H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

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 Mohamed Hassan Mohamed (Department of History, University of Windsor)
Published on H-Levant (April, 2011)
Commissioned by Amy A. Kallander

The Golden Trade of the Moors Revisited

In their discourse on the network of trade linking the historic Maghrib and Bilad al-Sudan, Africanists tend to emphasize the "trans" in trans-Saharan trade. The Sahara often comes across as a barrier between what Hegel dubbed "European Africa" (north) and "Africa proper" (south). Anglophone scholars often "skip" the Sahara and posit the Maghrib mainly as a depot for the gold and slaves the caravans had picked up from its African beyond. Change and continuity are conceived in terms of decrease in the quantity of gold shipments and increase in the volume of slaves heading northward. To account for the disparity between the small number of Africans in the Maghrib and the projected increase in the volume of slave shipments, Africanists invoke miscegenation to turn "mixed" communities into signs of descent from African slaves. The situation is complicated by the standard complaint about the lack (or dearth) of local sources, often an alibi for the elevation of accounts by modern European travellers and consuls to authorities on what caravan traders were up to. Against this backdrop, Ghislaine Lydon's *On Trans-Saharan Trails* is a welcome addition to Anglophone literature on northwest Africa.

On Trans-Saharan Trails is composed of seven chapters and a conclusion (chapter 8) which aspire to provide a history of the caravan trade in the longue durée. In the first two chapters, Lydon takes us back to the aborted "all Africa perspective" adumbrated by the (UNESCO) *General History of Africa* (1981-93). She presents the Sahara as "a dynamic space with a deep history" and hence, blames the area studies paradigm for its current "misperception" as an inhibitor of cross-cultural exchange (p. 4). This assertion is the beacon for a survey of the history of the pre-nineteenth-century caravan trade and the introduction of the concepts and sources that illustrate the pitfalls of conventional wisdom. Besides a wide range of French, English, and Arabic publications, Lydon draws on an impressive array of "original oral and written sources collected during several years of field work" (p. 4).

Chapters 3-5 revolve around what can be conceived as the mechanics and modes of the expansion of long-distance trade in the nineteenth century. Lydon tends to predicate this expansion on the combination of literacy and a steady supply of paper. Thanks to both, local sources enabled the author to capture changes in tradable goods and facilitated her recovery of the portable identities of the traders who crisscrossed the Sahara as well as their hitherto understudied "sidekicks" –i.e., Jews, "caravan workers," women, etc. Lydon imputed a distant origin for the vintage Wad Nun traders and the family that came to epitomize their entrepreneurialism–the Tikna and the Bayruk respectively. According to Lydon, the Tikna are "distant relatives of the Almoravids" with a dash of "Arab" and "victims of the trans-Saharan slave trade" (p. 172). This section is capped with a chapter (5) on the organization of the caravan trade with special attention to mediums of exchange and the facilities of the journey itself.

In contrast, the last three chapters deal with the culture behind the caravan trade network. They enshrine what appears as the crux of Lydon's theory of a casual link between access to literacy and "faith-based institutions," and the organization of trade (p. 3). In chapter 6, she outlines the "cultural and religious determinants" of what she calls "the paper economy of faith" (pp. 274, 342). In the absence of centralized states, traders utilized a variety of strategies to minimize the risks of trading in cross-cultural settings including partnership and a wide range of paper contracts. The efficacy of such arrangements, however, was contingent on the omnipresence of judges, clerics, and muftis who served as guardians of Muslim ethics of trade. According to Lydon, "documents

such as contracts were not considered official legal instruments in Islamic law" (p. 293). As a result, the system was not conducive to the kind of institutional developments that could have "modernized" the caravan trade, though it would be interesting to test this hypothesis. In chapter 7 Lydon explains the formation and transformation of the network of exchange linking Wad Nun to the Sahara and West Africa as one that relied heavily on trust. To simulate the centrality of trust to long-distance trade, Lydon adapts the ethnographic use of distance from, or proximity to, the seat of the Moroccan government (the *Makhzan*) to locate autonomous (Berber) tribes in space. In the absence of institutions, we are told, the Wad Nun traders relied on "concentric circles of trust and trustworthiness" (p. 392). In spite of the efficiency of such contraptions, however, there were limits to cooperative behavior. Ultimately, the lack of legal structures entailed serious risks, especially in cases of dispute or death.

