

On Trans-Saharan Trails

ISLAMIC LAW, TRADE NETWORKS,
AND CROSS-CULTURAL EXCHANGE
IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY
WESTERN AFRICA



GHISLAINE LYDON

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ON TRANS-SAHARAN TRAILS

This study is the first of its kind to examine the history and organization of trans-Saharan trade in western Africa using original source material. It documents the internal dynamics of a trade network system based on a case study of “Berber” traders from the Wād Nūn region, who specialized in outfitting camel caravans in the nineteenth century. Through an examination of contracts, correspondence, fatwas, and interviews with retired caravaners, Professor Lydon shows how traders used their literacy skills in Arabic and how they had recourse to experts of Islamic law to regulate their long-distance transactions. The book also examines the strategies devised by women to participate in caravan trade. By embracing a continental approach, this study bridges the divide between West African and North African studies. The work will be of interest to historians of Africa, the Middle East, and the world and to scholars of long-distance trade, Muslim societies, and Islamic law.

Dr. Ghislaine Lydon is an Associate Professor in the Department of History at UCLA. The author of several articles on West Africa, she has done extensive fieldwork in both West and North Africa and archival work in France.

To the People of the Sahara

On Trans-Saharan Trails

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

GHISLAINE LYDON

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Acknowledgments

While sitting on the sandy floor of an empty house where once resided the former Muslim judge of the oasis town of Shinqīti (Mauritania), a fragment of paper resembling the torn-off corner of a document kept drawing my attention. I was consulting the private papers of the Arwili family of the Tikna clan that were deposited there sometime in the early twentieth century during the judge's lifetime. It was common practice for families with no living relatives to place their civil and commercial records in the hands of judges for the settling of posthumous legal affairs. In the middle of my third day of research, I finally reached for the piece of paper absent-mindedly and was shocked to realize that it was in fact the edge of a document buried in the sand. Once I retrieved and unfolded the folio, which was covered on both sides in small, tight Maghribi script, I was staring at the largest parchment I had ever seen. As I began to read the document, I experienced the most astonishing moment in my career as an historian. Addressed to "the community of the protected people of Guelmīm" (in the Wād Nūn region of what is today southern Morocco), the legal report contained the names of the forefathers of several Tikna families who had shared with me their genealogies. I immediately was overcome with an awesome feeling that these ancestors had guided me toward this hidden treasure, the contents of which, after several years of analysis, would unlock the mysteries of trans-Saharan trade network systems.

This book is the fruit of a dozen years of research and study. The easy part was engaging in fieldwork; the challenge was making sense of the written and oral source material that it generated. None of this would have been achieved without the assistance of friends, informants, and colleagues. Friends provided guidance and perspective, informants shared their family histories and archival treasures, and colleagues

imparted their critical judgment and sound advice. This research was funded by the Fulbright-Hays Program, the Social Science Research Council, and the Council for American Overseas Research Centers as well as support provided by Michigan State University and the University of California, Los Angeles.

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Note on Language

ARABIC transliterations

Overall, I tend to follow the standard transliteration of Hans Wehr's *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, 4th ed. (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1994), with these notable exceptions:

ذ : dh

ث : th

خ : kh

ش : sh

غ : gh

و : w and ū as in Mawlūd

SAHARAN SPECIFICS AND DATES

Because Saharan names are genealogical in structure they tend to be rather long. Daughters and sons are given their father's name. A daughter's first name is separated from her father's name by the word "daughter [of]" written *mint* in the Sahara, instead of *bint* (literally, "daughter" in Arabic), which is more common in Arabic-speaking countries. Sons' names are followed by *wuld*, meaning "son [of]." In classical Arabic, and in most places in the Arabic-speaking world, the "son of" is usually "ibn," often abbreviated to a simple "b." Throughout this book I use both forms when writing the names of women and men, depending on the source of reference. The Islamic (*Hijri*) calendar was current in the region and

period considered in this book. As much as possible, I have attempted to supply exact dates in both the Hijri and Gregorian calendars, placing the former first.

TRANSLATIONS AND FOREIGN WORDS

Translations from interviews and texts are mine, except where indicated. Foreign words are usually in Ḥasānīya, or in Arabic, Znāga, Wolof, or Songhay where indicated. They appear in parentheses and/or italicized on first mention only, and in the singular form with an “s” added for the plural. Longer foreign expressions (such as *Bilād al-Sūdān*) remain italicized throughout. Arabic words that have entered mainstream English, such as jihad and fatwa, are not italicized and are spelled as such without diacritics. Most names of regions and towns are transliterated, except for some commonly known ones (e.g., Timbuktu).

Abbreviations

AEH	<i>African Economic History</i>
AFLSH	<i>Annales de la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines</i> (Université de Nouakchott)
AMAE	<i>Archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères (Paris, France)</i>
ASR	<i>African Studies Review</i>
BCAFRC	<i>Bulletin du Comité de l'Afrique Française, Renseignements Coloniaux</i>
BIFAN	<i>Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Afrique Noire, Série B</i>
BSG	<i>Bulletin de la Société de Géographie</i>
BSGAM	<i>Bulletin de la Société de Géographie d'Aix-Marseille</i>
BSOAS	<i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i>
CEA	<i>Cahiers d'Études Africaines</i>
CEDRAB	<i>Centre de Documentation et de Recherches Ahmed Baba</i>
CJAS	<i>Canadian Journal of African Studies</i>
El3	<i>Encyclopedia of Islam</i> . Leiden: Brill, 2003 [1968]. CD-ROM.
HT	<i>Hesperis-Tamuda</i> (formerly <i>Hesperis: Archives Berbères et Bulletin de l'Institut des Hautes-Études Marocaines</i>)
IJAHS	<i>International Journal of African Historical Studies</i>
JA	<i>Journal des Africanistes</i>
JAH	<i>Journal of African History</i>
JAS	<i>Journal of African Studies</i>
JEH	<i>Journal of Economic History</i>
JESHO	<i>Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient</i>
JNAS	<i>Journal of North African Studies</i>

<i>JRAS</i>	<i>Journal of the Royal African Society</i>
<i>Maṣādir</i>	<i>Maṣādir: Cahiers de Sources de l'Histoire de la Mauritanie</i>
<i>RFHOM</i>	<i>Revue Française d'Histoire d'Outre-Mer</i>
<i>RMMM</i>	<i>Revue du Monde Musulman et de la Méditerranée</i>
<i>SGPRVM</i>	<i>Société de Géographie de Paris, Recueil de Voyages et Mémoires</i>
<i>SI</i>	<i>Studia Islamica</i>

Glossary

‘adīla (‘*adā’il*): In the western Sahara, slabs or bars of rock salt (often functioning as currency). In Timbuktu and Libyan markets, half a camel-load.

‘Agbrayjīt: Town east of Tīshīt founded in 1267/1850–1 by the Awlād Billa.

aīt: “Berber” for clan, family, people of, as in Aīt Mūsā Wa ‘Aly (prominent Tikna lineage).

‘ajamī (from the Arabic term *‘ajam* lit. non-Arab): Term used to describe the transliteration in the Arabic script of non-Arabic languages (such as Fulfulde, Hausa, Swahili, Wolof).

akābār (*akwābīr*): Trans-Saharan caravan or international caravan, linking northern and western Africa, often organized by members of the Wād Nūn network (Tikna and Awlād Bū al-Sibā‘).

akḥal (from the Arabic for blackest): Term used to designate a dark, black cotton cloth imported from South Asia by way of European merchants on the Atlantic coast.

Al-Ṣawīra: Port city on the Atlantic coast, known as Essaouira or Mogador, rebuilt by the Moroccan Sultan in 1127/1764.

amersāl: Salty earth crust sold in leather bags to herders as animal feed. Most important amersāl deposits are in and around Tīshīt.

amuggār: Fairs in northwestern Sahara commemorating saints. Typically lasting for a week, these commercial fairs marked the end of the caravan season.

‘aqādīm: Caravan agent or chief worker in charge of outfitting caravans and commandeering a crew of typically enslaved caravan workers.

‘arab: Warrior nomads of the Sahara. Also referred to as *ḥasānī*.

Azawād: Region of present-day northern Mali that includes Timbuktu, Gao, Arawān, and Tawdenni.

bayṣa: Unit of cotton that came to be a common currency in western Africa from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century. Referred to in French as (*pièce de*) *guinée*.

Bīḍānī (*Bīḍān*): Inhabitants of the Sahara of mixed Arab, “Berber,” and African origins, united by the common use of Hasaniya, the Arabic colloquial language of the Sahara spoken in southern Morocco, western Sahara, western Algeria, northern Mali, Mauritania, and Senegal.

Bilād Shinqīt: The country of Shinqīṭi (spelled Chinguetti in French documents). This is the name historically given to the region of Ādrār and its vicinity. The reputation of the scholars of Bilād Shinqīt was well established in the Muslim world.

dhabīḥa: Ritual slaughtering (usually of a camel) performed by one group for another as a gesture of submission, alliance, or/and to seek protection.

dhimmi: In Islamic legal traditions, this is a non-Muslim of either Jewish or Christian faith, living in Muslim lands and protected by local authorities. These communities were subjected to a special tax (*jizya*) and other restrictions on mobility and behavior.

faqīh (*fuqāhā*): Scholars of Islamic jurisprudence, or *fiqh*.

fatwā (*fatāwā*): Legal opinion issued by a *muftī* versed in Islamic jurisprudence.

filatūr: Type of cloth (*petite filature*) imported by the French that was of higher quality because of a finer weave.

getna: Date festival during the late summer in the regions of Ādrār and Tagānit.

ghāfar (meaning “pardon”): Type of customs duty or tax imposed by local emirs on caravaners who crossed their territories. International traders such as the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ and Tikna paid a special, heavier, duty called the *ghāfar al-shidd*, or pardon for camel-loads.

girba: Goatskin water container.

ḥartāni (*ḥarātīn*): Freed slave generally assimilated to Biḍān culture.

ḥasānī: See ‘Arab.

Ḥasānīya: Lingua franca of the western Sahara, a mixture of Arabic, “Berber,” and other African languages. Spelled Hasaniya throughout this book.

Hawd: Region in southeastern Mauritania.

Imazighen (sing. *Amazigh*): The peoples of North and West Africa typically labeled as “Berbers,” including speakers of Tashilhīt (e.g., Tikna), Tamashek (e.g., Ṭuāreg), and Tamazigh (e.g., Kabyles).

iqāla: Revocation of a sale with the consent of both parties (Islamic law).

jaajgi: Landlord/broker in Soninké; the equivalent of the *mai gida* in Hausa.

khunt: Word of uncertain origin, used generically for cloth. It came to designate industrial cotton cloth made in South Asia and Europe.

kunnāsh (*kanānīsh*): Account book; also a collection of trade records bound in a leather folder or a register.

leff: Political/tribal division of complementary opposites typical of “Berber” groups (e.g., the Tikna clan is divided into two leffs: the Aīt al-Jmal and the Aīt Billa).

Maghrib al-aqṣā (Arabic, lit. the farthest Maghrib): Expression used in former times to designate the northern edges of the western Sahara, a region located to the south of Morocco.

maḥalla: The nomadic emirate or state of Saharan rulers usually composed of mounted armed horsemen and camels carrying members of the ruling group (women, children, retinue), tents, supplies, and equipment. The maḥalla traveled from one end of the territory to the other holding court and collecting tribute along the way.

mallāḥ: Jewish quarter.

marṣa: Market along the Atlantic Coast or the Senegal River where caravans met European traders.

mudārāt: Tribute exacted by *ḥasānī* from *ẓwāyā*. The *mudārāt al-qawāfil* were the tolls exacted by nomads and emirates on caravans crossing their territory.

mudd (*amdād* or *mdūda*): Measure for dry goods (especially cereal) with sizes varying by region.

muftī (*muftiyu*): Legal scholar qualified to issue fatwas and *nawāzil*.

Naṣrānī (*Naṣāra*): Christian European, especially French (to Saharans, I am a *Naṣrāniya*). This epithet stems from the word Nasareth.

nawāzil: Short legal replies written by jurists in response to the concerns of the general public (known as *ajwība* in other parts of the Muslim world).

Ndar: Town referred to by the French as Saint-Louis du Sénégal.

Nīma: Town in eastern Mauritania, south of Walāta.

nomadize: To live a nomadic lifestyle. This is my translation of the French verb *nomadiser* and the Arabic verb *raḥala*, which has no equivalent in English.

qāḍī (*quḍāʾ*): Judge of Islamic law.

qāfila (plur. *qawāfil*): Literally, “caravan” or “convoy” in Arabic.

qirād: Limited-liability partnership contract between an immobile merchant-investor and an itinerant trader.

rafga (*rafaʿig*): Interregional or “subsistence” caravans typically trading salt for millet. From the Arabic *rifqa*, meaning company of people.

raṭl (*arṭāl*): A measure for light or expensive goods such as ostrich feathers. The measure varied, but it was approximately 500 grams in nineteenth-century Sahara.

riḥla (plu. *riḥalāt*): Pilgrimage travelogue.

Sāqiya al-Ḥamrāʾ: Northwestern desert region in present-day western Sahara.

shigg (*shgūg*): Half a camel-load.

Shinqīti: Town in northern Mauritania (spelled Chinguetti in French documents).

Shurfa (*Shurafā'*; sing. *Sharīf*): Linked through genealogy to the family of the Prophet Muḥammad. Also used in the adjective “Sharifian.”

Ṭarīq al-Lamtūna (*Ṭarīq Lamtūnī*): Caravan itinerary from Nūl Lamṭa to Awdaghust, made historical by the Almoravids.

Tashilhīt: “Berber” language spoken by groups in the Maghrib, including the Tikna.

Tindūf: Caravan town in Algeria founded by the Tajakānit in 1268/1852; important caravan crossroads until the early twentieth century.

Tīshīt: Town in the middle of today’s Mauritania located next to an amersāl pan (see above). It became an important market in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

tishtār: Dried salted meat, staple of caravaners.

Ṭrāb-al-Bīḍān: The land of the Bīḍān, which encompasses the regions of southern Morocco, western Algeria, northern and parts of western Mali, Mauritania, and parts of northern Senegal (see Bīḍān).

‘*uqūd* (sing. ‘*aqd*): Contract.

uṣūl al-fiqh: Classic sources of Islamic law.

Wād Nūn: Tikna homeland on the northern edge of the western Sahara (now a part of southern Morocco).

Wādān: Town near Shinqīti and an important caravan center until the early nineteenth century.

Walāta: Town in eastern Mauritania, intellectual sister city of Timbuktu.

wangāla: Traditional rotating lunch association.

zakāt: Islamic tithe paid after Ramadan.

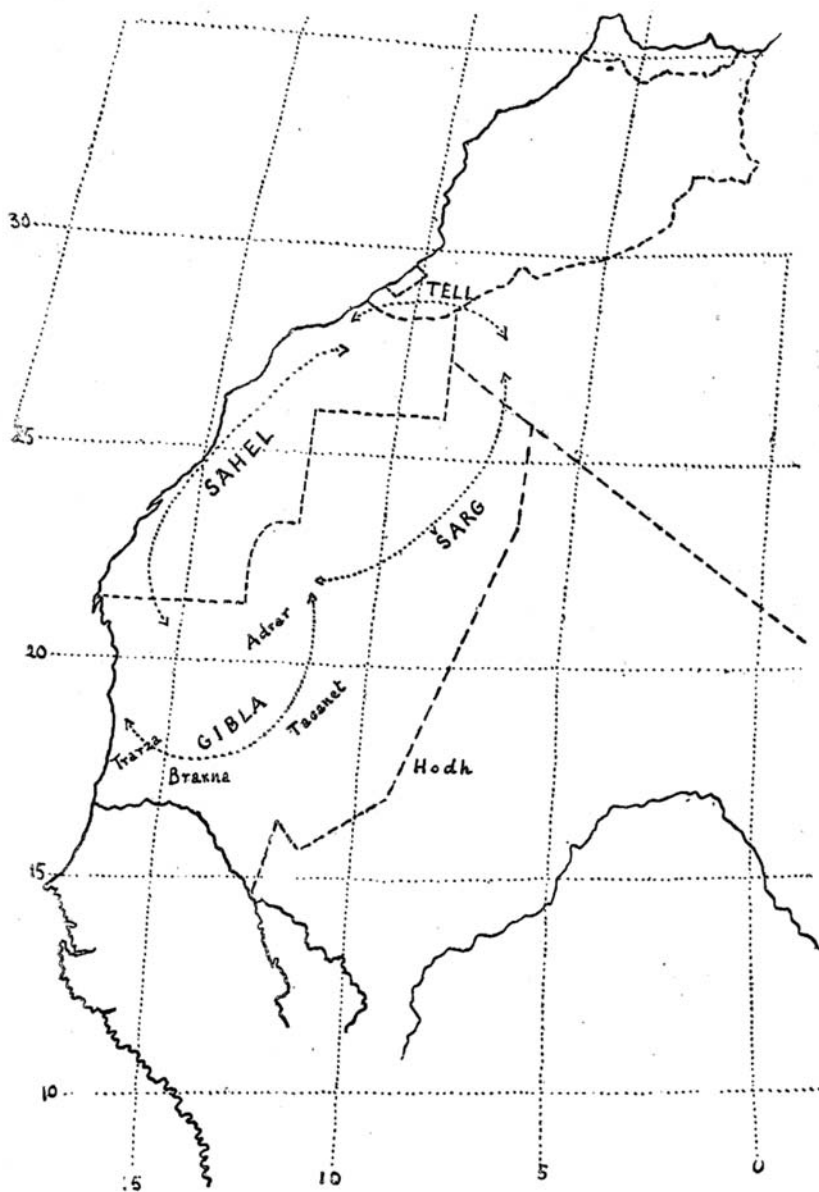
Znāga: Name of the “Berber” language prevalent in Mauritania before the spread of Hasaniya; also meaning tributary groups of the ‘arab or the *zwāyā* (sometimes also called *lahma*).

zwāyā: The clerical classes in the Sahara. They were the custodians of Islamic teaching and law.

Maps

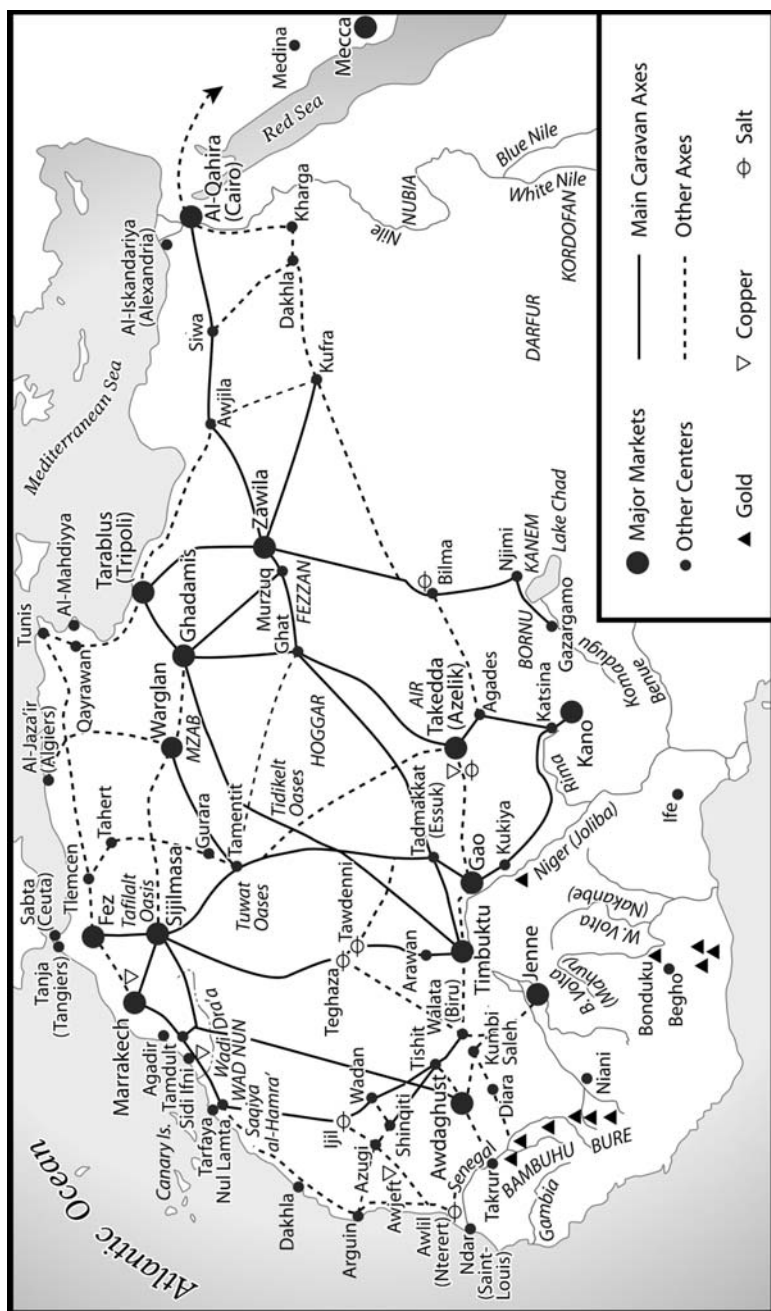


MAP 1. Western Africa.



