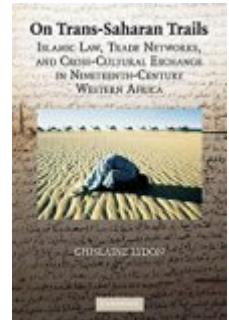


**Ghislaine Lydon.** *On Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks, and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Nineteenth-Century Western Africa.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xxviii + 468 pp. \$95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-88724-3.



**Reviewed by** Amanda Rogers

**Published on** H-AfrArts (July, 2010)

**Commissioned by** Jean M. Borgatti (Clark Univeristy)

Ghislaine Lydon's *On Trans-Saharan Trails* not only fills a gap in knowledge of premodern Saharan economic history, but also bridges the cultural and historical terrains of the region in a manner relevant to a variety of disciplines. Chapter 1 introduces the central argument, presents the methodological premises, and deconstructs predominant myths plaguing the study of Saharan history. Lydon posits that Arabic literacy and Muslim religious institutional frameworks enabled the success of trans-Saharan trade despite the lack of shared currency and unified state systems, allowing for the cultivation of trust-based relationships between Muslims and Jews in a "paper economy of faith" that facilitated commercial transfers across wide distances (p. 3). The text focuses on nineteenth-century Wad Nun, a regional network of traders whose caravans circulated throughout the areas of northern and western Africa, today encompassing Mauritania, Senegal, Mali, and Morocco.

The author creates a historical portrait of the region in chapter 2 that challenges long-standing

myths of the Sahara as a barrier between North and South. Here the author documents the impact of climate patterns on trans-Saharan trade and human geographies. The once densely populated and fertile Sahara allowed for multidirectional migration prior to progressive desertification--a process that created salt deposits later responsible for fueling long-distance trade. She also overturns the idea that Arabic sources are foreign to the continent, drawing attention to centuries-old institutions of Islamic learning scattered throughout western Africa. She further deconstructs stereotypical historiographies that artificially divide the region on the basis of race and religion, demonstrating that the Sahara served as a contact zone in which long-standing historical exchange stimulated the dissemination of culture at a rate unrecognized by most scholars.

Among the watershed moments of Saharan history were the introduction of the camel after the first century AD and the eighth-century arrival of Islam. The camel enabled the movement of goods more quickly and reliably than ever be-

fore. The religion spread the Arabic script and legal codes that would transform regional economies, settlement patterns, and culture. The formality of legal codes became particularly important in the tenth century as trade became increasingly complex. The eleventh-century Almoravid jihad spread Maliki doctrine (the most accommodating and flexible legal code) across western Africa, further facilitating commercial exchange.

Trans-Saharan commercial interaction in the eleventh through fifteenth centuries succeeded as a complex, international system of networks. Groups settled in such key market centers as Jenne and Timbuktu, passing down knowledge of caravan routes to successive generations. The desire for metal and leather, coupled with the spread of Maliki law and literacy, fueled the trade as routes gradually shifted eastward beginning in the eleventh century, leading to the establishment of permanent settlements—a trend that continued as long-distance commerce integrated the Saharan trade into a truly global economy by the nineteenth century.

The early nineteenth century witnessed an acceleration of trade along earlier Almoravid-era routes. Jihads, civil wars, and anticolonial struggles posed challenges to the trans-Saharan movement of information, yet facilitated commerce. The decline of Atlantic slave trading coincided with the importation of such new commodities as gunpowder, arms, cotton cloth, refined sugar, and green tea, even as trans-Saharan markets still demanded human cargo. Muslim jihad leaders financed their activities through caravan raids, ensuring the success of wartime economies. Civil unrest, such as Shaykh ‘Umar’s jihad, revealed the fraught relationship between Islamic legality’s idealism and the necessity of trading with “enemies” (i.e., non-Muslims). Traders and clerics justified compromises on the grounds of necessity, revealing the flexibility of Islamic legal structures.

Chapter 4 focuses on the market town of Guelmim and the Wad Nun regional trade network, located beyond the jurisdiction of the Moroccan empire, at the crossroads of North and West Africa. Caravan trade formed the basis of the local economy, both supported by and sustaining agricultural and irrigation systems. The Wad Nun region was famed not only for its location but also for its powerful local leader Shaykh Bayruk (followed by his son). Bayruk’s commercial acumen extended to dispatching envoys to African markets as well as European centers.

The market town grew exponentially under Bayruk’s protection. The demographic fabric of Guelmim was mixed, consisting of the Tikna, their sub-Saharan slaves, and political allies (Berber Jews and other Saharan partners). The Tikna defy ethnic labels; neither Berber nor Arab is an appropriate designation. Occupational diversity characterized Tikna society, although they were known above all as traders. To Lydon, the Tikna are best described not as a tribe but as a nation, with a shared territory, culture, and political system, that formed powerful diaspora communities throughout the continent.

Chapter 5 reconstructs the logistics of camel caravanning. Lydon unravels the complex mechanisms necessary to commercial success, focusing in particular on kinship connections, the importance of women’s labor, institutional trust, paper economies, market systems, and strategies negotiating the political climate. Large, trans-Saharan caravans consisted of multiple groups travelling as a fleet on an annual basis, splitting apart upon reaching the destination. Smaller caravans operated interregionally, trading subsistence goods. Extensive management of resources and preparation went into every caravan, and occupational stratification provided for a wage-based economy; shareholders (entire cities or family conglomerates) financed the journeys and members played multiple roles, from cleric/doctor and leader/sheriff to translator. Although the physical act of cara-

vanning was undertaken by men, women's work proved integral to commercial success. Wives managed the household and business affairs during their husbands' long journeys. Women owned and sold property, knew their divorce rights (often using Islamic marital contracts to circumscribe polygamy), manufactured a majority of the necessary equipment, and sometimes financed the expeditions.