Overall, *On Trans-Saharan Trade* is a significant contribution to Anglophone scholarship on the caravan trade, by virtue of both the answers it expounds and the questions it raises. The range of evidence informing the author's main arguments–the primary Arabic sources and the live interviews in particular–is impressive. The diligent search for, and recovery of, "African sources" goes a long way towards rectifying the current entrapment in the caravan of abolitionism. The profiles of the Wad Nun traders and the glimpses of their subculture add tangible faces to a trade network mired in elusive neologisms–e.g., "Muslim/Arab traffickers," "dissident tribes," "African slaves," etc.

The text, however, also reinforces some of the "misperceptions" Lydon has adeptly summarized in the first chapter. First, Lydon's conception of the origin and make-up of the Tikna harks back to the same ethnographic tradition underpinning "the African divide" she sought to bridge. Despite the healthy disclaimers, she predicates Tikna origin on infinite nativity to Wad Nun, descent from Gazulas of antiquity, and "connections" to ancient Almoravids. Lydon's quest for "Berber ethnicity" precipitated the classification of the Tikna as "Tashilhit speakers" (p. 172). This ethnic simplification mystifies the Tikna invocation of the two Arabic (Hasaniya) proverbs cited at the beginning of the same chapter (4). Lydon does not dwell on the split between the ethnographic paradigm and either the demographic history of the space the Tikna call home or their own "legends." The reader is left with lingering questions pertaining to the making of a Tikna "nation" and the role of literacy in the production of their oral traditions. The same academic proclivity also oozes from the deft invocation of miscegenation to explain somatic differences among Saharans. The reader is led to believe that the Tikna were, once, "indigenous Berbers" but then became "mixed" because of their consumption of black slaves. This disposition feeds off the conflation of negritude with servitude born in the bosom of abolitionism and subsequently codified by colonial ethnography and the postcolonial academy. To date, Anglophone Africanists routinely posit *African* as a signifier of alterity to North Africa. Lydon honors this tradition–it lurks beneath the translation of *hartani* as "freed slave" (pp. xix, 229).

The second example of entrapment in textuality is the split between statements regarding the trans-Saharan slave trade. Lydon's conclusions reflect undue deference to scholars who cannot boast of her extensive research of local experiences and as a result tend to recycle the very "western sources" she censures as "tainted with distortions, misinformation, and prejudice" (p. 122). Fittingly, caravan traders were routinely "orientalised" and projections of their slave intake continue to languish in what she describes as "speculation" (p. 128). Speculation also bred the erstwhile oscillation between the assertion that slave exports "grew significantly" in the nineteenth century and bewilderment over their "disappearance" in the twentieth century. This is also the riddle that spawned the use of miscegenation to circumvent the pertinent question A. G. Hopkins posed back in 1973: "What happened to such large Negro communities?" he wondered, "for they appear virtually to have disappeared from north Africa and the Middle East today" (p. 82). That Lydon should return to this textual convention is particularly puzzling partly because of her simultaneous declaration that "the distortions about the trans-Saharan trade … do not significantly alter the overall facts" (p. 123)–i.e., the idea about the growth of the slave trade in the nineteenth century. The reader is left wondering about the identity of the sources behind these conclusions. After all, the crop of her own field work does not warrant such an assessment–indeed, it did not even lend itself to "quantitative analysis" (p. 129). The valiant attempt to vindicate current Anglophone projections may also explain the rather coercive reading of local sources–e.g., *muluk ala rijala* (kings of its men) became "owns men." Unfortunately, combined with the excessive subtitles, these limitations mar an otherwise promising project .

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Mohamed Hassan Mohamed. Review of Lydon, Ghislaine, *On Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks, and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Nineteenth-Century Western Africa.* H-Levant, H-Net Reviews. April, 2011.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=32726

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