MAP 2. Saharan orientation.

Source: Julio Caro Baroja, *Estudios saharianos* (Madrid, 1955), 66.

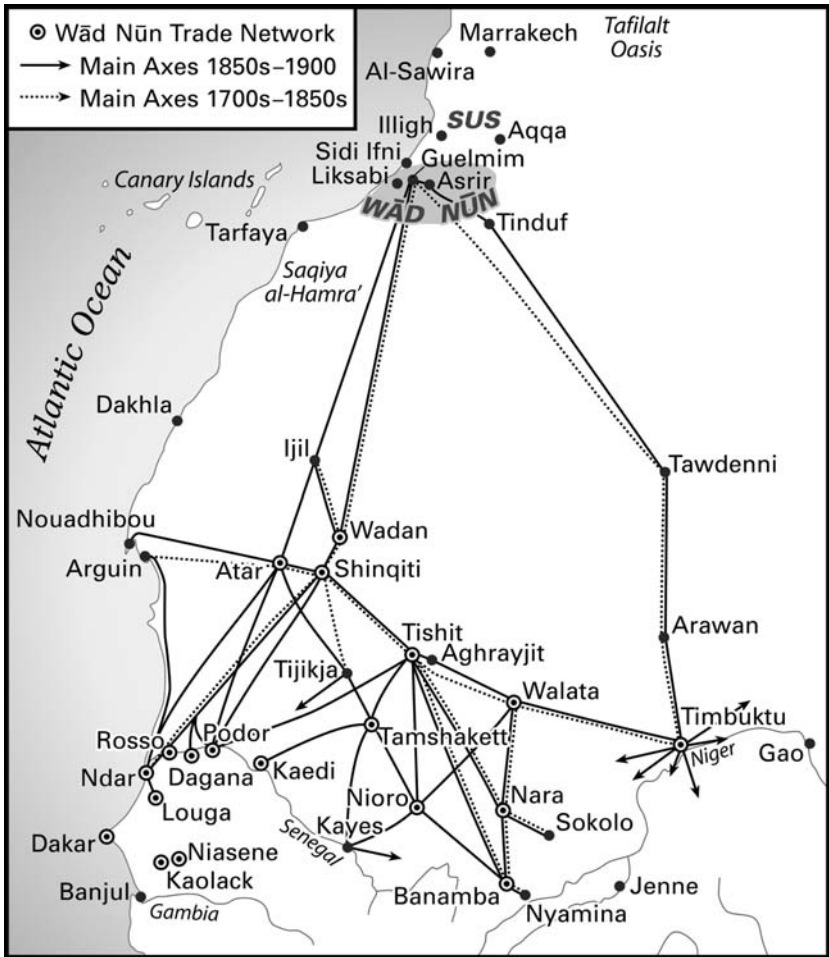


MAP 3. Trans-Saharan trade in the *longue durée* until the 1700s.

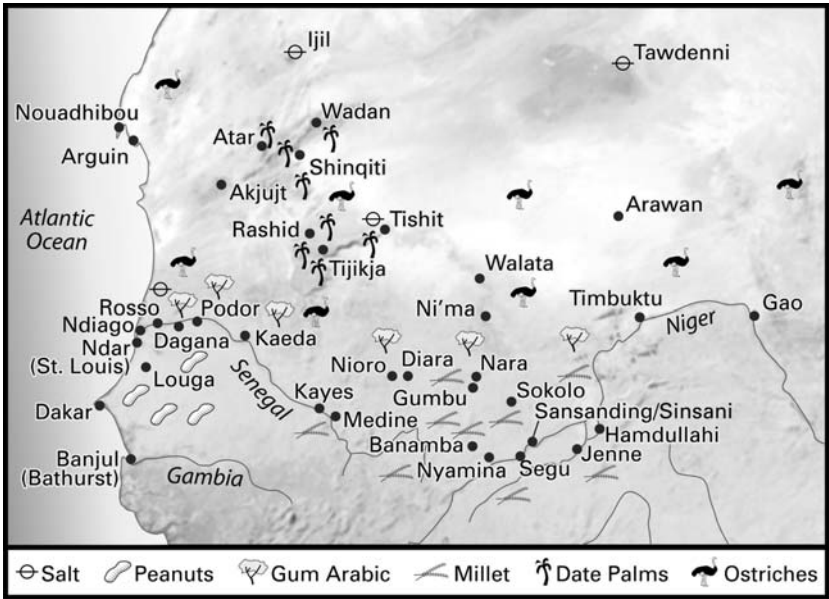
Source: Based on De Moraes Farias, *Arabic Medieval Inscriptions from the Republic of Mali* (Oxford, 2003), figure 2.



MAP 4. *The Catalan Atlas*, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, ESP30.



MAP 5. Main markets and caravan routes of the Wād Nūn trade network in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.



MAP 6. Principal resources of western Africa.

“Making History” Across the African Divide

The trans-Saharan trade wove ties of blood and culture between the peoples north and south of the desert.

E. W. Bovill¹

It was the middle of the caravan season when Baghlīl started out with his team of camels on a voyage from which he would never return. The year was 1265 *Hijri* in the Islamic calendar (1848–9), and by all accounts it was a time of intense warfare aggravated by an outbreak of smallpox that brought about great insecurity on trans-Saharan trails. Baghlīl was a Muslim caravaner of the “Berber”² Tikna clan, originally from the Wād Nūn region on the southern desert edge of present-day Morocco. He held residence in the then thriving oasis of Tīshīt, located in the heart of today’s Islamic Republic of Mauritania. There he collaborated with other Wād Nūn traders in outfitting camel caravans to transport goods among the markets of Mali, Senegal, and the northwestern shores of the Sahara. When news broke of Baghlīl’s passing, one of his partners was chosen to manage his estate and sort out the inheritance, while his Muslim and Jewish “creditors rose to claim their rights,” terminate their written contracts, and settle their accounts in various currencies.³ Soon another Wād Nūn trader residing in Tīshīt lost his life whilst trading in Senegal. In time, a string of misfortunes and deaths would precipitate a long-distance legal battle, fought with pen and paper by Muslim jurists mediating for the inheriting families of these traders on both sides of the Sahara Desert.

¹ Bovill, *Caravans of the Old Sahara*, preface.

² The term “Berber” is used throughout this book in quotations to convey that it is a problematic construct. These people refer to themselves collectively as Imazighen (sing. Amazigh), and speak various dialects of “Berber” (Amazigh), including Tashilhīt, spoken by the Tikna.

³ Wād Nūn Inheritance Case (1269/1853), Arwīlī family records deposited in the house of Shaykh Ḥammūny, former qāḍī of Shinqīti (Mauritania).

Long-distance trade across political, economic, and cultural frontiers has been a common profession the world over. Whether it involved sailing to faraway lands for exotic spices or organizing a camel caravan to trade salt for slaves, such an occupation required a careful combination of resources, skills, stamina, and luck. But what were the logistics of commercial operations across lands not ruled by a unified state or integrated by a common currency? Indeed, how could long-distance traders be successful cross-culturally when the basic conditions of political stability and regional security were lacking? In unpredictable situations like the ones faced by caravaners such as Baghlil, and given the complicated nature of trans-Saharan trade, what were the strategies devised by these commercial entrepreneurs to circumnavigate the dangerous pitfalls? And how did such strategies – if at all institutionalized – evolve over time in the face of political turmoil and economic change?

Institutions, or “the structure that human beings impose on human interaction,” determine economic performance, as asserted in the seminal work of Douglass North.⁴ In reflecting on the incentives of individuals to engage in cooperative behavior, North underscores how the presence of formal rules and informal constraints leads to more efficient economic outcomes. An efficient institutional framework is one that reduces the cost of transacting, including access to information and enforcement of contractual agreements. But as Avner Greif admits in his contribution to the field of institutional economic history, institutions are much more than a set of rules.⁵ He argues that while the institutions-as-rules framework allows for an understanding of the structures guiding the behavior of economic actors, it does not explain what motivates them to follow “prescriptive rules of behavior.”⁶ Greif proposes that institutions and institutional elements (rules, norms, and beliefs) become enacted in organizational systems, which in turn generate institutionalized behavior.

When examining how economic actors solved fundamental problems of exchange in early modern trade by establishing organizations such as trade networks and relying on institutions, it appears that Greif and others have taken several factors for granted. The first is the extent to which the acquirement of literacy by economic actors improved the

⁴ D. North, “A Revolution in Economics,” 37, and *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*.

⁵ Greif, “Cultural Beliefs,” “Fundamental Problem of Exchange,” and *Institutions*.

⁶ Greif, *Institutions*, 8, 14.

structures of institutions and associated behavioral norms. At the same time, literacy supported both information flows and internal or private enforcement of norms and agreements, such as contracts. The second factor is the role of religious institutions, in particular those created by Judaism and Islam, with their embedded legal frameworks. Surely these environments provided public institutions motivating compliance with what Greif terms the "regularity of behavior."⁷

This study suggests that access to literacy on the one hand and faith-based institutions on the other provided support, laws, and incentives that structured the organization of early modern trade. Through an analysis of institutional economics that takes into account cultural and religious determinants of individual and collective behavior, I argue that Muslim religious practice, which promoted the acquisition of literacy, provided structure and agency that shaped the activities of trans-Saharan traders. Concomitantly, the application of Islamic legal codes to business behavior enhanced commercial enterprise, as demonstrated in the case of nineteenth-century Muslim Africa. The practice of Islam structured both the organization of long-distance caravan trade and the operation of trade networks. Muslim merchants and traders used their Arabic literacy and access to writing paper to draw contractual agreements and dispatch commercial correspondence, while depending on their mutual trust in God. At the same time, they relied on an Islamic institutional framework defined by local scholars versed in legal doctrine and local customs.

Paper obviously was a key transaction cost for trans-Saharan traders, as it was for the Maghribi Jewish merchants studied by Greif and documented by S. D. Goitein's extensive analysis of the Cairo Geniza records.⁸ Indeed, without literacy and access to a stable paper supply it is hard to imagine the efficient operation of far-flung trade networks. For both Jews and Muslims, their literacy enhanced network externality, allowing for complex accounting, information flows, and accountability or legal transparency to solve the commitment problem and enforce earthly sanctions. In this sense, then, Muslim caravaners, like their Jewish counterparts who "took a similar attitude toward learning and the learned," depended on a "paper economy of faith," an expression I derive from combining the ideas of Goitein and Pierre Bourdieu.⁹

⁷ Ibid., 32–3.

⁸ S. D. Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*.

⁹ Goitein, *Letters*, 9–10, and *Mediterranean Society*, vol. 1, 240–50; Bourdieu, "Structures, Habitus, Power," 168–9.

This book addresses these broad questions by examining trans-Saharan trade in the nineteenth century. It explores the case of the Wād Nūn trade network, a commercial coalition operated by the Tikna and their allies, namely, Maghribi Jews and members of the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ. These long-distance traders specialized in camel caravanning throughout a large area encompassing what is today Mauritania and the bordering regions of northern Senegal, western Mali, and southern Morocco. The spatial breadth of this study was determined by shifts in the movement of caravans. Its temporal parameters were set by the migration patterns of families between trading posts as they related to both the pursuit of economic gain and interactions with local and colonial polities. This historical investigation is anchored in the life histories of families who, across several generations, engaged in long-distance trade in and across the western Saharan regions of Africa, connecting markets, peoples, and cultures. It relies on a combination of original oral and written sources collected during several years of fieldwork.

This chapter presents an overview of the history of the Saharan region of western Africa that forms the backdrop of this study. It provides an extensive discussion of my methods and sources, followed by a presentation of the layout of the book. I examine the place of the Sahara in world history while describing the ways in which this region has been misperceived by outsiders. In so doing, I reflect on how historians of Africa defined their craft within a tradition of writing that has tended to exclude the Sahara. The largest section of this chapter discusses a methodological approach reliant on a multitude of sources to interpret and write trans-Saharan history.

SAHARAN HISTORY AND ITS MISPERCEPTION

The history of the Sahara is marked by the ebbs and flows of peoples and caravans. In the same way that recent scholars have tackled the concept of liquid continents by historicizing the Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific Oceans, as Fernand Braudel did decades earlier for the Mediterranean, one must think of the Sahara as a dynamic space with a deep history.¹⁰ It was a contact zone where teams of camels transported ideas, cultural practices, peoples, and commodities. Yet the Sahara, representing one-third of the African continental landmass, has remained largely outside the radar of

¹⁰ F. Braudel, *La Méditerranée*; P. Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*; B. Klein and G. Mackenthun, *Sea Changes*.

traditional scholarship, especially in North America where research has been landlocked in the area-studies paradigm. Historically, the Sahara was perceived as a natural barrier dividing the continent. Indeed, this land has rarely attracted scholars of “Sub-Saharan” Africa who prefer to think of themselves as specialists of an Africa located “south of the Sahara.” Concurrently, historians of North Africa often ignore the peoples living on the desert edge or in the less populated south. Instead, they tend to focus on the historical relationship with Europe and the Middle East, or emphasize the northern caravan trade, all the while disregarding North Africa’s “African” roots. The Sahara, stretching from the Atlantic coast to the Red Sea, therefore remains unappreciated by many historians on either side of the African divide.

Despite perceptions to the contrary, the countries bordering the Sahara are united by a common history. When transcending the notion of a “Saharan frontier” and examining the itineraries of trans-Saharan families, it is easy to see that the history of the desert, just like that of the ocean, is marked by continuous exchanges. I treat West and North Africa as one region with the Sahara sealing the continent rather than dividing it. In this book “western Africa” includes what is typically referred to as West Africa in addition to the Sahara, stretching to its northwestern (southern Morocco, western Sahara, southern Algeria) and central (Niger, southern Libya, Chad) edges.

Saharans: Betwixt and Between

The notion of an Africa divided by the vast Sahara Desert was not a product of the post-World War II geo-politics that led to the area-studies paradigm. Rather, it has antecedents in a long-drawn history of “otherings” rooted in antiquity. Herodotus spoke of the northern desert edge as “the wild beast region,” while characterizing the area to the south as “the ridge of sand.”¹¹ Although located beyond the Pillars of Hercules, and therefore outside the range of Herodotus’ descriptions of the eastern region, the western Sahara was the land of Hanno’s legendary or mythical voyage.¹² Whether or not it was the quest for gold that may have precipitated Hanno’s *Periplus* in the fifth century B.C.E., the lure of that

¹¹ Herodotus, *Histories* I, 67; IV, 181–5.

¹² M. Posnansky, “Introduction,” 548. See R. Mauny, “La navigation sur les côtes,” 99–101; R. C. C. Law, “The Garamantes,” 188–9; T. Garrard, “Myth and Metrology,” 444–6; J. T. Swanson, “Myth of Trans-Saharan Trade,” 596.

precious metal and the desire for slaves propelled Jews and later Muslims, to follow trans-Saharan trade routes into the western African interior.

Muslim geographers named the region *al-Ṣaḥrāʾ*, Arabic for “the Desert,” also referred to as *al-Ṣaḥrāʾ al-Kubrā* (or “the Great Desert”). They viewed it as an intermediate zone beyond which was the *Bilād al-Sūdān* or “Land of the Blacks.” In an attempt to describe an area they barely understood, these early writers used this expression to discriminate between Africans so as to set apart “Blacks” from “Arabs” and “Berbers” of Muslim North Africa, recently incorporated into the abode of Islam (*Dār al-Islām*). The limits of an imaginary *Bilād al-Sūdān* were redefined when a series of North African migrations, which began in earnest in the eleventh century, displaced many Saharan dwellers forced to migrate toward the southern desert edge. Ironically, some of these groups began identifying themselves as “Whites” (*Bīḍān*) and speaking of a “Land of the Whites” (*Ṭrāb al-Bīḍān*) united by the use of a common language, the Arabic-based *Ḥasāniya*.¹³ In the fifteenth century, Portuguese maritime explorers, vying for African gold, heralded a new age of imperialism. European explorers, and later colonial rulers, would reinvent Africa on their own terms by also applying a color line to their racial mappings of the continent.

Africans as well as foreigners have long discussed the Sahara as betwixt and between. In fact, the most celebrated Mauritanian author of the late nineteenth century, Aḥmad al-Amīn al-Shinqīṭī, weighed in on a long-standing debate about whether his place of origin, “the country of Shinqīṭi” (*Bilād Shinqīṭ*), was part of “Black Africa” (*Sūdān*) or north-west Africa (*Maghrib*).¹⁴ So eager was this author to prove that this Saharan region did not belong to “the Land of the Blacks,” as was the prevailing opinion in Mecca, that this controversy may well have inspired him to write his anthology in the first place. So he pondered:

Is Shinqīṭi part of the Sūdān or the Maghrib? Shinqīṭi is part of the Maghrib . . . and this is well known to the people of Shinqīṭi and the people of the Maghrib. But several Easterners dispute this, claiming instead that it is part of

¹³ Hereafter *Hasaniya*. The expression *Ṭrāb al-Bīḍān* and the *Bīḍān* ethnonym are problematic. Yet the region where *Hasaniya* is the lingua franca continues to be relevant as a culturally homogenous space. Terms such as *Sūdān* or *Bīḍān*, submits J. Hunwick (*Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, 2, n. 3), are “referents of cultural practices rather than of skin colours.”

¹⁴ Al-Shinqīṭī, *Al-Wasīṭ fī Tarājīm Uḍabāʾ Shinqīṭ*.

the Sūdān. Even some people of Shinqīṭi believe this. . . . So I told them that they are from the extreme southern part of the Maghrib (*aqṣā' al-maghrib*).¹⁵

Al-Shinqīṭī refers to the case of an eighteenth-century pilgrim from Shinqīṭi who, in order to prove this very point, sought several fatwas, or legal opinions, including an acknowledgment issued by the Sultan of Morocco. Tragically, the pilgrim died before making his case in Mecca. Moreover, al-Shinqīṭī claims that another scholar who held the opposite view, namely, that the people of Shinqīṭi were from the Sūdān, had misquoted one of his sources.¹⁶ But judging from the mockery with which his arguments were received, al-Shinqīṭī does not seem to have succeeded in convincing his audience. That such debates were taking place, however, is indicative of Saharans' ongoing crisis of identity as Africans caught between two shores. At the same time, they reflect the shifting borders of the *Bilād al-Sūdān* both in the minds of Muslims and in the physical distancing caused by desertification.

For centuries, the Sahara Desert has captured the Western imagination. It conjures visions of torrid heat waves rising over an endless sea of burning sand dunes where only nomads on spiteful camels dared to tread. So it is not surprising that, given its inaccessibility, the Sahara was the last portion of the African continent to be carved up by European conquest. But for the most part, this region was less affected by colonial rule than were other more accessible and more abundant regions of Africa.

Saharan Sun and Sand

The Sahara's reputation as an unbearably scorching and desolate wasteland is certainly justified in terms of climate. It is here that the hottest temperatures in the world have been recorded, reaching above 50°C (130°F). Depending on the time of year, night temperatures drop dramatically, sometimes to the point of freezing. Seasons also vary according to location. On the desert shores the rainy season (*lekhrīf*) is from about May to August. Then the low-pressure clouds of the Inter-Tropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ) rise toward the Tropic of Cancer and westerly winds bring rain from the Atlantic Ocean. The rainy season is followed by spring-like conditions (*tiviski*) when grasses grow for herds to graze. In

¹⁵ Ibid., 422–3.

¹⁶ S. Reichmuth ("Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī (1732–91) and the Africans: Islamic Discourse," 129–30) found reference to this debate in an eighteenth-century biography by a Muslim from India.

the ITCZ’s northern limits, engulfing the western Saharan interior, the rainy season is predictably shorter with sparse and sporadic rainfall ranging from 25 to 127 mm (1 to 5 inches) per annum. When it does rain in the Sahara it tends to be torrential, causing destructive flash floods.¹⁷ The northeast trade winds, known as the *Harmattan*, blow over the desert in the dry season between December and February, covering the cities of Africa and beyond with a fine layer of red dust.

