of Arabic, and their participation in multiple networks, which made them "go-betweens" between African and European cultures. Access to them required some skills on the part of the traveller, such as the ability to speak Arabic and to network. In some ways, his position was not so different from that of the pilgrims. The traveller's dual interdependent relationship with both the Geographical Society in Paris and the pilgrims in the process of collecting and verifying knowledge placed him in a position of power and negotiation, revealing his function as a go-between. It is the complexity of this function that characterises this cross-cultural interaction. During the process of interaction in Cairo, the pilgrims retained a relative agency through their ability to ask questions, answer, or lie, whereas in Paris, the relationship between the pilgrims and the traveller was destabilised at the expense of their agency. Here, the reconstitution of the acquired knowledge represented a power relationship in which the pilgrims' contribution was only partially recognised.

¹⁰⁹ Klute, *The coming*, (1996), 61.