A paper economy underpinned the structure of caravan trade. Lydon describes the rise of literacy as a technological innovation allowing for legal transparency; debt enforcement and information flows through such written genres as letters, ledgers, and shopping lists. The influence of Islam on increasing trade is indisputable; the use of Arabic and Islamic law provided institutional mechanisms for recording and furthering trade across vast territories. Although a lack of common currency was problematic (as values and prices fluctuated), traders developed innovative strategies for negotiating fluid economic conditions. Among the most important forms of currency, Lydon records salt bars, gold and silver weights, cotton currency, cowry shells, minted currency, and paper money. Informal market rules included clan alliances, taxing, and tolls that attempted to control trade. Lydon closes with an apt comparison between premodern Saharan caravans and Indian ocean maritime trade, noting parallels in financial risk, trust-based economies, cultural interchange, the integral roles of the family, and female participation.

The economics of trust form the basis of chapter 6. Lydon argues that Islam was particularly important in ensuring social stability where political authority was not centralized. Islamic law regulated transactions where no other cohesive civil law code existed. Its principal limitation in terms of institutional development, according to the author, was the requirement of oral testimony accompanying a written document in order for it to be recognized as legitimate evidence. She also

maintains that understanding trans-Saharan commerce is contingent on knowledge of *regional* Islamic practice and so draws from legal records to determine what constituted normative practice, mandated by Maliki law and local custom. The bulk of the chapter concerns itself with the relevance of religion to trading organization, the roles of legal service providers, legal recordings of business transactions, and contracts between financiers and their agents.

In chapter 7, Lydon paints a picture of nineteenth-century trading strategies of cost-reducing caravans operating in coalitions, facilitated in large part by transparent business transactions--themselves enabled by literacy and the paper economy of faith. She examines the limitations of trust using a legal dispute involving the death of Baghlil, a prominent Tikna trader, to illustrate the manner in which traders networked with their allies (in this case the Tikna with Awlad Bu al-Siba and Jews). According to the literature on trading networks, success was predicated on partners' sharing the same values and free-flowing information. Lydon's exploration of membership in the Maghribi networks indicates that regional identity was a factor along with kinship, religion, and ethnicity. Contractual documents between spouses and family members demonstrate that kinship was not sufficient to secure trust between trading partners. Religion, she argues, provided a much stronger foundation for solid business transactions since both Jews and Muslims used Maliki religious law to structure their commercial interactions.

The Wad Nun inheritance dispute vividly demonstrates what occurred when the system of collaborative long-distance trading broke down. The case itself concerns the deaths of four prominent Tikna traders, and the conflict over a weighty inheritance in gold. The high profile of the trader allowed for a uniquely comprehensive documentation of the situation; its text is, in fact, a compilation of several legal documents detailing

credit transactions, currency fluctuation, and the risks involved with trading--in a single folio that contains four perspectives on a single case.

The final chapter reprises the contributions of the text and gives recommendations for future research. The study demonstrates the manner in which trade succeeded across long distances despite the lack of common currency and nation-state unity. European encroachment increased during the nineteenth century, and paper currency, new routes, and changing technology altered the face of centuries-old caravanning patterns. Lyon argues against the essentialist treatment of trade networks as static and detached from host societies, documenting the exchange of artistic goods, technologies, clothing, architecture, food, music, language, and populations in both directions across the Sahara. In terms of future research, she indicates that there are still critical discoveries to be made in sources on Maghribi Jews that “remain to be mined” (p. 385). The tension between Jewish-Muslim cooperation and anti-Jewish pogroms and expulsions is not resolved in this volume, despite the argument that Jews and Muslims cooperated in a situation of mutual trust because of the legal structures of their respective religions and because of a shared culture as “People of the Book” (p. 392). The independence of Saharan women in relation to their Muslim sisters is another topic worthy of exploration, as her example of Masna women who not only accompanied trader husbands on occasion but also conducted short-term journeys alone suggests.

However, Lydon's work extends far beyond the historical reconstruction of trading patterns. Indeed, her research methodology may be one of the book's most significant contributions. Following Jan Vansina (*Oral Tradition as History* [1985]), she argues for the equal importance of various sources, aiming to resolve the disciplinary tension between the anthropologist's emphasis on orality and the historian's privileging of text. She uses

both types of sources effectively herself, conducting Hasaniya, French, Arabic, Wolof, Songhay, and Fulfulde interviews with retired caravanners, soliciting family histories and migration stories, to clarify text-based information on currency fluctuations and archaic terminology. She also makes an extensive review of written records—legal documents, pilgrim travelogues, tradesmen’s accounts, and personal letters from African sources; and from European ones, white slave narratives, abolitionist travelogues, and commercial records. The author’s methodological depth, reconstruction of Jewish history in Africa, comments on the Berber-Arab relationship, and deconstruction of the Sahara-as-barrier myth are particularly impressive aspects of this study. Additionally, Lydon’s lucid writing renders highly complex history enjoyable reading. The appendices, maps, and glossary are helpful and well organized—further revealing the depth of the author’s knowledge. The text is a significant contribution to the literature on North and West Africa and deserves to be widely read, not only by historians but also by anthropologists, students of religion, art historians, and others.

: *Islamic Law, Trade Networks and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Nineteenth-Century Western Africa*

impacting

not only<sup>160</sup>; but also

-

up

(reviewer's emphasis)&#160;

up

She

Lydon

,

1985:

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-afrarts>

**Citation:** Amanda Rogers. Review of Lydon, Ghislaine. *On Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks, and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Nineteenth-Century Western Africa*. H-AfrArts, H-Net Reviews. July, 2010.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=29643>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.