Far from being a mere “sandbox,” the desert is actually a very heterogeneous zone.¹⁸ There are not only dunes (*iguīdi*) and fields of sand (*ergs*) separated by inter-dunal depressions, but also mountains, undulating foothills, steppes, gravel and stony plains (*reg*), plateaus (*tassili*), and flat bedrock (*hammada*). Once lush and sustaining a diverse ecosystem and human environment, the Sahara experienced irreversible desertification from 3000 B.C.E.¹⁹ Even in more recent times, the changes in vegetation have significantly altered the landscape and transformed Saharan lifestyles. Today, date palms, once a staple and important Saharan export item, are dying out, while many of the oases of the interior are turning into ghost towns. The Sahara is the northern limit of western Africa’s malaria zone and the southern barrier to the tsetse fly, bearer of sleeping sickness (trypanosomiasis), all determinants of human and animal transhumance.

Elephants, giraffes, and lions were once common on the desert edge. When Muslim geographers and travelers described the region starting in the eighth century, they noted buffalos and tortoises that no longer inhabit the Sahara. Even in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Saharan environment was less arid than it is now. Oral informants described fauna and flora from the first half of the twentieth century that have vanished from the landscape.²⁰ The addax, leopard, ostrich, and horned oryx have practically disappeared. The ostrich was

¹⁷ A flash flood in 1999 nearly destroyed the desert oasis town of Tishīt, causing many of its inhabitants to relocate. More recently, in 2003, torrential rains caused the destruction of 180 mud houses in the historic Malian city of Timbuktu.

¹⁸ The prevailing image of the Sahara as a sandbox is something I. W. Zartman (*Sahara: Bridge or Barrier?* 541) decried decades ago. In the 1920s, French colonial ethnographer M. Delafosse (“Les relations du Maroc avec le Soudan,” 153) remarked on this same misperception.

¹⁹ J. L. A. Webb, *Desert Frontier*, 3–11.

²⁰ For example, Ibn Battūta reported apricot, pear, apple, and peach trees in the region south of Walāta that are no longer found. N. Levzion and J. F. P. Hopkins, *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources* [hereafter *Corpus*], 286. Elder informants described the former presence of lions in the region of Tishīt as well as large herds of gazelles.

driven to near extinction in the region by systematic hunting for its precious feathers sold on European markets. Fennec foxes, striped hyenas, and jackals will soon join dama gazelles on the endangered species list. Yet, as a land that never ceases to surprise, the Sahara is still home to the crocodile (*Crocodylus niloticus*) that survives in the deep caves of southeastern Mauritania.²¹

Caravans of Gold

Two events occurring in the common era would profoundly influence the history of Saharan societies. The first was the introduction of camels sometime after the first century, and the second was the spread of Islam from the eighth century onward. The adoption of the “ship of the desert” revolutionized the nature of long-distance transportation in terms of organization, endurance, and volume while stimulating nomadic and pastoral lifestyles in the region. Adherence to Islam and its code of law favored the development of both scholarly and commercial networks that linked Muslims across the desert to the world beyond. In time, a political economy of violence, patronage, and protection was negotiated among nomadic herders, semi-nomadic oasis residents in charge of organizing camel caravans, and sedentary farmers.

The pursuit of gold and other goods encouraged waves of migrations of North Africans and other groups into desert oases. The area presently divided among Mali, Mauritania, and Senegal was central to the great empires of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay that flourished from the eighth to the sixteenth century. The eleventh-century Almoravid jihad marked the first attempt at a large-scale Islamic reform in the region. To be sure, these Muslims who formed a coalition from the western to the northern desert edges were interested in controlling a share of the gold trade as much as in proselytizing and spreading the Mālikī legal doctrine. From then on, trans-Saharan trade thrived, with salt mined from Saharan deposits enduring as the single most important trade item. More nomads coming from the north, such as the *Banū Hilāl* from the eleventh century, and the *Banū Maʿqil* several centuries later, migrated to the region, upsetting settlement and trade patterns.²² These warrior groups, locally referred to as *ʿarab*, brought

²¹ T. Monod, “Remarques biologiques sur le Sahara”; T. Shine et al., “Rediscovery of Relict Populations of the Nile Crocodile,” 260.

²² *Corpus*, 338–9; T. Cleaveland, *Becoming Walāta*, 44; H. T. Norris, “Legacy of the Banu Hassan,” 21–5.

with them the use of an Arabic dialect that became infused with “Berber,” Wolof, and other African languages to form Hasaniya.

By the middle of the fourteenth century, the famous pilgrimage to Mecca by the emperor of Mali, Kankan Mansa Mūsā, alerted the wider Muslim world to the gold riches of western Africa and attracted many more foreigners to the area. In the late sixteenth century, after fending off a Portuguese invasion of his kingdom, the Moroccan Sultan Aḥmad al-Manṣūr attempted to control trans-Saharan trade routes by securing the principal salt mine of Taghāza. He then sent a contingent armed with Spanish muskets to conquer the Songhay Empire and its main cities of Gao and Timbuktu. Because of a number of factors, including distance, Morocco’s effective control was short-lived, although for centuries the Sultan, acting as “Commander of the Faithful,” would exert nominal authority over the region.

Southwestern Social Order

A social order was negotiated among southwestern Saharans by the end of the seventeenth century after the Islamic reform movement of Nāṣir al-Dīn. In the course of this struggle the warrior groups ultimately were victorious, assuming greater control of the region. Eventually, they came to found the nomadic emirates of Trārza, Brākna, Tagānit (Idaw‘ish), and much later Ādrār. By the early eighteenth century, Hasaniya was supplanting the local “Berber” language (*Znāga*), and gaining ground as a lingua franca from Timbuktu (Mali) in the East to Ndar (Senegal) in the West and into the Wād Nūn region on the northern desert edge (Map 1).

The region of the western Sahara, stretching south of the Wād Nūn to the Senegal River, was now dominated by Saharans of mixed ancestry who chose as their identity marker the above-mentioned ethnonym Bīḍān.²³ The Bīḍān tended to split vocationally into two groups: the people of the sword, or *ḥasānī* (also known as ‘*arab*), and the people of the book, referred to as *zwāyā*. Descendants of North African and other migrants, the *ḥasānī* thrived on arms-bearing and military prowess. They derived their livelihood from exacting protection fees from the *zwāyā* and other tributary groups and levying tolls on those who crossed their territory, especially caravan leaders.²⁴ The more numerous *zwāyā*, or clerical clans, were semi-sedentary by the late seventeenth century. Their

²³ The use of the term “ethnonym” is borrowed from J.-L. Amselle, “Ethnies et espaces.”

²⁴ A. W. Ould Cheikh, “Nomadisme,” 369.

designation came from the word “angle” to convey the idea that scholarly families retreated to a corner to study and teach the Qur’ān.²⁵ In addition to their roles as Muslim scholars and leaders, the *zwāyā* were herders and traders. They organized local and interregional camel caravans, trading in salt for slaves, gold, cotton cloth, and cereal in the agricultural regions of the western Sudan, and in gum arabic north of the Senegal River. Both these groups were slave owners and tended to exert domination over more sedentary tributary groups, which included former slaves, farmers, blacksmiths, leather artisans, and griots. However, this social stratification characterizing Saharan societies was not nearly as rigid as was previously implied in the literature.²⁶

Many Saharan clans, especially the *zwāyā*, tended to be literate and use the Arabic script to produce scholarship and administer their affairs. Indeed, in this area flourished one of the oldest traditions of Islamic learning in Africa, with men and women transmitting literature in oral and written form from one generation to the next. Saharan traditions of Islamic learning emanated from the educational system organized by clerics who were in charge of all religious matters. Through their enterprising commercial activities, Muslims purchased books and paper and built private libraries. They used paper not only for scholarly works, legal rulings, and amulet making, but also for supporting complex business operations. The practice of Islam was not confined to writing in Arabic and engaging in daily rituals. It involved the adoption of principles of governance, a legal code, and other institutions upheld by religious scholars (*‘ulamā*), and a class of what I call “legal service providers” such as judges (*qādīs*) and jurists (*muftīs*). By the eighteenth century, the reputations of notable thinkers from centers of learning such as Timbuktu, Walāta, Tishīt, and Shinqīti reached the Middle East by way of pilgrimage caravans. This region of the western Sahara, referred to as *Bilād Shinqīti*, became renowned as a place of learning and erudition.

The influence of Islam, Arabic, and legal codes on trans-Saharan trade cannot be overstated. Caravaners relied on their literacy skills for administrative purposes, correspondence, and drawing legal agreements in accordance with Islamic law. Operating in a “paper economy” represented a technological advantage that solved fundamental problems of

²⁵ M. al-Māmī, *Kitāb al-Bādiya*, cited in *ibid.*, 374.

²⁶ F. De Chassey, *La houe, l'étrier et le livre*; C. Stewart, “Political Authority and Social Stratification,” and *Islam and Social Order*. For the revisionists, see Ould Cheikh, “Nomadisme,” chap. 4; R. Taylor, “Of Disciples and Sultans”; Cleaveland, *Becoming Walāta*; and P. Bonte, “L’émirat,” 591–9.

exchange and rendered more efficient the organization of long-distance trade. Access to literacy and a regular paper supply, which became more prevalent in nineteenth-century western Africa, may explain in part the growth in the volume of trans-Saharan trade in this period. It is no coincidence that scholars often performed as traders and vice versa. Moreover, Saharan towns tended to be governed by Muslim judges who served as regional arbiters ruling on all civil, commercial, political, and religious matters. These semi-sedentary scholarly communities maintained alliances with nomadic groups who provided protection services to town dwellers, farming communities, and travelers. Although at various points in time regional kingdoms, Islamic states, and mobile emirates controlled certain key markets, not until the French conquest was the Sahara ever ruled by a single nation despite attempts by Morocco to extend its power to the southern desert edge.

Frenchmen in the Sahara

Many developments in the nineteenth century transformed the political economy of western Africa. Waves of imperialist incursions would redirect trade toward new centers of control located along the Atlantic coast and in key colonial outposts in the hinterland. Of all the European colonizing powers in Africa, the French had the most enduring relationship with the region. They were obsessed with the idea of conquering the unimaginable: the Sahara Desert. In the 1870s a handful of French officials, engineers, and Saint-Simonians promoted the idea that a trans-Saharan railway from Algiers to Timbuktu could spearhead France's ultimate conquest.²⁷ This pipe dream accelerated their drive especially in Algeria where effective French colonial control stopped at the edges of the desert. By the late nineteenth century, few French expeditions ventured into the depths of the Sahara and survived. The tragic massacre in 1881 of General Flatters and his Algerian reconnaissance mission indelibly scarred the French imperial ego and cemented the image of the Sahara Desert as an impenetrable *Tuāreg* preserve.

It is hardly surprising that the idea of creating Mauritania, the quintessential Saharan colony, would come from an Algerianist.²⁸ But the Sahara would prove a difficult terrain to dominate not just because of

²⁷ This movement was fueled by the publication of A. Duponchel, *Le chemin de fer trans-saharien*. See also Philibert and G. Rolland, *La France en Afrique et le Transsaharien*.

²⁸ Xavier Coppolani was murdered by a Saharan resistance fighter in 1905 early into the conquest. M. S. Ould Ahmedou, "Coppolani et la conquête de la Mauritanie," 101–14.

France's unfamiliarity with camels and sandstorms. Saharans presented the greatest challenge to European domination, even after Morocco became a French protectorate in 1912, because of the shrewdness of Muslim leaders as much as the ruggedness of the terrain. Not until 1934, when they occupied Guelmīm in the Wād Nūn region of the northern desert edge, a town locally named "the door of the Sahara" (*Bāb al-Saḥrā*'), could the French claim regional control. They thereby adjoined Algeria, France's first African colony since 1830, to territories south of the Sahara starting with Senegal, their West African colonial model. Two decades later, in 1951, French fascination with the Sahara drove the Minister of Colonies, Ernest Bélimé, to suggest creating a unified "French Sahara" composed of the contiguous Saharan regions of Algeria and the French West African colonies limited to the east by Chad. Even then, and despite over half a century of French occupation, the Sahara continued to be thought of as "empty, vacant and without masters, peopled at most by a negligible handful of Bedouins or Tuareg."²⁹ But this proposal, bearing the peculiar label of *Sahara "Alaska" français*, was never carried forward.

For centuries, European accounts portrayed the Sahara as an inhospitable "empty quarter," and they likened it to the ultimate no-man's land: dry, deserted, and impassable. Colonial ethnographic studies reinforced its image as a natural boundary between the North and the rest of Africa, separating "White" and "Black" Africa and, by extension, "Arabs" and "Berbers" from "Black Africans." In the late nineteenth century, the French began speaking of the Sahara as a *trait-d'union* (or hyphen) to legitimize efforts to connect their North and West African colonies.³⁰ This contrived "western epistemological order," to use Valentin Mudimbe's expression, with its antecedents in earlier Muslim mappings of the continent, remains pervasive and has propagated lasting misunderstandings about the continent's history.³¹ So entrenched is the notion of the Sahara as a historic barrier that it has led to a flawed characterization of Africa as inhabited by

²⁹ Bélimé cited in Monod, "Notes et documents: autour de l'Alaska saharien," 683. This project was inspired by the lure of the region's untapped mineral resources, namely, iron ore. The proposal and a map of the colonial project were advertised in *Le Figaro* (08/01/51).

³⁰ On an official visit to the Islamic Republic of Mauritania in 1997, former French President Jacques Chirac spoke about this "hyphenated" country and the "secret charms of the Sahara" (<http://www.elysee.fr/documents/discours/1997/MAUR972.html>). Today, a tourist Web site of Mali advertises the "Sahara, hyphen between Black Africa and White Africa" (<http://www.malitourisme.com>).

³¹ V. Mudimbe, *Invention of Africa*, x. It is erroneous, I would argue, to attribute this "invention of Africa" to European racial templates alone for reasons discussed at the beginning of this section.

two diametrically, racially, and, by extension, culturally opposed Africans. The historical alienation of peoples across an artificially created racial divide is perpetuated by separating the continent geographically into North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa, turning the Sahara into a blind spot, which consequently remains understudied. Such misperceptions undermine the history that unites the continent, and they have seriously influenced the way African history has been written and understood.

AFRICANS, ARABS, AND “MAKING HISTORY”

When historians of Africa started in the 1960s to define their craft in the Western tradition of writing history, they faced major difficulties accessing reliable sources. Since African societies were thought to be predominantly oral and not scriptural, the record of their historical consciousness was *a priori* “invisible.” Although the accounts of Portuguese, Dutch, British, French, and other travelers contained useful insights about peoples, routes, and realms, these were peripheral impressions of Africa and Africans. They were “Eurocentric” narratives built on information tainted by language and cultural barriers. Merchant, naval, consular, and later colonial records posed a similar set of problems. Indeed, writing history with external and, for the most part, imperial sources could not be reconciled with the agenda of the social historian. To better represent the peoples who had lived through oppressive colonial regimes and their pre-colonial ancestors, it was imperative for historians to reveal African agency through local historical sources.

Writing African History

Historians, therefore, set out to uncover the African past by innovating an unconventional method: the use of oral sources. Since many African societies recorded and transmitted the past via oral traditions that relied on mnemonic devices, their oral histories had to be properly collected and critically subjected to the rules of evidence. The spoken word of “the native” had to be approached not as an “exotic object” but as an archival source *à part entière*.³² Based on the methodology of anthropologists (who, together with ethnographers, dominated the early field of African studies), historians of Africa would pave the way toward incorporating oral narratives into historical research. Indeed, proving the validity of oral vis-à-vis

³² M. De Certeau, *L'écriture de l'histoire*, 216.

more conventional, written sources was tantamount to defining the field itself, and in many ways, engaging oral sources became synonymous with writing a new kind of history.³³ This methodological approach would promote not just a systematic recording and analysis of oral evidence (formal oral texts, and the memory of the living for later periods), but also the inclusion of other source material, such as linguistics, pictography, paleography, environmental evidence, archaeology, and art. However one gleans and treats information derived from the spoken word, the rules of evidence apply to all sources that must be weighed against others.

Hence, it is especially in their treatment of orality that historians of Africa set themselves apart from the pack of "archival animals" to assume the role of "archive creators."³⁴ As such, the historian of Africa became an "archon," in Jacques Derrida's sense of the term. By selecting the historical literature to be recorded and preserved, including what not to be archived, as well as providing the context, textual structure, and, by extension, interpretative framework of oral material, however, the archon encodes it with meaning.³⁵ The "fever" to collect and archive the oral record began in earnest in the 1970s. Armed with Jan Vansina's *De la tradition orale*, Philip Curtin's directives about oral techniques, and a sense of urgency to interview elders and record their cerebral libraries, students of the African past embarked upon a singular mission to create oral repositories.

By the 1980s, however, such a project had proven too daunting a task, perhaps because recording, transcribing, and archiving are cumbersome and time-consuming. The aim had been to prove that some oral sources, namely, oral traditions, were like fixed texts comparable to written documents. In oral traditions, however, the historical veracity of the narrative transmitted *texto* from one professional griot to another is transformed according to the style, art, and audience of the orator who embellished, adapted, and otherwise manipulated the "oral text."³⁶ Critics of oral sources, starting with anthropologists, associated oral

³³ J. Vansina (*Living with Africa*, x-xi) explains how "the practice of African history often differs from others," although he admits there is no "definitive historiography."

³⁴ P. Curtin, "Field Techniques," 369.

³⁵ J. Derrida, *Mal d'archive*, 13.

³⁶ A griot is a professional oral historian. As Joseph Miller explains, some oral traditions can contain outright fabrications. See his "Introduction: Listening for the African Past," and D. Henige, *Oral Historiography*; K. Barber and P. F. de Moraes Farias, *Discourse and its Disguises*; E. Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts*; C. K. Vansina and Adenaike, *In Pursuit of History*; L. White et al., *African Words, African Voices*; L. White, *Speaking with Vampires*. On the silences or misremembering in the oral record, see also R. Roberts, "Reversible Social Processes."

traditions with myth making.³⁷ Eventually, even Vansina modified his position regarding the treatment of oral traditions by admitting that, as with all documents, these could be manipulated by the intent of the *rapporteur*.³⁸ Nevertheless, the efforts of African historians positively influenced the historical profession to the extent that oral sources of all kinds are now recognized forms of evidence.

Studying Islamic Africa

One of the most significant developments in African historical methodology in recent years has been the growing use of untapped sources written by Africans themselves. Especially useful are documents in original scriptural languages such as the "Berber" alphabets (Tifnagh and Libyan); the Ethiopic script (Ge'ez); the syllabic and consonantal scripts created much later in other regions such as Guinea (N'ko), Liberia (Vai), Nigeria (Nsibidi), and Cameroon (Bamun); and pictographic and ideographic meta-languages imprinted on textiles (Akan).³⁹ At the same time, scholars are increasingly relying on the tremendous wealth of writings by African Muslims in Arabic and in African languages transcribed in the Arabic script or *'ajami* (such as Hausa, Fulfulde, Wolof, Tamashek, and Swahili).⁴⁰

Conversion to Islam and the adoption of Arabic led Africans to begin producing written records in this language and in transliterated African languages. As Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias has shown in his groundbreaking research on Malian funerary epigraphy, the earliest sources for Muslim West African history are engraved in stone.⁴¹ He contextualizes a rich epigraphic corpus that includes inscribed tombstones and other stelae, as well as graffiti by royals, commoners, and merchants. Yet he acknowledges the challenge of interpreting "the convergence of written, oral and archaeological registers of evidence into a single coherent tableau of the past."⁴² By tackling the once controversial study of Islamic epigraphic evidence dating from the

³⁷ B. Mudimbe and Jewsiewicki, "Africans' Memories and Contemporary History."

³⁸ Vansina, *Oral Traditions as History*; "Memory and Oral Tradition," in Miller (ed.), *The African Past Speaks*, 262–79; and "On Combining Evidence."

³⁹ J. Goody, *Interface between the Written*; H. Lhote, *Les Touaregs du Hoggar*; A. Bekerie, *Ethiopic: An African Writing System*; D. White Oyler, "The N'ko Alphabet"; J.-L. Amselle, *Branchements: anthropologie de l'universalité des cultures*.

⁴⁰ H. Sharawy (ed.), *Heritage of African Language Manuscripts*.

⁴¹ P. F. De Moraes Farias, *Arabic Medieval Inscriptions*.

⁴² *Ibid.*, xxxvii.

early eleventh century, De Moraes Farias provides a new vision for African history.⁴³ He causes historians to re-examine the early history of medieval West Africa in terms of periodization, political succession, and literary, religious, and cultural practices, and therefore to question the accuracy of the commonly relied-upon Timbuktu chronicles. Revealing genealogies and modes of dynastic changes of queens and kings, De Moraes Farias points to the prevalence of matrilineal ancestry and descent in the region and the widespread adoption of the Muslim calendar. Moreover, some of these inscriptions were not in Arabic but in Tifnagh, the Amazigh (so-called Berber language) script used by a number of Saharan groups, namely, the Tūāreg. Indeed, the sheer volume of Tifnagh engravings found across the Sahara from Mali to Libya points to remarkably early and widespread levels of literacy in Africa as compared with other parts of the world.

In the past, the French were particularly interested in Arabic manuscripts in western Africa. While some were reportedly confiscated, perhaps because their existence was not easily reconcilable with the *mission civilisatrice*, others were translated and edited by French scholars calling attention to their historical significance.⁴⁴ But to some extent, Africa's Islamic intellectual heritage often was overlooked by later scholars conditioned to write off any material in Arabic as foreign to Africa itself.⁴⁵ While historians recognized that many of the early written sources for Africa were in Arabic, these were understood to be authored by Arab and Andalusian geographers who either traveled to western Africa or wrote accounts based on hearsay and interviews with trans-Saharan travelers. The better-known sources are by the Cordovan al-Bakrī, the globetrotter

⁴³ Ibid., xxxvi. De Moraes Farias speaks to the issue of the African divide when noting how nineteenth-century concerns about how to treat Islamic epigraphy caused "internal theoretical difficulties that had remained unresolved."

⁴⁴ Some manuscripts are preserved in Paris at either the Institut de France (Fonds Gironcourt and Fonds Terrier) or the Bibliothèque Nationale (Fonds Archinard).

⁴⁵ A recent collective volume claiming to "represent the current state of the art in African historical research" pays no attention to the use of documentation in Arabic for reconstructing African history (T. Falola and Jennings, *Sources and Methods in African History*, xx). Even Miller failed to acknowledge the intellectual traditions of Muslim Africans ("Africa in History," n. 4). He mentions the spread of Islam in Africa from the eighth century onward only in passing (19) and notes that Muslim merchants or "foreign visitors also left the documentary records from which historians can now derive evidence of African agency" (21). But while he recognizes that written sources available to historians are not just "European documents," he discusses only in a footnote (n. 66) documents in other languages, namely, Ethiopian sources and "Arabic-language documentation," referring the reader to the works of Levtzion and Hunwick. The new anthology by J. E. Philips (ed.), *Writing African History*, corrects this bias.

Ibn Baṭṭūṭa of Tangiers, and al-Hasān Ibn Muḥammad al-Wazzān al-Fāsi (alias Leo Africanus) of Granada and Fez.⁴⁶ Written by foreigners who may have been prejudiced toward both non-Muslims and Africans, these works could easily be dismissed on the same grounds as European sources. Besides, it was erroneously believed that only a handful of Arabic documents, now well known and available, existed.⁴⁷

For lack of language training or because of the Africanist's discomfort with the "Arab," many historians were not prepared to recognize that there were Muslims in Africa with centuries-old institutions and traditions of learning. These included schools providing education in Islamic sciences and vast scholarly networks with established reputations across the Muslim world. "Despite racist and colonial distortions to the contrary," John Hunwick affirms, "Africa turns out to be a highly literate continent."⁴⁸ The inability to recognize the achievements of Muslim Africans can be explained by the biases of many Western scholars toward Islam. For many, the use of Arabic was equated with the Arab and therefore the foreign, and for the most part there was failure to comprehend that Africans and Arabs could be one and the same.

The pioneering studies of Raymond Mauny, Joseph Cuoq, Humphrey Fisher, J. F. P. Hopkins, Nehemia Levtzion, H. T. Norris, De Moraes Farias, Melvyn Hiskett, John Ralph Willis, David Robinson, and others on Muslim West Africa went a long way toward addressing this knowledge gap. Hunwick and R. Sean O'Fahey, who began the painstaking process of compiling and translating bibliographical lists of African authors and their writings, are leading scholars in a field promoting the use of Arabic sources for African history. Both have made substantial contributions to the study of Muslim states and societies in Africa.⁴⁹ Increasingly, scholars with even minimal training in Arabic are able to decipher the 'ajamis, which predate the transliteration of several African languages into the Latin script initiated by Western missionaries.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Excerpts were published in *Corpus*, the seminal volume of works by North Africans, Andalusians, and Muslims of Africa and the Middle East.

⁴⁷ D. Henige, "The Race Is Not Always to the Swift," 54.

⁴⁸ Hunwick, "The Islamic Manuscript Heritage of Timbuktu," unpublished paper presented at Vassar College (November 8, 2002).

⁴⁹ Together Hunwick and O'Fahey have published three volumes of *Arabic Literature of Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 1994, 1995, 2003).

⁵⁰ For example, J. Boyd and B. Mack, *Collected Works of Nana Asma'u*, on the scholar of early-nineteenth-century Sokoto (northern Nigeria) who wrote poetry and treatises in Arabic and several African languages, including Hausa and Tamashek, using the Arabic script.

The bias toward Islamic Africa, however, was mainly North American. Scholarship by historians in British, Israeli, German, French, and other European academic centers, including work produced in the School of Oriental and African Studies, long developed a more holistic approach to Islamic Africa based on a systematic understanding of its place in the larger Muslim world. The two encyclopedias of African history, published in the 1980s by Cambridge and UNESCO, embraced an "all Africa" perspective. Scholars trained in the *Islamwissenschaft* tradition of Islamic studies, with its heavy emphasis on philology, produced some of the most comprehensive studies of African literature in Arabic. More recently, Dierk Lange's scholarship on Kanem-Bornu and the central Sahara embraces a continental approach.⁵¹ For the western Saharan region of interest here, aside from Levzion, De Moraes Farias, Hunwick, and Norris, already mentioned, Michel Abitbol on Morocco and Timbuktu and Ulrich Rebstock on Mauritanian literature stand out as important scholars in this regard. The classic work of French historian Mauny took a continental view of African pre-colonial history as did the short history of the western Sahara by Frédéric De la Chapelle, while colonial ethnographer Maurice Delafosse wrote on the historical links between West Africa and Morocco.⁵² Moreover, Ismaël Diadié Haïdara on Mali, Paul Pascon on Morocco, Ulrich Harmann on Libya, and Anders Bjørkelo on the Sudan have made original contributions to African economic history by translating Saharan trade records.⁵³

Since the 1980s, increasing numbers of African historians fluent in Arabic have made critical contributions to Saharan studies. Scholars of Mauritania, linked to the Laboratoire d'Études et de Recherches Historiques at Nouakchott University, have been mining their rich written heritage for the production primarily of national histories. These include the seminal scholarship of Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh, Yahya Ould El-Bara, Muḥammad al-Mukhtār Wuld al-Sa'ad, Abdallah Ould Deddoud,

⁵¹ Lange, *Ancient Kingdoms of West Africa*.

⁵² Mauny, *Tableau géographique*; De La Chapelle, "Esquisse d'une histoire du Sahara occidental"; Delafosse, "Les relations."

⁵³ Diadié Haïdara (*Les juifs de Tombouctou*) translated and set in context fifty trade records, mainly loan contracts, written in the late nineteenth century by several Jewish traders. Pascon (*La maison d'Illigh*) mined the commercial records of a prominent nineteenth-century merchant of southern Morocco, with the collaboration of A. Arrif, D. Schroeter, M. Tozy, H. Van Der Wusten; and Harmann ("The Dead Ostrich: Life and Trade in Ghadames") analyzed the commercial records published by B. Q. b.Yusha', *Ghadāmis: Wathā'iq Tijāriyya*; Bjørkelo, *Prelude to the Mahidiya*, and "Credit, Loans and Obligations."

Mohamedou Ould Mohameden, and others.⁵⁴ One of the pioneering Europeans to write on Mauritania based on Arabic source material is Rainer Oßwald, whose dissertation is an economic and social history of the four major oases.⁵⁵ The seminal contributions of Charles Stewart, the first American historian trained in Arabic to produce important historical works on Mauritania's social, religious, and political history, inspired others, including Raymond Taylor and Timothy Cleaveland, to follow in his formidable footsteps.⁵⁶ Using both oral and European sources, James Webb wrote the first economic and environmental study of the south-western Sahara in the pre-colonial period that considers the regions of Senegal and Mauritania as a whole.⁵⁷ Moreover, Ann McDougall and Pierre Bonte have done groundbreaking research on Mauritania based primarily on extensive oral interviews, colonial archives, and a trans-continental approach.⁵⁸

African studies institutes in Morocco and Libya have promoted African history scholarship through publications and conference organizing. Scholars there actively engage in research in western and central Africa but usually with the aim of uncovering the history of North African migrations such as Morocco's invasion of Songhay or the presence of merchants of Fez in Senegal and of Ghadāmis in Timbuktu. However, the Institut d'Études Africaines of Morocco's Université Mohammed V has played a critical role in promoting workshops and publications focused on bridging the continental divide in African studies. In the past ten years, there has been a significant growth in scholarship on Muslim Africa, but still too few scholars specialize in the history of the Sahara.⁵⁹ Finally,

⁵⁴ Ould Cheikh, "Nomadisme"; Ould El-Bara, *Al-Fiqh wa al-Mujtama' wa al-Sulta*; Wuld al-Sa'ad, "Imārat al-Trārza," "Masālik al-qawāfil," and *Al-Fatāwā wa al-Tā'rikh*; Ould Abdallah, "Guerre sainte" and "Al-thaqāfa"; Wuld Muḥammadhan, *Wathā'iq min al-Tā'rikh al-Mūrītāni*; and Ould Khalifa, *La région du Tagant en Mauritanie: l'oasis de Tijjga entre 1660 et 1960*.

⁵⁵ Oßwald, *Die Handelsstädte der Westsahara*.

⁵⁶ Stewart, *Islam and Social Order in Mauritania*; Taylor, "Warriors, Tributaries, Blood Money and Political Transformation"; Cleaveland, *Becoming Walāta*; Hall, "The Question of 'Race' in the Pre-colonial Southern Sahara."

⁵⁷ J. L. A. Webb, *Desert Frontier: Ecological and Economic Change along the Western Sahel*.

⁵⁸ Bonte, "L'émirat de l'Adrar"; McDougall's numerous articles cited in the bibliography.

⁵⁹ E. Ann McDougall, a pioneer in the economic and social history of the region that concerns us, discusses the state of the field ten years ago in a review article, "Research in Saharan History." In Europe, many Saharanists, such as Pierre Boilly at Université de Paris I, who organizes the scholarly community, work out of France. These include Pierre Bonte, the distinguished professor of Saharan anthropology at the Centre National de Recherche Scientifique in Paris. Others, such as Rainer Oßwald of Bayreuth University, and Ulrich Rebstock of Freiburg University, are in Germany. In June 2004, an

while the French colonial experience caused a dramatic drop in Arabic literacy in Muslim Africa, this trend thankfully is now being reversed.

The present study is an effort to reconstruct trans-Saharan history by focusing on a nineteenth-century trade network organized by caravaners such as Baghlil. This trade network was operated by a group of families from a “Berber” (*Amazigh*) clan collectively known as the Tikna, and a number of their “Berber” allies, namely, the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ and the Jews of Guelmīm. Multilingual caravaners from the region of Wād Nūn, they tended to be commercially successful because they formed tight-knit corporate associations based on trust and a reliance on Islam as an institutional framework. These trans-Saharan traders, who negotiated alliances with nomadic groups, tapped into local networks to conduct transactions in all kinds of merchandise as well as enslaved Africans. They used their cross-cultural skills to maneuver among African markets. Because of their professional activities, they formed diasporic communities in western Africa. Their histories had to be retrieved by engaging in transnational research, which required a great deal of flexibility.⁶⁰ Such research also entailed the adoption of a rather nomadic existence. Like a vagabond (*clochard*), as Michel de Certeau portrays the historian, I wandered from one town to the next, with longer stays in the capitals of Mauritania and Senegal, following clues and collecting evidence in the footsteps of my historical subjects.⁶¹ This research itinerary was steered primarily by information derived orally from multiple sources.

THE CENTRALITY OF ORALITY

In the process of research, I came to rely on orality not simply as an ethnographic exercise but as a method for interpreting all historical

exceptional conference entitled “Sahara Past and Present” was hosted by University of East Anglia (Norwich), and thirty international scholars participated. In North America, scholars of the Sahara tend to be members of the Saharan Studies Association, founded by McDougall and Hunwick in 1992 and managed by David Gutelius for over a decade.

⁶⁰ This research involved visits to five national archives and about thirty private libraries. I conducted over two hundred interviews in several languages including classical Arabic, Hasaniya, and French (with assisted interviews in Wolof, Songhay, and Fulfulde). It is important to note that fewer than half of the interviewees belonged to the two targeted groups (Tikna and Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ). Those listed in the bibliography agreed not to be anonymously cited.

⁶¹ De Certeau, *L'écriture*; see also W. Weymans, “Michel de Certeau,” 174.

evidence. As previously mentioned, many African societies possessed sophisticated mnemonic devices to record oral texts and preserve information across the generations. Muslim communities had distinct mechanisms for cultivating orality through the reading, memorization, and recitation of the Qurʾān and other religious works. A discursive tradition became central to the practice of Islam from the moment the message was passed on orally to its Prophet, as Brinkley Messick has shown.⁶² To a large extent, the spoken word was considered more valuable than the written. In fact in Islamic law, evidence (*al-bayyina*) was entirely testimonial and therefore oral in nature, and only when authenticated by witnesses could written documentation sometimes be introduced in a court of law, a point discussed further in Chapter 6. The emphasis placed on orality in Muslim societies is neatly captured by the story told of the famed Imām al-Ghazzālī of twelfth-century Persia about the day he realized that it was imperative to memorize all written texts. After pillagers attacked his caravan, he pleaded with them not to take “his knowledge,” by which he meant his books, to which one replied, “What kind of knowledge is that if a person like me can take it away from you?”⁶³

Oral sources informed my understanding of the past in myriad ways. Informants provided formative lessons in history and society as well as cultural and religious practices. The details they shared on Saharan geography and spatial terminology drew my attention to the diversity of environmental, political, and economic landscapes, as well as to patterns of transhumance and Saharan traffic. Many data on genealogies, migrations, and commercial itineraries could not have been obtained from any other source. Furthermore, information-sharing directed me toward other historical sources in archives and private collections. In the course of conversations and formal interviews, informants revealed details about faith-based behavior, culture, social order, ethnic identity, and interpretations of contentious historical events. Interviews and conversations often contained a combination of biographical information (personal recollections), family stories, and other historical observations (informal traditions), as well as memorized formal texts linked to legendary people and events (formal traditions).⁶⁴ These sources produced a set of oral

⁶² Messick, *Calligraphic State*.

⁶³ Lydon, “Inkwells,” 50.

⁶⁴ Curtin (“Field Techniques,” 369) recognizes that there could be an overlapping of categories. Vansina (*De la tradition orale*, 21) establishes an alternate categorization focused on oral tradition, as distinct from “eyewitness accounts” and “rumors.” He later expanded his definition to include “verbal messages which are reported statements from the past beyond the present generation” (*Oral Traditions*, 27).

narratives of varying quality. Migration narratives, family histories, and the recollections of retired caravaners were especially informative for trans-Saharan history. Before examining these sources, however, a word must be said about the Saharan tradition of naming years for it illustrates Africans' sophisticated sense of chronology and their methods for recording history orally.

Oral Chronologies

Residents of several Saharan oases held written chronicles of major events, such as the movement of nomads, natural disasters, and the births and deaths of notable personalities, dated in the Islamic calendar.⁶⁵ Dates however were remembered orally with nicknames that could vary across regions. The year 1304/1886–7, for example, is known in several northern Mauritanian towns as “the year of the stars” (*‘ām al-nujūm*) presumably because of the occurrence of a remarkable meteorite shower. Memorable incidents or battles were often remembered as “the day of” or “the battle of” as, for example, the 1266/1849–50 battle between the Awlād Billa and the Māsna in Tīshīt (*waq‘a Tīshīt*).

Frequently, a given name corresponded elsewhere to a different calendar year because the same event took place in different regions at different times. The year the French conquered Mauritania, for instance, is known as “the year the Christians came” (*‘ām jawū an-naṣārā*). But the conquest started earlier in the south (1319/1901–2) than in the middle of the country (1322/1904–5), and years later in the northern region of Ādrār (1327/1909–10). Another example is *‘ām al-keyit*, a combined Hasaniya and Wolof phrase meaning “the year of the paper,” which marks the year 1338/1919–20 when French paper money first infiltrated western African markets. The actual year of this event varies since banknotes gradually reached different markets. Being informed about these temporal markers and the corresponding calendar years allowed for the dating of events revealed in oral sources that otherwise would have been difficult to place in time.

⁶⁵ Al-Shinqīṭī, *Wasīt*, 525–28; al-Tā’rikh Ahmad, *Tā’rikh Ibn Tuwayr al-Janna*, A. b. Aḥmad Sālim (ed.); M. Wuld Ḥamidūn, *Ḥayāt Mūrītāniya: al-Tā’rikh al-Siyāsi*, 363–8; Cleaveland, *Becoming Walāta*, 169–73. Some Saharan chronologies are published in French translation by P. Marty, “Chroniques de Oualata et de Néma,” and V. Monteil, “Chroniques de Tichite.” The Mauritanian Ministry of Economic Planning, Office of Statistics, has compiled lists of year names in each of the twelve *départements*. These are guidelines for demographic census purposes, which are not always accurate. Still other year names were gathered orally. On the problems of dating oral information, see Henige, “Oral Tradition and Chronology.”

When elders in Mauritania were asked about the early history of trans-Saharan trade, they invariably replied that "the first to bring *tijāra* [here meaning international trade] to the area were the Tikna and the Awlād Bū al-Sibā'." ⁶⁶ Because of the scope of their commercial connections, these traders were regarded, in the living memory of informants, as the earliest international caravaners. They dealt in luxury goods such as paper, books, tobacco, textiles, rugs, and firearms in response to African demand and exported gold, ivory, ostrich feathers, gum arabic, and other commodities as well as enslaved Africans. As for the Tikna and the Awlād Bū al-Sibā', they both claim to be the first to introduce green tea and sugar to the region together with the teatime ritual. This is no small claim because drinking mint tea became a favorite pastime shared by Africans across the Sahara, from Senegal to Niger, and beyond. Just as this beverage was a luxury in England until the mid-1700s, so was it reserved for the wealthy in western Africa until the first half of the twentieth century. ⁶⁷ Imported into Morocco mainly from China and India by British merchant ships, the consumption of tea gradually spread to the African interior.

As early as the 1820s, Saharan traders were reportedly selling tea and sugar to the very wealthy in Timbuktu and Jenne. ⁶⁸ A Tikna oral tradition, reproduced in a contested tradition by the Awlād Bū al-Sibā', claims that it was one of their ancestors located in Shinqīti who gave the Emir of the Ādrār region his first taste of tea sometime during his reign (1289–1307/1872–90). ⁶⁹ As the tale goes, the following day the Emir sent his slave with

⁶⁶ This opinion was repeatedly stated in interviews and is a fact most Mauriticians seem to agree on. This critical piece of information obtained orally determined the focus of my research project. That the Tikna and Awlād Bū al-Sibā' played such an important role in trans-Saharan trade was only recently recognized. See Bonte's "Fortunes Commerciales à Shinqīti (Adrar Mauritanien)," 9, and his monumental thesis "L'émirat," chap. 14.

⁶⁷ J. Walvin, "A Taste of Empire"; J.-L. Miège, *Le Maroc et l'Europe*, 71–4.

⁶⁸ Their identities are not specified, but at least one of these traders was originally from Tafilālt (Morocco). See R. Caillié, *Journal d'un voyage à Temboctou et à Jenné*, 212, 223–4. This intrepid traveler, who was served tea in the Sahara, is discussed below. But according to James Riley's narrative (also discussed later) tea was unknown to inhabitants in the Wād Nūn region in 1815. See Riley, *Sufferings in Africa*, 187. Four years later, Charles Cochelet was offered tea in Guelmīm, the largest town in the Wād Nūn. See C. Cochelet, *Naufrage du Brick Français La Sophie*, vol. I, 309, and vol. II, 37 and 45.

⁶⁹ A. Leriche collected a parallel oral tradition told about the Awlād Bū al-Sibā' ("De l'origine du thē en Mauritanie," 870). Most oral sources confirm that the event occurred during the "peaceful reign" of the Emir Aḥmad Wuld Lemḥammad. Interviews were conducted in Shinqīti with Tikbir Mint al-Ghulām b. al-Ḥabbut (03/08/97), Ruqāya Mint Muḥammad al-Amin Wuld 'Abāba (10/03/97), and others; in Nouakchott with Mūlāy 'Umar Wuld Mūlāy Aḥmad and 'Ā'ishatu Mint Mūlāy 'Aly (07/30/97) and Khadijatū Mint Khatārī Wuld 'Abāba (05/29/97).

a wooden bowl instructing the Tikna to fill it with the wondrous beverage, a sign that the Emir knew neither how to brew nor how to drink tea. As for the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ, they were importing green tea to Shinqīṭi long before this reported event but mainly for private consumption until tea gained popularity.⁷⁰ Yet another version, collected by French colonial ethnographer Albert Leriche, explains that tea was introduced sometime between 1275/1858 and 1292/1875 by a Wād Nūn caravan composed of several Tikna traders, three Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ, and one Jew named Bedjūkh.⁷¹

The Memory of Strangers

Striking memories and details emerged from migration narratives recounting the diasporic trajectories of Wād Nūn traders living in Mali, Mauritania, and Senegal. Minorities often possessed sharp memories of the time when they, or their ancestors, migrated to a given market town. Because they were considered strangers outside the Wād Nūn homeland and they experienced short-term residency in a given time and place, they tended to have clearer and more salient recollections than locals about people, locales, and events. From their vantage point as outsiders, Tikna and Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ interviewees described matters autochthonous people typically took for granted and they sometimes spoke more freely about local politics. Moreover, migration narratives figured prominently in the histories passed down to the next generation.

Oral informants concurred that several Tikna and Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ families were long-term residents in Shinqīṭi by the late nineteenth century. The most prominent trader at the time was Mḥaymad Wuld ʿAbāba, who claimed prime real estate next to the mosque.⁷² At the time, he commanded the largest Tikna caravans connecting markets north and south, while collaborating with a relative located in Timbuktu. His great-granddaughter related how Mḥaymad Wuld ʿAbāba migrated to Shinqīṭi at the outset of a violent affair in Guelmīm that led to the murder of his cousin and the ransacking of their compound.⁷³ As his great-great-grandson explained,

⁷⁰ Interview in Shinqīṭi with ʿAbdarrahmān Wuld Muḥammad al-Ḥanshī (02/28/97). See Chapter 3.

⁷¹ Leriche, "De l'origine, 869."

⁷² Interviews in Shinqīṭi with ʿAbdarrahmān Wuld Muḥammad al-Ḥanshī (02/27/97), Muḥammad al-Amīn Wuld Mamad Wuld ʿAbāba (02/27/97), and Ruqāya Mint Taqla Wuld ʿAbāba (10/03/97); in Nouakchott with Khadijatu Mint Khatāri Wuld ʿAbāba (05/21/98); and in Tamshakett with ʿAbdāwa Wuld ʿAbāba (05/21/98).

⁷³ Interview in Shinqīṭi with Ruqāya Mint Taqla Wuld ʿAbāba (10/03/97).

Mḥaymad Wuld 'Abāba, then eighteen, borrowed money in Guelmīm to finance his first participation in a caravan.⁷⁴ He purchased ostrich feathers, which he sold at a premium in the Senegalese port of Dakar instead of in Morocco as was the practice. This expedition launched his memorable, albeit short, career as a caravan merchant.

As with all historical accounts of prominent people, the bigger the reputation, the longer it survives in local memory. Mūlāy al-Yazīd Wuld Mūlāy 'Aly was a well-known figure in the early twentieth century whose interactions with the French are documented in the colonial archive. He, too, was from Guelmīm, but it was the desire to collect his father's inheritance that brought him to Shinqīṭi in the 1880s. There he settled, working his father's connections and symbolic capital to prosper in trans-Saharan trade. A story repeated by oral informants illustrates his flare for business:

It is said that once en route to the market of Nioro (in present-day Mali) with his loads of salt, he met a returning caravan. The caravaners informed him that there was a big cloud over Nioro, and it was pouring rain. As a result, these traders had lost their entire supply of salt. And so they warned Yazīd that he should turn around if he wanted to save his salt. Yazīd thanked them for the information, but he decided to take the risk to proceed on course. The clouds had dissipated by the time his caravan entered Nioro and the demand for salt was so high that he obtained the best price.⁷⁵

When the French finally succeeded in conquering northern Mauritania in the first decade of the twentieth century, they established their headquarters in Aṭār, a town twenty miles east of Shinqīṭi (Map 1). The French colonel Henri Gouraud then invited Yazīd to set up shop so he could "teach the people [t]here how to trade."⁷⁶ Eventually, Yazīd took the offer to move there from Shinqīṭi, marrying a second wife, and in no time at all, he became the most successful trader in town. He continued dispatching caravans to Senegal, Mali, the Wād Nūn, and Morocco, but now he branched out into the colonial economy leasing his camels and providing transportation services to the French military. Surely because of his collaboration with the French, he built his house close to their headquarters in Aṭār, and it soon became the place where many incoming caravans unloaded their cargoes.

⁷⁴ Interview in Shinqīṭi with Muḥammad al-Amīn b. 'Abāba (02/27/97–02/28/97).

⁷⁵ Adapted from interviews in Nouakchott with Mūlāy Ghāly Wuld al-Yazīd Wuld Mūlāy 'Aly (07/24/97) and Mūlāy 'Umar Wuld Mūlāy Aḥmad and 'Ā'ishatu Mint Mūlāy 'Aly (07/30/97) and in Aṭār with Sidi Muḥammad Wuld Daydi Wuld al-'Arabi Wuld Mūlāy 'Aly (10/20/97).

⁷⁶ Archives Nationales de la République Islamique de Mauritanie (hereafter ANRIM), Série Militaire, N92 (Colonel Gouraud, Carnet de Route).

The history of Yazīd is told by older generations of Mauritians and among some Senegalese elders. He is remembered, by relatives and locals alike, as a man of wealth who extended credit and jump-started the careers of countless young traders. What is highlighted is Yazīd's piety and that he was "*nāfiq fī sabīl Allah*," a classic expression meaning that he was generous in the ways of God.⁷⁷ It is said that every night in Yazīd's house the bulk of the food prepared was not for his family and dependents, but for his numerous guests, especially the needy. Apparently, one winter night during a severe famine in the 1910s, large platters of food were placed in his courtyard. As the people ate, someone recognized the bracelet of a woman whose head was covered. That person complained that the woman had no business eating the food of the poor because she was from a well-to-do family. When he heard about the incident, Yazīd ordered meals from that day forward be served only in darkness so people would not fear being identified.

Family histories of this kind belong to a tradition of historical remembering that conceals contentious facts while underscoring achievements. Indeed, however rich and informative they may be, migration narratives and family histories pose a set of problems to the scrupulous historian sensitive to contradictions, repetitions, exaggerations, and fabrications. Stories about prominent figures tend toward the hagiographic, emphasizing positive greatness (Yazīd's pious acts) while suppressing or misremembering controversial achievements (his collaboration with the French).⁷⁸ Counter-narratives obtained through other sources were necessary to form a more balanced historical interpretation.

Moreover, some popular stories, such as the incident in Yazīd's house, sometimes become tropes appropriated by other families to embellish the memory of their own ancestors. While they must be deconstructed for what they reveal about versions of history and the ways in which symbolic capital is preserved, such narratives are not always accurate or reliable recollections of the past. At worst, they are useful "clues" to uncover structures of "encoded meaning" as opposed to factual evidence

⁷⁷ Numerous interviews including one in Atār with Fātimatu Mint Mbārak b. Bayrūk (09/26/97). It is worth pointing out here the convergence of prescribed Islamic practice and economic behavior. The Arabic word *nafaqa*, meaning charitable gift or handout, also translates into expenditure or allowance, while the derived word *nāfiq* means selling well or easily marketable. See J. M. Cowan, *Hans Wehr Dictionary*, 1158.

⁷⁸ "Hagiographic" is used in the sense of a "*discourse of virtues*." De Certeau, *L'écriture*, 282; S. Greene ("Whispers and Silences") provides a useful discussion of certain areas of misremembering.

per se.⁷⁹ Supernatural or esoteric accounts such as miracle making and the presence of ghosts reveal the mental landscapes that frame the remembrance of certain events. While often absent from formal interpretations, apparitions are an integral part of the *believed* historical past. Finally, only the profiles of men and women with wealth or notoriety tend to survive in oral traditions. But selective memory is a problem all historians face because prominence and posterity usually overlap in the historical record.

Recollections of Retired Caravaners

Aside from family narratives, professional and retired caravaners provided vivid accounts of their experiences on trans-Saharan trails. Whether they were successful or not, these professional traders are a dying breed. Today only a few inhabited oases of the interior are supplied by caravans. For this reason, caravaners were eager to impart details about their trade and show their unique empirical knowledge about people and places, including regional geography, topography, and hydrology. A former nomad shared valuable advice regarding the issue of routes and itineraries:

Those people [meaning caravaners] do not go in straight lines. They have animals and so they are obliged to cope with temporary wells and especially with the pastures. So those who try to identify fixed trails marked like those of the Romans, they are wrong. . . . It must be known that the itineraries of al-Bakri must be accepted with the understanding that they were related to [the availability] of pastures. When one had 300 or 400 camels to feed one had to figure out where they were going to graze every night. And these are not necessarily straight lines. There are always variations. . . . There are also temporary pools which formed in known regions, and so the crossing is done with full knowledge of the facts. So you must not be fixated on itineraries.⁸⁰

While many trails varied from one year to the next, there were numerous permanent routes or passages along mountain terrain. Still, the notion that environmental and political events determined caravan routes at any point in time was at variance with the idea of fixed trade routes conveyed in Western sources.⁸¹

⁷⁹ C. Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, 96–125; Miller ("Introduction," 50–1) speaks of "encoded meaning."

⁸⁰ Interview in Nouakchott with 'Abdallah Wuld Muhammad Sidiyya (10/16/97).

⁸¹ One exception was the American Consul in Morocco, F. Mathews ("Northwest Africa and Timbuctoo," 214), discussed in Chapter 5.

Just as mariners sailed with full knowledge of the tides, caravaners studied climate change to ascertain shifts in the desert landscape such as the movement of dunes. Like their seafaring counterparts, they plotted a course based only on a few fixed reference points. They also relied on predictable celestial positions, possessing fine knowledge of astronomy so as to navigate with the constellations.⁸² Fuījī Wuld al-Ṭayr, a former accomplished caravaner of the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ, was in his nineties when he explained the art of trans-Saharan navigation:

At night, there is a star that rises called *bilbady* [Polaris, or North Star]. If it was night, I would show it to you. All the stars move except *bilbady*, it does not shift. . . . Sometimes when I go [on the caravan] over there, I place it in front of my neck, and when I return, I put it on one or the other of my shoulders. . . . You can travel without fear guided by that star over there which does not move. The stars that move, when you leave with their help, you get lost.⁸³

That the North Star, known to northern Saharans as the *Najma al-Sharg*, was the cardinal astronomical reference point is well known.⁸⁴ Throughout his life, Fuījī Wuld al-Ṭayr was a most active merchant who led caravans between Senegal and Morocco. His recollections captured both the excitement and the dangers of a caravaning life. Informants like him shared gripping accounts of death on the trail brought about by surprise sandstorms, bad planning, encounters with pirates, disorientation, or simply thirst.

Personal recollections of an autobiographical nature posed similar challenges of interpretation, as did family histories. One such challenge was the question of Saharan spatial terminology, because different people used distinct concepts to refer to the four cardinal points (Map 2). A classic misinterpretation concerns the word “*Sahel*, from the Arabic for shore (*sāhil*). European sources erroneously took the word to refer to the southern desert shore, but for western Africans it designates the northern or northwestern edge of the Sahara.⁸⁵ For example, the expression

⁸² Sahara scholars collected books on astronomy. The Ḥabbū library of Shinqīti holds many such manuscripts, which contain colorful diagrams of the constellations.

⁸³ Interview in Atār with Fuījī Wuld al-Ṭayr (10/09/97).

⁸⁴ Caillié (*Journal*, II, 361–2) remarked on the reliance of Saharan nomads on the North Star and their remarkable navigational skills.

⁸⁵ Such a misunderstanding warrants a rethinking of the continent’s geographic regions. Interestingly, the French were aware of this misunderstanding. C. Brosset, “La Rose des vents chez les nomades sahariens”; J. Caro Baroja, *Estudios Saharianos*, 64–7; L. Prussin, “African Nomadic Architecture,” 35–6; and A.-M. Frérot, *Découverte de l’espace mauritanien*.

ahl al-sāḥil, or "people of the Sahel," designates the nomadic groups circulating in the northern region of western Sahara, such as the Tikna, Awlād Dīm, Awlād Bū al-Sibā', and Rgaybāt. In an unpublished paper discussing Saharan orientation, Théodore Monod speculates that this *quid pro quo* was a result of the late-nineteenth-century study of French botanist Auguste Chevalier, who, on his way to Timbuktu coming from the south, was informed that the region north of him "is the Sahel," by which his informants really meant the north.⁸⁶ On the other hand, from the point of view of Algeria, the Sahel was located to the south. This nomenclature came to designate the so-called Sahelien zone in a most artificial manner.

Understanding Saharan cardinal points is further complicated by the fact that different groups use the same word for distinct directions. Residents of Timbuktu, for example, use the term *gibla* to designate west, whereas the same word means south (or southwest) to other Saharans.⁸⁷ For them, the *gibla* is diametrically opposed to the *sāḥil*, or northwest, while *till* designates a northeasterly direction. Depending on positioning, the word *sharg* (Arabic for east) refers either to east, north, or south. Caravaners' knowledge of spatial vocabulary and their experiences during the first half of the twentieth century informed my understanding of earlier periods. It provided a better appreciation of the complexity of caravan routes, and the need for cooperative behavior among caravaners together with the conditions they endured, from their frugal meals to the multiple dangers they faced. It goes without saying that such detailed information could not have been obtained from written documents, although some of these data are corroborated in several captivity narratives and European accounts discussed shortly. For aside from a few notable travelogues written by Saharans about their pilgrimages to Mecca and the rare commercial registers, trans-Saharan traders did not keep diaries nor did they hold logbooks.

⁸⁶ Monod, "La zone sahélienne nord équatoriale" (n.d.) cited in E. Bernus, "Points cardinaux," 101–6. See also V. Monteil, "Notes sur la toponymie, l'astronomie et l'orientation."

⁸⁷ This orientation of the *gibla* is even more unique since for most Muslims it points to Mecca, a decidedly easterly direction in Africa. Likewise, the "Berber" word *till* refers to the north for some, while for others it designates a northeastern direction. The so-called *gibla* region is limited to the Trārza region (Maps 1 and 6). All those east of Butilimit are from the east (*ahl al-sharg*). It is interesting to note that the German explorer Heinrich Barth (*Travels and Discoveries*, 353, n. 715), who knew Arabic, was fully aware of this, stating that "'gibleh' for these western Arabs signifies the west," in reference to the western gates of the town of Timbuktu.

AFRICAN WRITTEN SOURCES

The researcher of Saharan history is fortunate to have access to a wealth of local written sources contained in public and private libraries. Currently, a fraction of Saharan manuscripts for the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are published and available.⁸⁸ Many manuscripts are either theological in nature or deal with Islamic jurisprudence. Although many Saharan communities tended to be literate, most Arabic documents were produced by those who controlled access to the written word, that is to say, the Saharan nobility. The lower classes, tributaries, and slaves only rarely had access to education. As discussed in Chapter 2, scholars, religious and political leaders, and traders had to go to great lengths to acquire writing paper since it was not produced locally. Women infrequently attained advanced levels of literacy. Women's voices, however, did appear in the written record, although for the most part, they were interpreted by a male cleric or judge. In this respect, the nature of these sources is not unlike European documentation produced almost exclusively by men.

Besides the above-mentioned regional chronicles, works of Moroccan chroniclers, and the histories of Timbuktu for an earlier period, surprisingly few Saharans wrote histories.⁸⁹ Since it involved discussing various families and groups, historical reflection generally was considered contentious and potentially dangerous. Moreover, mundane activities such as caravanning and commerce were not typical writing subjects, although they were unquestionably of great legal concern to Saharan jurists and their constituents. To date I have yet to discover a description of caravan organizing of the kind produced by the tenth-century Yemeni al-Ḥamdānī, who had an obvious predilection for camels.⁹⁰ For the

⁸⁸ Notable examples include the following: the turn-of-nineteenth-century prosopography of over 200 Saharan scholars by al-Ṭālib Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr al-Ṣaddīq al-Bartaylī al-Walātī, *Fath al-Shakūr fī maʿrifat aʿyān ʿulamāʾ al-Takrūr*, M.I. al-Kattānī and M. Ḥājji (eds.); Al-Shinqīṭī, *Wasit*; ʿAbd al-Waddūd b. Aḥmad Mawlūd b. Intahā's *Tāʾrikh Ādrār* (copy of original manuscript in author's possession), translated by Norris (*Saharan Myth and Saga*, 126–59); and the three volumes of *Hayāt mūrītāniya* by Mukhtār Wuld Ḥamidūn, together with his private papers located at the IMRS.

⁸⁹ I relied on A. Q. b. Aḥmad al-Zayyānī's chronicle ending in 1812 for events concerning the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ and the Tikna (*Al-Turjīmān al-Muʿarrib*). For Timbuktu, I refer to Maḥmūd Kaʿti, *Tarikh El-Fettach*, O. Houdas and M. Delafosse (eds.); al-Saʿdī's *Tāʾrikh al-Sūdān* as per Hunwick's translation (*Timbuktu*), and the eighteenth-century chronology annotated by M. Abitbol, *Tombouctou au milieu du XVIIIe siècle*.

⁹⁰ A. Jāzim and B. Leclercq-Neveu, "L'organisation des caravanes au Yémen."

scholar of trans-Saharan trade, therefore, three types of written sources are particularly useful: accounts of Muslim pilgrims, legal documents, and commercial records.

Pilgrimage Travelogues

A number of travelogues (*riḥla*, plur. *riḥalāt*) written by Saharan pilgrims bear witness to their relationships with North Africans and the ease with which they circulated throughout the Muslim world. While their journals are filled with spiritual introspection, sacred revelations, and religious verses, pilgrims sometimes interjected descriptions of caravan routes and political, scholarly, and theological exchanges, as well as ethnographic and commercial information. The following two accounts are particularly useful sources for the activities of Saharan pilgrims and their trans-Saharan crossings.

The *riḥla* of al-Ṭālib Aḥmad b. Ṭuwayr al-Janna (d. 1265–6/1849) describes his round-trip to Mecca between 1245/1829 and 1250/1834.⁹¹ At each stage of his journey, he wrote about the hospitality of locals with whom he enjoyed copious meals occasionally served with tea. He recorded how his caravan fortunately steered clear of reportedly numerous highway robbers. In Morocco, he discovered by chance a relative seven times removed, and he swore allegiance to the Sultan Mūlāy ‘Abdarraḥmān, who assisted him in his travel arrangements and with whom he had numerous exchanges. When he sailed back from Egypt bearing four hundred books, al-Ṭālib Aḥmad was interviewed by French and British officials in Algiers and Gibraltar, respectively.⁹² He returned to his native Wādān near Shinqīṭi with over thirty camels loaded with many gifts, books, and commodities such as barley, tea, and candles.

Some sixty years later, the celebrated scholar of Islamic law Muḥammad Yaḥya b. Muḥammad al-Mukhtār al-Walātī describes his pilgrimage (1311–17/1894–1900) in similar fashion.⁹³ More than the previous traveler, however, he devoted many pages to religious exaltation, poetry, and citations. While imparting few details about the passage

⁹¹ A. Zamāmiḥ, “Riḥla min al-qarn 13 H./19 M.” Norris (*Pilgrimage of Ahmad*) photographed the original manuscript in Wādān and wrote a very useful annotated translation. The regional pilgrimage caravan, organized regularly until the late 1870s, used to congregate either in Shinqīṭi or in Tishīt before joining other pilgrims along the way at meeting points in Morocco or Algeria. See A. Coyne, *Étude géographique sur l’Adrar*, 1.

⁹² Norris, *Pilgrimage*, 91–3, 101–2.

⁹³ Al-Walātī, *Al-Riḥla al-Ḥijāziya*.

from Shinqīṭi to Wād Nūn, he mentioned the people encountered, remarking on the meals and tea provided along the way. Especially insightful are his exchanges with various hosts and the legal questions he occasionally was asked to deliberate given his manifest scholarly credentials. When in Guelmīm, for example, he earned his keep during a three-month sojourn in the house of the Tikna chief, Daḥmān Wuld Bayrūk, by writing at his host's request a lengthy fatwa on whether it was preferable to hold the Friday prayer in the old or the new mosque.⁹⁴ Indeed, Muḥammad Yaḥya seems to have financed most of his pilgrimage travels by providing similar legal services, as Ibn Baṭṭūṭa did centuries before him.

Legal Documents

Much paper was expended by Saharans on the subject of Islamic law. Legal documentation, which tended to be preserved by families to protect property rights and because it represented a source of cultural capital, details the application of local and Mālikī legal codes. Scholars deliberated on all economic matters, from the numerous forms of usury and the status of salt or gum arabic as food or currency to the use, inheritance, and sale of slaves. In fact, as seen in Chapter 6, the lawfulness of economic and financial exchange was a topic that consumed Saharan jurists and their Muslim constituents. These records bear witness to the intense discourse of Saharan legal experts, who typically traded to finance their scholarly activities. They wrote collections of shorter legal replies (*nawāzil* or *ajwiba*) to myriad questions posed by a general public in search of legal and, by extension, religious sanction. Discussing comparable legal or ecclesiastical records for an earlier period in Europe, Carlo Ginzburg explains that these records represent dialogic or polyvocal texts because they tend to contain the voiced concerns of the common folk recorded by scribes.⁹⁵ As such, they are interface texts where the questions of the unlearned are addressed and mediated by the learned.

The Arabic sources I consulted in private library collections also included commercial records such as registers, contracts, and letters,

⁹⁴ Ibid., 87–100. In sum, he recommended using the older mosque on Fridays and the newer mosque for regular prayer. Upon his return from Mecca, al-Walātī (ibid., 388–96) again stayed in Guelmīm with Daḥmān b. Bayrūk, who asked him to issue a second fatwa on the same matter. It would seem that the ruler of Guelmīm there was having trouble imposing his will on the people.

⁹⁵ Ginzburg, *Clues*, 159.

described in detail in Chapters 5 and 6. Most of these nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century documents were found after rummaging through piles of papers, sometimes with the assistance of collection owners or their relatives. Records were chosen for either their content about market information or for what they revealed about the transactions of the authors or people mentioned therein. Without the oral information shared by the descendants of the traders who penned the letters, an appreciation of the context would be lost to the interpreter. Moreover, unlike documents of a more legal nature, such as contractual agreements, letters usually were not dated. So knowing the identity and genealogy of corresponding traders was necessary for dating purposes. Finally, the assistance of elders was critical for translating vocabulary of goods no longer in use or available, such as ostrich lard (formerly used for cooking and medicinal purposes) or the numerous kinds of cotton cloth.

Commercial Records

Commercial correspondence was difficult to come by since it habitually is not preserved by families. Yet the rare letters that remain offer unique insights into the activities of trans-Saharan traders. Typically, correspondence would begin with salutations and then proceed with a review of recent business and political activity. Letters from a Tikna trader stationed first in Walāta, and later in Timbuktu, to his brother in Shinqīṭi, dispatched at the hands of a third brother in the late 1870s and early 1880s (discussed further in Chapters 3 and 5), contain a variety of business intelligence. They recount debt settlements among various network members, the recent movement of caravans, and political events, as well as relaying the prices of market goods in various measures and currencies.

Correspondence and contractual agreements generally presented problems of interpretation, not the least of which was the matter of equivalencies. Conversions are complicated by the fact that certain weights and measures are no longer current, but there were some other variables. For example, as in many parts of the Muslim world, the common unit for grain and dried foodstuffs was the *mudd* measured in tall wooden bowls. However, just as standard weights varied regionally in most European countries before the nineteenth century, the size of the Saharan *mudd* fluctuated from one to five kilograms depending on the market. While variations in certain measures rendered comparisons difficult, the gold weight or *mithqāl* was apparently a stable 4.25 grams

across African markets, and it served as a common unit of account from Kumasi to Cairo.

Another level of difficulty for the interpreter of commercial records is that they tend to paint a picture of business behavior that may only partially reflect actual trans-Saharan exchange. Indeed, it is important to recognize that trade records rarely document “illegal” matters such as usurious interest rates or illicit trade in guns or slaves in the colonial period. In a sense, they are public records produced by traders or scribes who wrote “in fear of God.” Legal records, on the other hand, expose the wrongdoings of social actors who, in the face of uncertainty, conflict, and contestation, sought the mediation of legal experts in charge of defining the rules of lawful behavior. While Islamic precepts and customary law influenced social and economic conduct in the Sahara, however, their enforcement was not always realized. It is also worth pondering to what extent the correspondence dispatched via messengers to traders of a network was censored or encrypted in case it fell into the hands of an enemy or competitor. Therefore, I would argue that the “informal economy,” operating beyond the purview of Muslim jurists or political authorities and off the record, did not necessarily follow the same guidelines set by Saharan jurisprudence. This is not to imply that what was not written was necessarily illegal in the eyes of Islam but rather to suggest that the written record is a formal, public, and sometimes optimistic representation of normative behavior.

A great deal of historical information is also lacking from this form of evidence. Unbiased representations of social relationships are rare because local sources were more often than not produced by those Saharans who had access to the power of the pen and the reins of social dominance. The voices of the oppressed or minority groups are typically muted, while only their labor or exchange value may be expressed in a letter or fatwa. But it is important to recognize that those who left written records were not all prominent or wealthy. The Tikna in Shinqīti, Walāta, and Timbuktu whose letters are cited above, for example, were modest traders who relied on their functional literacy and for whom writing paper was a necessary overhead cost. Moreover, many enslaved Africans working as trade agents were literate and left records of their contracts and correspondence. Finally, the political economy of violence, which was the backdrop to all Saharan exchange, is not always documented by these writers who knew peril, hostility, and warfare to be part of the natural order. To complete the picture, the interpreter of Saharan history turns to Western sources.

INTERPRETING THE SAHARA THROUGH WESTERN SOURCES

In the course of the nineteenth century, the idea of mastering the Sahara Desert consumed many Western explorers and European powers. France and Britain especially competed to control trans-Saharan trade while racing to become the first nation to penetrate into the heart of the Sahara, epitomized by its mystical city Timbuktu.⁹⁶ Early on, Spain secured rights on the Saharan coast, starting in 1860 with the enclave of Santa Cruz de Mar Pequeña, at the outcome of its war with Morocco. Ultimately, the French succeeded in obtaining the lion's share of the Saharan region following a secret deal with the British in 1890.⁹⁷ Meanwhile, after a long series of negotiations with Morocco, and with the endorsement of Europeans obtained at the Berlin conference of 1884–5, Spain gained recognition of Rio de Oro, a strip of Saharan desert facing the Canary Islands that they renamed *África Occidental Española*. Their colonial presence there remained weak and was mainly confined to the littoral, but I have yet to consult the archives in Madrid for this part of Saharan history.

European imperialism led to numerous writings on the Sahara by Westerners (Europeans and Americans), perhaps more than any other region of Africa. The scholar of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century trans-Saharan history, therefore, has access to a considerable amount of primary sources written by these foreigners, starting with explorers and ending with colonial ethnographers. It is important to recognize to what extent the historical information contained in many of these documents often was derived from oral sources. Clearly, both Western travelers and colonial administrators were guided by interpreters and cross-cultural brokers who sometimes produced accounts of their own.

"White Slave" Narratives

Travelogues and captivity narratives belong to a once popular literary genre that fed a Western fascination with the Sahara while disseminating

⁹⁶ Ironically, the first Westerner to visit Timbuktu and write about it may have been an American held in captivity by Saharans in the 1810s (see below).

⁹⁷ The British conceded to France's right of conquest over the Sahara in exchange for the East African islands of Zanzibar and Pemba. The settlement reached in 1890 defined the limits of France's Saharan occupation to Niger and Lake Chad.

lasting stereotypes about the region and its inhabitants.⁹⁸ European and American explorers who either traveled there or participated in conquests left valuable records. Several were written by accidental tourists, such as the so-called “white slaves” seized by maritime pirates off the infamous Barbary Coast or by Saharan nomads. Reportedly, shipwrecks on the coast from Morocco to Senegal, where currents were exceptionally treacherous, happened more than once a year in the early nineteenth century.⁹⁹ The writings of those who survived the ordeal are not always useful, for many were preconditioned “to consider [Saharans] the worst of barbarians.”¹⁰⁰ As McDougall has argued, “the process of ‘knowing’ the Sahara made of it an imagined contact zone . . . , in which Africa and the Orient met in the context of their respective literary traditions.”¹⁰¹ Beyond this proclivity, however, such narratives are particularly relevant for documenting the activities of the Tikna and the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ. Indeed, Tikna chiefs in the Wād Nūn acted as brokers with foreign diplomats in Morocco for the ransoming of European captives. At the same time, a great many foreigners were held in captivity by Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ nomads, who, together with the Awlād Dlīm, inhabited the Atlantic coast and entertained trade relations with Spanish merchants from the Canary Islands.

Whether or not he was the first Westerner to visit Timbuktu, Robert Adams’s narrative sheds some light on the Sahara in the 1810s.¹⁰² An American sailor of African descent, Adams was enslaved for several years during which time he learned Hasaniya. His testimony, collected in London by British merchants of the Royal Africa Company, contains observations on caravan organization, market goods, slavery, and the slave trade. The text includes supporting evidence from the British consul who ransomed Adams.

⁹⁸ Three anthologies on this subject are particularly useful. For the British captives of the eighteenth century: D.J. Vitkus (ed.), *Piracy, Slavery and Redemption*. For the Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, excluding Riley’s narrative: Paul Baeppler, “White Slaves,” *African Masters*. Also see Maurice Barbier (ed.), *Voyages et explorations au Sahara*.

⁹⁹ Cochelet, *Naufrage*, vii–viii.

¹⁰⁰ J. Riley, *Sufferings*, 209. It is interesting to note that, unlike the classic New England captivity narratives or the *riḥlas* of Muslim pilgrims, these accounts contain surprisingly little religious introspection.

¹⁰¹ McDougall, “Discourses and Distortions,” 96.

¹⁰² S. Cook, *Narrative of Robert Adams*. Benjamin Rose, alias Robert Adams, spent three years in the Sahara. Because his description of the famed city of Timbuktu did not match the grand expectations of European merchants, his presence there was questioned. See, e.g., Cochelet, *Naufrage*, vol. I, ix–x, and vol. II, 24. See also the critique by J. G. Di Hemsö as related in W. W. Riley, *Sequel to Riley’s Narrative*, 413–434.

Other similar sources, such as *An Authentic Narrative of the Loss of the American Brig Commerce*, by James Riley, a sea captain from Connecticut who was shipwrecked in 1815, contain more ethnographic detail.¹⁰³ The most interesting section is Riley's interview with Sidi Hamet, his Awlād Bū al-Sibā' captor, transcribed by Riley with the help of an interpreter who translated into Spanish "such parts of the narrative as [Riley] did not perfectly comprehend in Arabic [!]."¹⁰⁴ Even if some information may have been distorted or lost in translation, Sidi Hamet's report of two commercial expeditions from Wād Nūn to Timbuktu provides remarkable details about the logistics of large caravans involving several thousand camels and hundreds of men. According to Sidi Hamet, once every ten to twelve years a large caravan would capsize, and such was the fate of the second one he joined that was wrecked by a violent sandstorm.¹⁰⁵ This interview, which corroborated more recent information derived from the recollections of caravaners discussed above, includes notes about life on the trail, the harshness of the desert environment, and the delicate business of steering a course when tensions prevailed among traders.

A French merchant shipwrecked in 1819 also described his months in the Sahara. Charles Cochelet provided one of the earliest descriptions of the Guelmīm market and the Tikna chief Shaykh Bayrūk, who negotiated the ransom of his party.¹⁰⁶ His depiction of the dark-skinned chief's dress, including his indigo blue bandana as well as the musical performances of West African dancers in his home, point to the cultural markers that connect societies across the Sahara.¹⁰⁷ Because of the language barrier,

¹⁰³ Riley, *Sufferings*. The popularity of Riley's account contributed to propagating negative stereotypes about Africans, Arabs, Muslims, and the Sahara. Incidentally, this was one of Abraham Lincoln's favorite books (Baepfer, "White Slaves," 2). Riley described the hardships endured by Saharans and provided evidence that tea was unknown to many of the inhabitants of the Wād Nūn. His information must be used carefully, especially since he expects the reader to believe that he acquired proficiency in Arabic during his months-long captivity. Riley's son published a most informative annotated anthology of his father's letters (W. W. Riley, *Sequel*).

¹⁰⁴ Riley, *Sufferings*, 262–93.

¹⁰⁵ Riley, *Sufferings*, 268–72. Out of a caravan numbering over 1,000 men and about 4,000 camels, only 21 men and 18 camels reached Timbuktu.

¹⁰⁶ For most of his captivity, Cochelet was in the hands of Sidi Hamet and his brother Seid, the very same Awlād Bū al-Sibā' nomads who captured Riley's crew. Cochelet, *Naufrage*, vol. II, 25–26, and vol. I, esp. 239–41 and 267–300. Like Riley, Cochelet (vol. I, 332–3, and vol. II, 59–63) claims to have held unproblematic conversations with Saharans in Arabic.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. I, 239–40, 336.

however, it is even more difficult to rely on the information Cochelet derived from his interlocutors; besides, much of it appears to be plagiarized from the two previous narratives.¹⁰⁸

European and African Explorers

European rivalry over Timbuktu would drive a number of extraordinary adventurers to voluntarily journey across the Sahara desert. Two British explorers, murdered en route, left valuable records: Alexander Gordon Laing (1793–1826), allegedly the first European to reach Timbuktu, and John Davidson (1784–1836), a medical doctor who attempted to cross the desert.¹⁰⁹ Laing's letters are laconic, but Davidson's journal, which was auspiciously salvaged, contains detailed daily entries about his four-month sojourn in Guelmīm in 1836. Because he witnessed a period of intense caravan traffic and several regional fairs, he documented with great detail the commercial exchanges between Wād Nūn, Morocco, Mali, and Senegal.¹¹⁰

Better-known travelogues were written by the Frenchman René Caillié (1820s), who succeeded as the first European to safely go to Timbuktu and return alive, and two German explorers, Heinrich Barth (1850s) and Oskar Lenz (1880s).¹¹¹ By this time, the influence of the abolitionist movement, together with a marked tendency to label Saharans as cruel, slave-trading Muslim "Arabs," would color the accounts of European travelers conditioned to respond to Western Orientalist expectations.¹¹² All three, especially Caillié and Barth, had good knowledge of Arabic. Disguised as a Muslim, the young Caillié traveled on multiple caravans from Sierra Leone to Timbuktu before traversing to Morocco. His three-volume account is a mine of information on all kinds of matters, including long-distance trade. Other Frenchmen would follow in the footsteps of these

¹⁰⁸ Like Riley, he transcribed an interview (based primarily on gesticulations) containing secondhand knowledge about Timbuktu that resembles both Sidi Hamet's and Adams's accounts. Ibid., 342–4, and Cochelet, *Naufnage*, vol. II, 1–26.

¹⁰⁹ Only the letters of Major Gordon Laing, murdered on his return from Timbuktu in 1826, are available. See Bovill, *Missions to the Niger*, 121–365, and Monod, *De Tripoli à Tombouctou*. J. Davidson's very detailed travelogue was published by his brother (*Notes Taken during Travels in Africa*).

¹¹⁰ Like Cochelet before him, he also described the arrival of a party of western African musicians from Timbuktu who entertained in Shaykh Bayrūk's house (Davidson, *Notes*, 109–10).

¹¹¹ Caillié, *Journal*; Barth, *Travels*; O. Lenz, *Timbouctou: Voyage au Maroc, Au Sahara et au Soudan*.

¹¹² See McDougall, "Critical Reflections."

explorers, but Spaniards also joined in writing about their Saharan adventures.¹¹³ The most notable Spanish travelogue is by Don Joaquín Gatell, who served in the Moroccan army in the 1860s in order to visit the Sūs and Wād Nūn regions and wrote rich accounts.¹¹⁴ In the 1870s, a Scot named Donald Mackenzie, in partnership with the Tikna of Wād Nūn, sought to “flood the Sahara” with British products by establishing a trading post on the coast. Although his plan failed, his somewhat inflated report on international trade in Africa complements information contained in other late-nineteenth-century sources.¹¹⁵

Less known are two accounts written in the mid-nineteenth century by a Senegalese and by a Moroccan. The first to document a trans-Saharan crossing along western routes was Léopold Panet, a christened orphan of French and Senegalese descent who became a merchant. Panet volunteered in 1850 to travel from Senegal to Morocco to determine how to establish overland communications between Algeria and Senegal. Unlike most foreign travelers, Panet spoke African languages although he does not appear to have known Hasaniya, and was very keen on reporting trading activities. In tune with many nineteenth-century travelogues, he discusses his contempt for slavery, although, oddly, he hardly makes mention of the slave trade in the regions he traversed. Conversely, his Saharan interlocutors repeatedly asked Panet to explain why Europeans had renounced owning slaves.¹¹⁶ Particularly important is his interview with the aging Tikna chief named Shaykh Bayrūk, who revealed the secret of his commercial success.¹¹⁷

Nine years later, a native from Aqqa on the northern desert edge decided to brave a trans-Saharan passage to become the first Jew, along with his brother, to reside in Timbuktu in the nineteenth century. Since the fifteenth century when the Songhay emperor Askiyya Muḥammed forbade them from trading in his territory, Maghribi Jews had access to western African commerce primarily through Muslim intermediaries.¹¹⁸ Rabbi Mardochee Aby Serour’s intriguing account documents his perilous crossings in the late 1850s and early 1860s, his altercations with other merchants, including the

¹¹³ Other notable examples include H. Vincent, “Voyage dans l’Adrar et retour à St. Louis”; C. Douls, “Cinq mois chez les maures nomades”; G. Donnet, *Mission au Sahara Occidental*.

¹¹⁴ Gatell, *Viajes por Marruecos, el Sus, Uad-Nun y Tekna*; “L’Ouad-noun et le Tekna.”

¹¹⁵ D. Mackenzie, *Flooding of the Sahara*.

¹¹⁶ Panet, *Première exploration du Sahara occidental*, 101, 159–61, 166.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 155–6. See Chapter 3.

¹¹⁸ Hunwick, *Shari’a in Songhay*, and his latest, *Jews of a Saharan Oasis*.

Tikna and the Awlād Bū al-Sibā¹¹⁹, and the pillaging by Saharan nomads of most of his commercial ventures.¹¹⁹ Written in Arabic using the Hebrew script and translated at the behest of the French consul in Mogador (*Al-Ṣawīra*), this source reveals the tense competition among merchants in Timbuktu and their relationship with the Masina Caliphate governing the town at that time. Despite his misfortunes, Aby Serour managed to negotiate permission for Jews to trade in Timbuktu, but the community would be short-lived. Later in the 1880s he would work as a guide and translator for French ethnologist Father Charles de Foucauld.

Orientalizing the Sahara

While explorations allowed for a better understanding of the area, the Sahara proved a difficult world for the French to interpret. As explained in the first part of this chapter, the French perceived the Sahara as a continental divide between “Black” and “White” Africa. To a large extent, the Sahara also was seen as providing a religious fence separating Muslim “Arab fanatics” from non-Muslim “pagan” or “animist” Africans. This racial mapping was reinforced when they refined colonial constructs in the early twentieth century.¹²⁰ The French became masters at advancing a Western epistemological understanding of the colonies by classifying spaces, races, and species, creating taxonomies and nomenclatures and reconfiguring geography, all the while disregarding or misinterpreting local knowledge. As Edward Said and, more recently, Abdelmajid Hannoum explain, the tradition of Orientalism came out of France’s encounter with North Africa.¹²¹ Steered by influential colonial ethnographers such as Father de Foucauld and Robert Montaigne, the North African version of Orientalism exaggerated dichotomies between “Arabs” and “Berbers” as well as “Africans.”¹²² In turn, French soldiers

¹¹⁹ M. Aby Serour (A. Beaumier, trans.), “Premier établissement des Israelites à Tombouctou.”

¹²⁰ In the words of Mudimbe (*Invention of Africa*, 1), “colonialism and colonization basically mean organization, arrangement. . . . It can be admitted that the colonists (those settling a region), as well as the colonialists (those exploiting a territory by dominating a local majority), have all tended to organize and transform non-European areas into fundamentally European constructs.” Pathé Diagne (“Introduction to the Study of Ethnonyms”) makes a similar argument.

¹²¹ Said, *Orientalism*; Hannoum, “‘Faut-il brûler l’Orientalisme?’”

¹²² This dichotomy was further developed in Morocco where Arabs were thought to be under the Sultanate’s jurisdiction (*bilād al-maghzin*), while the “Berbers” remained outside its control (*bilād al-ṣība*). See E. Burke, “Image of the Moroccan State.”

and colonial officers trained in the Algerian school would apply these racial templates to interpret their colonies further south. Indeed, it is significant that some of French West Africa's most influential administrators, Général Louis Faidherbe and Lieutenant Xavier Coppolani, the architects of colonial Senegal and colonial Mauritania, respectively, were trained in Algiers.

In the process of "Orientalizing" the Sahara, the French perpetuated misunderstandings about its inhabitants. Indeed Saharans, who were of mixed African origins, proved difficult to categorize in the French ethnographic grids of "scientific racism."¹²³ Naming their last African conquest Mauritania or "land of the Moors," the French proceeded to favor the Bīḍān whom they had long labeled with the blanket-term "Moors" (Maures), over the multiple ethnic groups inhabiting this Saharan colony. To better differentiate between "Moors" and "Black Africans," the French then codified Islamic practice in Africa based on an artificial discrimination between so-called Moorish Islam (*islam maure*) and Black Islam (*islam noir*), a codification that would profoundly influence their segregationist Muslim policy in the region.¹²⁴ What is more, their fixation on things Islamic rendered the French oblivious to the historic presence of Jewish communities in Africa. Nowadays, while North African Jews have been the subject of significant scholarship, many still turn a blind eye to the contributions of Jews to African history.

In obvious and subtle ways, the works of colonial ethnographers Delafosse, Paul Marty, Charles Monteil, Alfred Le Chatelier, Robert Arnaud, and many others disseminated misperceptions about the distinctions between "Moors" and "Blacks," and about the relationships between darker- and lighter-skinned Saharans.¹²⁵ Moreover, as Cleaveland has argued, the colonial model for interpreting Saharan societies was based on a static view of the relationships among clerics (*ẓwāyā*) equated with "Berbers," warriors (*ḥasānī*) or "Arabs," and tributary groups (*ẓnāga*).¹²⁶ The French created this model after interpreting the writings of the eighteenth-century Saharan scholar Muḥammad al-Yadālī, a direct descendant of the aforementioned Nāṣir al-Dīn, who emphasized these distinctions based on patrilineal descent. Interestingly, just as in North

¹²³ Blacks appeared at the bottom of this racial grid, followed by Moors, Arabs, and then "Berbers," considered closer to Caucasians in physique and intellect. See Robinson, "Ethnography and Customary Law in Senegal."

¹²⁴ Marty, *Études sur l'islam maure*, and Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation*, 94–5.

¹²⁵ J. Schmitz, "L'Afrique par défaut ou l'oubli de l'orientalisme."

¹²⁶ Cleaveland, *Becoming Walāta*, 6–8.

Africa, the French would identify these so-called Berbers as their natural allies.¹²⁷

African Interpreters

Much has been written about the Eurocentric nature of colonial sources and how problematic they are for documenting African agency. To be sure, aside from *arabisant* scholars, the French rarely had even rudimentary understanding of the languages of the people over whom they ruled. While there were many excellent and prolific French colonial administrators specializing in multiple scholarly disciplines – for Mauritania the excellent studies of Paul Dubié and Albert Leriche stand out in this regard – most colonials were not interested in learning about African societies, their service in Africa was temporary, and they were blinded by a superiority complex. Yet it is important to recognize, as Robinson does, that the colonial archive was “mediated” by Africans and that this mediation was “especially true for the ‘frontier’ – areas that the French hardly knew.”¹²⁸ Indeed, much of the colonial record about the Sahara, especially in the nineteenth century, was filtered by Africans at all levels starting with guides and interpreters – the eyes, ears, and mouthpieces of foreign occupation.

Several African interpreters played remarkable roles as mediators for the French in the Sahara. The Bū al-Mughdād family of Ndar (Saint-Louis), Senegal, was extremely influential in brokering relationships between Saharans and the French. The son of a Wolof Muslim intellectual who was educated in the southwestern part of what became Mauritania, Bū al-Mughdād was a respected notable who served the French for over three decades as an interpreter, translator, and Muslim judge.¹²⁹ In 1860, the French financed his pilgrimage, and the report on his voyage from Senegal to Morocco and over to Mecca appeared in a major colonial journal.¹³⁰ The written records of Bū al-Mughdād and his sons represent invaluable sources for the history of the region.¹³¹ In the early twentieth

¹²⁷ Hannoum, “Translation and the Colonial Imaginary”; Burke, “Image.”

¹²⁸ Robinson, *Paths*, 50.

¹²⁹ Interview in Ndar (Senegal) with his great grandson of Bū al-Mughdād, Abou Latif Seck (11/05/97).

¹³⁰ Bou-el-Mogdad, “Voyage par terre entre le Sénégal et le Maroc.”

¹³¹ Saharans composed poems about Bū al-Mughdād, such as one discussing the cracked walls of his home in Ndar (Saint-Louis), which is visited by countless Saharans. Another praise poem described him as a thin man who serves all his food and “eats” with his ears because he thrived on the information derived from the mouths of his numerous guests. I thank Mohamed Yehdih Ould Tolba for sharing these poems (04/97).

century, Doudou Seck (“Bū al-Mughdād II”), who replaced his father as the chief colonial interpreter for Mauritania, wrote an important essay on the history of Franco-Saharan relations at the turn of the century.¹³² The French archives are filled with the translations, advice, and “framing” presence of the Bū al-Mughdād family.¹³³ Another notable interpreter was Mahmadou Ahmadou Ba, a Halpulaar with close ties to a Saharan family living in Senegal. In the first decades of the twentieth century, he served the French in Aṭār, the economic capital of colonial Mauritania. He went on to write numerous reports for the French, including a series of historical essays based on oral interviews as well as local written sources.¹³⁴

Some of the richest sources produced by interpreters were the translations of letters exchanged between the French and their African correspondents, letters usually catalogued in the colonial archives under the rubric *correspondance indigène*.¹³⁵ Wuld Sa‘ad, Taylor, and others have studied these sources extensively to understand the political history of nineteenth-century Mauritania.¹³⁶ Just as in North Africa, Arabic was the language of communication used by the French administration in Senegal, Mali (*Soudan Français*), Mauritania, and the Saharan regions extending eastward to Chad. Official correspondence between colonial officers and African Muslim merchants and leaders (such as emirs, marabouts, and Sufi leaders) was in Arabic. Colonial communiqués were often advertised in bilingual posters and pamphlets. Moreover, Arabic was the official language used in the colonial Muslim tribunals operated by Muslim judges who ruled based on Mālikī law. In fact, from the early nineteenth century until 1911, when the new governor-general, William Ponty, banned its use in the French administration starting with colonial tribunals, Arabic had been the language of diplomacy in western Africa.¹³⁷

From the descriptive impressions of European captives and explorers to the evidence contained in the archives, these Western sources proved indispensable for writing trans-Saharan history. Additionally,

¹³² “Mémoires de Bou el Mogdad jusqu’en 1903,” ANRIM, E1/3.

¹³³ Robinson, *Paths*, 37–57.

¹³⁴ Interview in Nouakchott with Mohamed Saïd Ould Hamody (07/20/97). Most of Ba’s articles were published in the French journal *Renseignements Coloniaux*. See the Bibliography.

¹³⁵ In the national archive of Mauritania, these letters, when found, are scattered across the numerous files. ANRIM Série E1, especially E1/73 and E1/100 for the largest collection of letters translated by Bū al-Mughdād II and his assistant Hamet Fall and Archives Nationales du Sénégal (hereafter ANS), Ancienne Série 13G (Sénégal) and 15G (Soudan).

¹³⁶ Taylor, “Of Disciples and Sultans”; Wuld al-Sa‘ad, *Imārat al-Trārza*.

¹³⁷ Ponty, “Circulaire,” no. 29.

nineteenth-century reports by foreign consuls stationed in Morocco, such as the British James Grey Jackson, the Tuscan Jacopo Graberg di Hemsö, and the American Felix Mathews, yielded important qualitative and quantitative data about caravan traffic to western Africa. All three consuls held long residencies during which time they interviewed caravaners. Grey Jackson's published account, which includes official correspondence, contains an entire section dictated by a certain al-Hajj 'Abd al-Salām Shabīnī. It details his extensive trans-Saharan travels as a young boy accompanying his father to Timbuktu and later Hausaland in the late eighteenth century.

While varying in style and usability, the French colonial record is particularly voluminous for the early twentieth century. Because the French were keen on surveillance and reporting, they compiled numerous data, including statistics on the movement of caravans, prices, and merchants, which were useful for understanding the evolution of Saharan trade. Many of these written sources were initially based on information obtained orally and therefore contain the muffled, distorted, misquoted, and translated words of informants or colonial subjects. The nature of this information was transformed as it sifted through the hierarchical ladder of the colonial administration. It was necessary, therefore, to decode these documents to ascertain both the evidence they represented and the orality on which they were based.

ON TRANS-SAHARAN TRAILS: METHOD AND LAYOUT

The historian, Peter Novick once wrote, is "like a witness to what has been found on a voyage of discovery."¹³⁸ For many, such voyages may lead them across borders and oceans through multiple languages and epistemological landscapes and into unfamiliar mental maps and faith-based provinces. The itinerary of the historical quest, from intuition to clue, from conjecture to source, from evidence to interpretation, is never straightforward. There are no set rules or methods with which to predict the ultimate destination of a historical investigation, and how could there be anything but pointers when the probability of obtaining a completely holistic source base is a near impossibility? Joseph Miller expressed this well in his presidential address to the American Historical Association. "History," he submitted, "ultimately fails as 'science,' since historians can assemble only random evidence from *the debris of the past* that reaches

¹³⁸ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 220.

them through processes far beyond their control."¹³⁹ In a similar vein, Frederick Cooper discussed how "the doing of history" involves reconciling the tension between the historian's own attempts to reconstruct and synthesize the past and the "messiness" of the historical record.¹⁴⁰

My own path into the African past was shaped by ad hoc encounters with peoples, their memories, and texts. As a scholar of nineteenth-century Saharan history, I retraced the steps of families across several generations and markets to understand the rapport between Islamic legal practice and cooperative behavior in long-distance trade networks. It was a voyage that crisscrossed several regions of western Africa from the Gambia, Senegal, and Mali to Mauritania and over to Morocco with a visit to Libya and stops in archival repositories in France. Because I traced the migration patterns of families involved in commerce in a region not ruled by a single state and bridging North and West Africa, I naturally engaged in transnational research. My itinerary was steered by chance meetings with texts in the archives as well as with individuals and their family treasures. But if the facts, narratives, memories, and perspectives that I relied on to reconstruct trans-Saharan history were collected on an accidental trajectory, the interpretation of these data followed a deliberate methodological approach. For even if there may be no "science" involved in collecting historical data, there are "well-worn rules of evidence."¹⁴¹ This is particularly true in the Western tradition of "making history" where the art of writing is an exercise in logic governed by "scientific" methods, in De Certeau's sense.¹⁴²

Like most historians of Africa, I base my interpretations primarily on oral and written information. But in combining sources to decipher the particulars of any given historical situation, I emphasized the orality within all forms of evidence. Indeed, I systematically related the spoken to the written word, both local and colonial, by dialoguing with elders about all kinds of matters including what was embedded in the archives. The dialectical use of memory and the reliance on multiple forms of orality were central to my method. As much as possible, I strove to interpret documents within their original context without "displacing" them or

¹³⁹ Miller, "Africa in History," 27 (emphasis added).

¹⁴⁰ Cooper, "Africa's Pasts and Africa's Historians."

¹⁴¹ Vansina, *Living with Africa*, 56.

¹⁴² De Certeau, *L'écriture*, 53–65. For De Certeau (*ibid.*, 64, n. 5) history is and must remain a "scientific discourse." By "scientific" he means "the possibility of establishing an ensemble of *rules* allowing 'control' of *operations* commensurate with the *production* of defined objects or subjects."

“carving them out from their sphere of use.”¹⁴³ This method was afforded through consultations with the families who shared their records, as well as elders or the custodians of the past.

Oral sources, from caravaners’ descriptions of the challenges involved in navigating sandstorms and brigands to the recollections of supernatural occurrences, were critical loci of interpretation. These sources were invaluable not simply for the clues embedded in the details but because they conveyed the way people imagined the past to be from their own historical consciousness and version of events. But oral informants shared much more than historical narratives, family stories, and lessons in legal and cultural history. They identified historical actors, translated words no longer in use, and explained the use of goods unknown to current generations. It goes without saying that such a discursive approach to historical sources is meta-disciplinary in orientation.

This book, framed by the migratory patterns of trans-Saharan traders in the nineteenth century, illustrates the ease with which Africans maneuvered across ecological landscapes, political frontiers, and economic zones. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the history of trans-Saharan trade in the *longue durée* from the earliest records until the eve of the nineteenth century. I map out the historical landscape, highlighting major trends and shifts in markets, goods, and caravan routes. I continue the historical narrative in Chapter 3, focusing on the impact of European commerce, African jihads, and the spread of Islam in revitalizing trans-Saharan trade in the nineteenth century. The increased influx of commodities and industrial products in this period, namely, bales of cotton cloth, firearms, sugar, and green tea, significantly altered African demand and consumption patterns. The proliferation of firearms transformed caravanning in terms of size, frequency, and mobility, while access to larger quantities of writing paper also had a significant impact on caravan organizing.

Many of these new products were channeled to western Africa from the north through the market of Guelmīm, which is described in Chapter 4. Located in the Wād Nūn region, this is the homeland of the caravan entrepreneurs belonging to the trade network that is the focus of this book. Here I discuss the emergence of the Wād Nūn trade network operated primarily by the Tikna clan in collaboration with other groups, including Jewish traders and members of the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ.

¹⁴³ Following De Certeau (ibid., 84–9), primary sources are not “‘abstract’ objects of knowledge,” “isolated” and “denatured,” and must be interpreted in their organic setting.

A detailed examination of the organization of camel caravans from the point of view of logistics, finance, and literacy is the subject of Chapter 5. Informed in part by the oral histories of retired caravaners, I describe the structure and management of different types of caravans and assess the dangers involved in navigating through conflict and arid terrains.

Chapter 6 examines how traders, scholars, and legal service providers negotiated Islamic practice and business behavior as revealed in the records of their "paper economy of faith." Muslim traders relied on an Islamic legal and institutional framework for the purposes of accounting and accountability, while Muslim scholars defined legal norms and acted as mediators in commercial disputes. Partnerships and other contracts of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries document how caravaners relied on Islamic legal formulas to solve fundamental problems in long-distance trade. Concurrently, I demonstrate how credit was the lifeline of caravans and the main conduit for capital accumulation.

The story with which I began this book is continued in Chapter 7. It focuses on a complex inheritance case involving Baghlil and other members of the Wād Nūn trade network who died tragically in the mid-nineteenth century. It begins with a review of the literature on trade networks. Then, I examine the inner workings of the Wād Nūn trade network, based on a legal report containing several fatwas, and assess the limits of cooperative behavior in long-distance trade in the face of extreme predicaments. Finally, Chapter 8 returns to the discussion of institutional economic history to summarize the contributions of this book. I conclude by arguing for an appreciation of both the importance of literacy and the use of paper for documenting transactions and cementing "trust," and the role of legal service providers in structuring the organization of early modern trade. I also underscore that cross-cultural exchange entailed not simply the transportation of merchandise and slaves, but also the distribution of ideas and trends influencing cultural behavior at every stop along the caravan trails that connected peoples across the African continent.

Trans-Saharan Trade in the *Longue Durée*

West Africa has well established and highly organized external commercial links across the desert and the ocean. These highways, though slow and hazardous, connected the region to the international economy centuries before the industrial revolution enabled the major European powers to increase their penetration . . .

Anthony G. Hopkins¹

It is more profitable and more advantageous [for the trader] . . . to export his products to a distant land and take a dangerous route. In this way, the distance and the risk incurred will give a rare quality to his merchandise, and thereby increase its value. . . . This is why the wealthiest and most prosperous merchants are those who dare to go to the Sudan.

‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Khaldūn²

In the fifteenth century, before the arrival of Portuguese caravels on the western shores of Africa, caravans circulated between Timbuktu, the famed city of present-day Mali, and the markets of the northern desert edge. They transported primarily gold, ivory, tanned leather, and enslaved Africans, which were exchanged for copper, cowries, salt, and other goods. One such northern market was the burg of Tamentit, located in the oasis of Tuwāt, considered then the “Gateway to the Bilād al-Sudān.”³ When the Genoese merchant Antonius Malfante sojourned there in 1447, he explained in a letter to his Italian associate that his host and main informant, who presumably was a Muslim, was a retired trans-Saharan merchant. He had resided in Timbuktu for thirty years before eventually returning home, leaving his brother there to trade in his place. Malfante

¹ Hopkins, *Economic History of West Africa*, 78.

² Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah*, 809.

³ Hunwick, “Al-Ma[g]hīlī and the Jews of Tuwāt,” 164.

further remarked that Jews were very numerous in Tamentit and that they dominated in trade.⁴ But after incurring the wrath of several groups in the region, the Jews no longer dared to cross the desert, because of the threat of Tūāreg nomads along the way.⁵

There is reason to suspect that Jewish traders may have preceded their Muslim counterparts as pioneers on trans-Saharan trails long before the rise of the “golden trade of the Moors.” To be sure, the contributions of Jews to western African history have hardly drawn the attention of scholars. At the same time, the early history and full extent of trans-Saharan trade remains poorly understood, due in part to the great divide in African studies discussed in the previous chapter. The most enduring misrepresentation is the notion that “the Sahara [was] one of the world’s most formidable barriers to human intercourse.”⁶ Indeed many contend that until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the West African interior remained “isolated” from the major currents of world trade and “cut off by the aridity of the Sahara,” although sources point to just the opposite trend.⁷ A second problem is the assumption that trans-Saharan trade operated on a north–south continuum and was entirely stimulated by North Africans. Tadeusz Lewicki, for instance, states bluntly that in contrast to the “Sudanese states . . . less advanced culturally [*sic!*],” North Africa, due to its “cultural and technological development, . . . gave birth and growth to all of this grand traffic and was the creative factor of the trans-Saharan routes adopted by caravans.”⁸ The following discussion underscores that this one-sided view of the commercial stimulus between Africans of the North and the West is not borne out by the evidence.

This chapter sketches the contours of trans-Saharan commercial history in the *longue durée*. It reviews trends in regional caravan traffic from antiquity until the eve of the nineteenth century with a heavy emphasis on the period between the eleventh and the fifteenth centuries, considered the “Golden Age” of trans-Saharan trade. Attention is paid to the identities of merchants, the rise and fall of markets, and the movement of caravans and merchandise.

⁴ Malfante, “Copie d’une lettre écrite du Touat,” in De la Roncière, “Voyages d’explorateurs européens au Touât,” 152.

⁵ De la Roncière, “Voyages d’explorateurs européens au Touât,” 145–6.

⁶ Bovill, *Golden Trade of the Moors*, 237. In his popular work this author proceeded to prove just the opposite.

⁷ Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade*, 15; Austen, “Marginalization, Stagnation and Growth,” 349.

⁸ Lewicki, “Traits d’histoire du commerce transsaharien,” 292–3.

EARLY TRANS-SAHARAN CROSSINGS

Whether energized by human porters or animals, caravans always have crisscrossed the continent. Although the first trans-Saharan crossings cannot be reliably dated, it is important to understand that the region once was densely populated. Living in large settlements and villages, early inhabitants engaged in transhumance and migrations in all directions from the late Pleistocene until the middle of the Holocene periods.⁹ For millennia, the Sahara sustained a relatively large population of gatherers, hunters, and fishing people who traveled the large expanses of land that eventually evolved into a rather unforgiving desert environment.¹⁰ Their Paleolithic blades and hand axes, and later Neolithic tools such as arrowheads, grindstones, potsherds, vessels, and other archaeological material, today found strewn across the region from southern Morocco to Mauritania and over to northern Mali, are clues pointing to the shared traditions of the crowds that once populated this vast terrain stretching across to Libya and Egypt's western desert.¹¹

The Effects of Desertification

The rock art of early "Saharan" inhabitants, first interpreted by French colonial ethnographers, informs our understanding of the region and bears witness to the biodiversity of a once lush and fertile habitat.¹² Rock engravings depicting elephants, giraffes, and buffalos represent uncontested evidence. It was only after the middle of the Holocene, or last environmental wet phase, that swamps and eventually riverbeds dried up. Then the desert began to take over, forcing peoples to move further north and south, or to adopt semi-sedentary lifestyles around the remaining sustainable oases. Over the course of many years, from approximately 3000 B.C.E. until 300 B.C.E., green grassy hills gave way to mounds of sand, rocky plateaus, and arid plains.¹³ Gradual desertification caused the last bodies of water left over from the Ice Age to slowly move underground or evaporate, creating paleo-lake depressions with salt deposits that would fuel trans-Saharan exchange in a new era. But in many areas, the

⁹ Brooks et al., "Geoarchaeology of Western Sahara."

¹⁰ Mauny, *Tableau géographique de l'ouest africain*.

¹¹ Vernet, *Préhistoire de la Mauritanie*; Wuld Khattâr, *Mūrītāniya al-qadīmā*.

¹² Lhote, *Peintures préhistoriques du Sahara*; Brooks et al., "Environment-Society Nexus."

¹³ Brooks et al., "Environment-Society Nexus," 257; Brooks, *Landlords and Strangers*.

water tables remained very close to the surface, sometimes only a few centimeters below the sand.

Climatic change, coupled with human action, caused shifts in trans-humance and population densities. By 2900–2100 B.C.E., inhabitants of Dhar Tishit, a region where much later an important caravan center would emerge, had mastered plant domestication (Map 2).¹⁴ Concurrently, desertification and migrations led to an increased concentration of agricultural communities in proto-urban settlements. As Ray Kea explains, summarizing the most recent archaeological data, this region would have housed “more than 400 dry-stone settlement sites – hamlets, villages, and towns,” fortified or enclosed by low walls.¹⁵ Founded sometime in the third century B.C.E., the market town of Jenne-Jeno to the southeast was urbanized before the beginning of the Common Era, attracting increasing numbers of colonists including iron tool-using farmers who toiled the floodplains of the Middle Niger River.¹⁶ The findings of Susan Keech McIntosh and Roderick McIntosh document how Jenne, located at the confluence of riverine and land trade routes, was an early commercial center and entrepôt for the transshipment of long-distance cargo onto the Joliba or Niger River (Map 3). With the transition to food-producing and animal-domesticating economies came the emergence of social complexity. As specialization arose, so, too, did the need for trade. Yet irreversible desertification would make long-distance travel increasingly challenging.

Early Chariot Crossings?

When the Phoenicians and in turn the Romans colonized North Africa, the Sahara was not quite the largest continuous desert on the planet that it would become. In the days of Carthage when Herodotus was writing his *Histories* and elephants still roamed the countryside, there was reason for him to describe the northern desert edge as “the wild beast region.”¹⁷ It is here that he revealed critical yet contentious information believed to be the earliest evidence of Saharan long-distance trade.¹⁸ Herodotus described the activities of what one could reasonably describe as early trans-Saharan travelers known as the Garamantes in what is today’s

¹⁴ Munson, “Archaeological Data on the Origins of Cultivation.”

¹⁵ Kea, “Expansions and Contractions,” 738.

¹⁶ McIntosh and McIntosh, “From Siècles Obscurs”; McIntosh, *Peoples*.

¹⁷ Herodotus, *Histories*, I, 67.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, IV, 181–5.

Libyan desert.¹⁹ Conceivably they led expeditions on horse-drawn chariots between the Punic North and central Africa. The Garamantes, who “hunt[ed] Troglodyte [or cave-dwelling] Ethiopians on four-horsed chariots,” presumably carried enslaved Africans and other luxury goods to northern markets.²⁰ Scholars, starting with Edward W. Bovill, were tempted to see evidence in this description of trans-Saharan trade.²¹ Yet if the Garamantes may have trafficked in the occasional slave, their main trade item was seemingly the fabled carbuncle gemstone, or deep-red garnet, most appreciated by Carthaginians to adorn dagger handles, jewels, and other gear. After the establishment of Roman Mauretania, the Garamantes regularized their commercial activities to the point that, as Robin Law argued, they may well have become “pioneers of trans-Saharan trade.”²²

Herodotus’ descriptions later were associated with Saharan rock art-work clearly depicting horse-drawn chariots and their riders. First reported in the 1850s by the explorer Barth on his Saharan travels, rock paintings abound throughout the region from southern Libya to northern Mauritania. Based on their sightings, French archaeologists Raymond Mauny and Henri Lhote identified two trans-Saharan “chariot routes”: an eastern branch connecting northern Libya to the markets of the central Sudan and a western route from northwestern Algeria through present-day Mauritania and ending in the Niger River bend.²³ Trans-Saharan trade in Africa would evolve along these two axes, while a third one linked the eastern Sudan to Egypt (Map 3). At first, these discoveries prompted historians to infer the existence in Roman times of well-established trans-Saharan trade in slaves, ivory (from elephant and hippopotamus tusks), and gold.²⁴ But the lightweight, two-wheeled chariots soon came to be recognized as better suited for warfare than the transportation of goods, even commodities with high value-to-weight ratios, such as gold or precious stones.²⁵ Perhaps chariots were simply used on fact-finding missions rather than trading expeditions.

¹⁹ The impressive ruins of the mud-brick metropolis once the capital of the Garamantes, known as Jerma, located in southern Libya in the Wādi al-Ḥayā near the town of Awbārī, give a sense of the magnitude of this ancient polity dating from before the sixth century B.C.E.

²⁰ Herodotus, *Histories*, IV, 183.

²¹ Bovill, *Golden Trade*, 22; Law, “Garamantes,” 183.

²² Law, “Garamantes,” 198.

²³ Mauny, “Une route préhistorique”; Lhote, “Route antique.”

²⁴ Swanson, “Myth,” 583.

²⁵ Ehret’s (*Civilizations of Africa*, 223) linguistic evidence corroborates that the horse was introduced to the western African interior during the days of Carthage. Swanson

Recent scholars have questioned whether there was any regular trans-Saharan trade before the Common Era. Timothy Garrard's research, based on both literary and numismatic sources, suggests that there was not much of a gold trade before the Byzantine period.²⁶ Yet Herodotus' discussion of trade in gold between coastal North or West Africans and seafaring Carthaginians, which he memorably dubbed the "silent trade," would captivate historians who read into it an early form of cross-cultural exchange.²⁷ This was linked to the idea that in ancient times barter with strangers was possible without direct contact between the trading parties or the use of cross-cultural brokers. However, as De Moraes Farias has demonstrated through a careful reading of the evidence, there is serious doubt whether such a mode of trading ever existed anywhere but in the minds of writers.²⁸ Indeed, the only things that were definitely "silent" about this trade were the traders who controlled access to gold and who, for centuries, successfully concealed the sources of this coveted metal from trans-Saharan and later European merchants. If there was contact between the peoples living in northern and western Africa then and continuing in a later period, evidenced squarely by the discovery of Roman coins in southwestern Mauritania, long-distance commerce was probably irregular until the widespread adoption of the camel.²⁹

Ecology and the Camel

According to George Brooks it was between 300 B.C.E. and 300 C.E. that "the ecological conditions improved sufficiently to permit the development of intra- and trans-Saharan commerce."³⁰ Although the interregional movement of people and goods was possible with human portage, oxen, and donkeys, the widespread adoption of the *Camelus dromedarius* or the single-hump camel in the first centuries of the first millennium led to the most important transportation revolution the

("Myth") argues against the existence of long-distance trade during this period, but, oddly, he neglects to discuss the trade in carbuncles so present in the Roman sources. See Bovill (*Golden Trade*, 40) citing Pliny.

²⁶ Garrard, "Myth."

²⁷ De Moraes Farias, "Silent Trade"; Bovill, *Golden Trade*, 23–4. Arab geographers, starting with al-Mas'ūdī in the tenth century, repeated the notion that North Africans trading in western Africa would "bargain with [traders] without seeing them or conversing with them" (*Corpus*, 12–13). Curtin (*Cross-Cultural Trade*, 12–13) admits that the "empirical evidence for any of these accounts is extremely weak."

²⁸ De Moraes Farias, "Silent Trade." ²⁹ Law, "Garamantes," 189.

³⁰ Brooks, *Landlords*, 7.

region had ever known.³¹ This remarkable domestic animal became the engine of caravan transportation. At the same time it enabled groups to exploit the environment by adopting nomadic pastoral lifestyles. But it also made it possible for communities to reside in the desert, leading to the development of oases and settlements that became relay towns for travelers who traded across the northern half of the African continent. For a great many reasons, examined in Chapter 5, the camel was the ideal so-called ship of the desert.

Progressive regional desertification modified camel-herding patterns and caravan itineraries. Changes in the ecology of the landscape over the *longue durée* forced caravaners to adapt to a forever changing environment as they took their herds to pasture, plotted their itinerant lifestyles and routes, and selected caravan resting and refueling stations. The southern limit of camel herding was determined by the presence of camel trypanosomiasis, or sleeping sickness. By the mid-nineteenth century, the levels of aridity pushed herding zones further north and south, just miles of the rain-fed cereal-producing areas above the Senegal River.

The preferred camel-grazing zone in nineteenth-century western Sahara was the Tiris, a large band bordering present-day Mauritania and the former Spanish Sahara. Located at 1,000 feet above sea level, the Tiris was arid most of the year except in the spring and summer when small amounts of rainfall produced excellent, albeit ephemeral, pastures. In 1859, the French Governor of Senegal, Louis Faidherbe, obtained the following information about the Tiris:

It is a region where there is not a village, not a tree, not even a small stream. . . . But from October to May it is covered in grazing fields, and all the clans from the Oued Noun [Wād Nūn], in the north, to Senegal, in the south, and to Tichit, in the East, that is to say living in a space of 40,000 square miles, head towards the Tiris with their herds of camels and sheep to find grass. The Tiris extends to the sea. During our rainy season in Senegal, on the contrary, from June to October, there is no more grass in the Tiris, and the tribes all return to their countries, where they can now find grazing fields. . . . It is therefore a name which must appear on the map, because it plays an important role in the lives of all the people in this part of the Sahara.³²

³¹ Bulliet, *Camel and the Wheel*. Shaw (*Environment and Society in Roman North Africa*) believes the idea the camel was “reintroduced” into North Africa in the Roman period to be an enduring myth, suggesting instead that it never ceased to be a member of the African fauna.

³² Faidherbe, “Renseignements géographiques,” 1023.

Another advantage was that the Tiris was neutral politically and therefore considered a safe haven. In former times, the Wād Nūn region farther to the northwest was reportedly a popular grazing ground.³³

Saharan climatic change is nowhere more vividly captured than in the words of the early-nineteenth-century scholar of Wādān, mentioned in the previous chapter, al-Ṭālib Aḥmad b. Tuwayr al-Janna. In describing the routes connecting his hometown with other Saharan oases in a period corresponding to the eighteenth century, he explains:

At that time the road between Wādān and Timbuktu was well defined and used. One passed the night or took one's siesta [*al-gaila*], en route, under some structure. This was due to the number of huts and properly constructed buildings between these two places. . . . [The same was true of the trails] between Wādān and Tīshīt. . . . [and] the number of huts between these towns. I have seen confirmation of this. . . . [and it] is confirmed by my Shaykh and by all kinds of people. . . . namely that such and such was an inhabited place. As for the present-day, the route is deserted between Wādān and Tīshīt and even more so between Wādān and Timbuktu. There is now no fixed structure, nor anything cruder than that. It is simply vast expanses and nothing but limitless tracts of waste.³⁴

Increasingly dry conditions determined grazing patterns and transhumance as well as the overall camel stock. In the past century, the camel population of western Africa decreased dramatically in countries such as Mauritania and Mali where the trend followed the massive sedentarization of nomads. Urban shifts led to a considerable drop in the food-supply needs of the dwindling inhabitants of inland oases and the replacement of the camel caravan with the truck. But still today many oasis dwellers continue to depend on camel transportation for basic supplies and for their access to rock salt.

Expansion of Caravan Trade

Camel caravans were connecting communities across the western African desert edges much earlier than the tenth century, as previously believed.³⁵ But while international trade was the occupation of a trading minority, the primary function of caravans was the regional salt and cereal trade, as Ann McDougall has underscored.³⁶ Caravans probably supplied gold to Byzantine Carthage, the capital of Ifrīqiya, which flourished

³³ De La Chapelle, "Esquisse d'histoire du Sahara occidental," 42 n.4.

³⁴ Norris, "Sanhājah Scholars of Timbuktoo," 639–40.

³⁵ McDougall, "Salt, Saharans and the Trans-Saharan Slave Trade," 60.

³⁶ McDougall, "Sahara Reconsidered."

from the fifth century until the seventh-century Muslim conquest.³⁷ Garrard's sources reveal that in North Africa "the supply of Sudanic gold had been continuous from at least the early sixth century," that is to say before the spread of Islam.³⁸ Archaeological evidence from the Middle Niger region further suggests that "gold passed through Jenne-Jeno by the seventh to the ninth centuries A.D." ³⁹ But while the early sources remain mute about what western Africans demanded in exchange, it is reasonable to assume, as does Law, that the Sahara-mined salt was probably traded since the earliest of times, preceding Herodotus' descriptions of salt-block houses.⁴⁰

The expansion of caravan trade clearly was linked to the increased demand for salt, cereal, and metal across the region (Map 3).⁴¹ Western and central Africans needed copper and brass to manufacture tools and equipment. They also depended on Saharan rock salt as a mineral supplement, while dates, spices, cowry shells, beads, foreign pottery and glassware, foreign textiles, and other manufactured goods were in frequent demand. For northerners, access to western African gold was at first the aim of such trade before enslaved Africans. As for residents of the Saharan interior, they too depended on long-distance trade for a regular supply of foodstuffs, namely, cereal, honey, nuts (including kola nuts or *goro* consumed as far north as Tuwāt and Ghadāmis), and spices as well as commodities such as wood and cotton cloth.

The Spread of Islam

The use of the camel greatly facilitated the Islamic conquest of North Africa led by 'Uqba Ibn Nāfi' in the seventh century. Occurring only a few decades after Prophet Muḥammad fled with his followers from Mecca to Medina, the spread of Islam announced a new phase in the organization of trade throughout Africa. Ibn Nāfi's crusade is said to have reached in 681 'Ayn al-Farsiya (the mare's spring) in the western desert, so named after his horse scraped the sand with her hoof in time to save the Muslim leader

³⁷ Kaegi ("Byzantium and the Trans-Saharan Gold Trade") is skeptical about the Byzantine gold trade.

³⁸ Garrard, "Myth," 452.

³⁹ McIntosh, *Excavations*, 267, cited in McIntosh, *Peoples*, 31.

⁴⁰ Law, "Garamantes," 184. For the development of gold minting in North Africa, see Garrard, "Myth."

⁴¹ Posnansky, "Aspects of Early West African Trade," 150.

and his party from thirst.⁴² For centuries, caravans stopped at this well as reported by al-Bakrī (discussed below). An oral tradition, linking the genealogy of the Kunta clan to Ibn Nāfiʿ, makes the claim that he reached the town that became known as Walāta where his son supposedly was later buried.⁴³ To be sure, one of Ibn Nāfiʿ' s descendents, ʿAbdarrahmān al-Ḥabīb, governor of the Fatimid state of Ifrīqiya, with its capital in Qayrawān, is credited with ordering the building of a number of trans-Saharan wells and staging points from the northwestern Sahara to Awdaghust in ancient Ghana, and in the Libyan Fezzān.⁴⁴

The first record of an official religious conversion in this region of western Africa dates back to the King of Takrūr by the name of Warjābi Ibn Rābīs, head of a little known polity located in and around the Futa Toro region of Senegal and bordering Mauritania. He is said to have converted in the early eleventh century and introduced Islam as the state religion.⁴⁵ This kingdom's reputation as a cradle of Islam in *Bilād al-Sūdān* grew so much that in the larger Muslim world the name Takrūr became synonymous with western African Muslims.⁴⁶ The advent of Islam, the waves of cross-continental migrations, and the growth of the camel population all contributed to shaping the new political economy of northwestern Africa. By the ninth century such movements followed well-established circuits and patterns of exchange. But soon enslaved Africans, and not just gold, ivory, and spices, became of primary interest to many northern traders, as Michael Brett, Elisabeth Savage, and others have argued for the central and eastern routes of trans-Saharan trade.⁴⁷ In fact, for these historians, the trans-Saharan slave trade took over in importance from the seventh century onward. Still, perhaps because of the nature of sources, scholars have tended to focus on the North African demand while neglecting to explain the incentives of western Africans in this exchange.

⁴² De La Chapelle, "Esquisse," 56. As this author acknowledges, this legend since has served to illustrate the feats of numerous local heroes, including the Almoravid leader Abū Bakr b. ʿUmar.

⁴³ Batran, *Qadryya Brotherhood*, 12–13; Hall, "The Question of Race in Pre-Colonial Southern Sahara," 357–8.

⁴⁴ De La Chapelle, "Esquisse," 56; Ould Cheikh, "Société et culture adraraise," 144.

⁴⁵ Too little is known about this kingdom, which was contemporaneous to the Empire of Ghana. See *Corpus* (al-Bakrī), 77; Ba, *Le Takrur*.

⁴⁶ Lydon, "Inkwells."

⁴⁷ Savage, "Berbers and Blacks"; Brett, "Ifriqiya as a Market for Saharan Trade." For Lange ("Progrès de l'Islam," 506) slaves were the most important trade item out of Kanem-Bornu from the eleventh century onward.

With the new religion came the spread of Arabic literacy and the Mālikī legal doctrine, provoking a second technological revolution in long-distance trading operations. Aside from connecting western Africa to an expanding Muslim world, Islam provided a code of law, a widely used lingua franca, and a script that promoted civil society while favoring the logistics of commerce, all of which are examined more fully in subsequent chapters. Islam also changed the nature of the historical record, and starting in the eighth century, Arabic sources inform about the movement and organization of trans-Saharan trade.

BEGINNINGS OF ARABIC SOURCES

A late-eighth-century geographer from Baghdad, al-Fazārī, provided the earliest Arabic source making mention of Africa's ancient Ghana as a "land of gold."⁴⁸ But it was not until a century later that a long-distance messenger named al-Ya'qūbī, who visited the Maghrib from the east, would provide more information about trans-Saharan trade.⁴⁹ By this time, Muslims were well aware that "the richest gold mine on earth is that of Ghana."⁵⁰ The Middle Niger River region, stronghold of the great western African empires wherein lay the gold, became the epicenter of trans-Saharan traffic and cross-cultural exchange. Starting with Ghana, African rulers thrived on commerce by protecting routes, taxing caravans, and negotiating terms of trade with camel-owning Ṣanhāja nomads and itinerant traders. By the ninth century, the gold mines of ancient Ghana, located in Bambuhu (Senegal) and Buré (Mali) near the Senegal River Valley, were known to many Muslims.⁵¹ One hundred years later, a scholar relying on secondary sources described cross-cultural trade in gold in very much the same fashion as Herodotus' so-called silent trade.⁵²

The two trans-Saharan itineraries most frequented at the time, described by al-Ya'qūbī, had changed little since antiquity. The first was an eastern branch from Zawīla (central Libya) southbound to Kanem (near Lake Chad), and the second branch linked Awdaghust, the commercial center on the southern desert edge (central Mauritania), to the northern terminus of Sijilmāsa, located in the oasis of Tafilālt. The distance between these two western Saharan markets was fifty days by camel. Al-Ya'qūbī noted the

⁴⁸ Bovill, *Golden Trade*, 119.

⁴⁹ *Corpus* (al-Ya'qūbī), 19–22.

⁵⁰ Kea, "Expansions," 738.

⁵¹ Curtin, "Lure of Bambuk Gold." Bambuk was also how Saharans refer to Bambuhu.

⁵² *Corpus* (al-Mas'ūdī), 22, 32. This is the first description of the silent trade in Arabic sources (De Moraes Farias, "Silent Trade").

significance of Gao on the eastern Niger River bend, which he identified as a kingdom, and that by all accounts was the wealthiest market in eastern Ghana.⁵³ Identified by Arab geographers as Kawkaw, Gao was among the most ancient cities of western Africa and became the capital of several successive polities including the Songhay Empire in the fifteenth century.

The Ṣanhāja nomads, belonging to the “Berber” confederation of clans inhabiting the western Sahara, were portrayed as follows: “It is their custom to veil their faces with their turbans. They do not wear [sewn] clothes, but wrap themselves in lengths of cloth.”⁵⁴ Information about gear is critical when considering the conditions of trans-Saharan crossings then and in later periods. Loose clothing provided windshield, sunscreen, and ventilation, while functioning as a resting sheet. By this period, cotton wraps may have been dyed with indigo that stained the skin, acting as a protective coating against sun rays. A long leather belt and sandals would complement such an outfit, completed by a long enveloping cotton turban covering the head and face to shield nomads and travelers from the elements. Caravan riders also wore black kohl eyeliner to decrease the glare of shimmering sands and sharpen their vision, just like pirates and other seafarers.

That this was required clothing for Saharan travelers also speaks to the regional demand for cotton. Some textile was imported from the Maghrib or Ifrīqiya to the north, but mostly it originated from one of several cotton-producing regions of the western and central Sudan. It would be centuries, however, before the majority of Saharans would wear cotton cloth, for up to the late eighteenth century most nomads were clothed in animal hides, as reported by shipwrecked travelers. On another note, al-Ya‘qūbī commented specifically on the leather shields produced by craftsmen of the Lamṭa, a learned Ṣanhāja clan of the northwestern desert edge – a region geographers named the southern extremity of the Maghrib (*Maghrib al-aqṣā*).⁵⁵ Their trademark large leather Lamṭa shields, which were known for their durability and may have resembled those the Ṭuāreg crafted until recently, would endure as objects of admiration and extensive exchange. The Lamṭa’s center was the burg of Nūl Lamṭa, or simply Nūl, founded sometime in the eighth century in the Wād Nūn

⁵³ Kea, “Expansions.” Gao was excavated by Insoll (“The Road to Timbuktu”; *Archaeology of Islam*), who found significant evidence of long-distance trade there from at least the seventh century.

⁵⁴ *Corpus* (al-Ya‘qūbī), 22.

⁵⁵ Naïmi, *Dynamique*. Lamṭa families still survive in the Wād Nūn, especially in the town of Āsrīr, as well as in Mauritania and Mali.

region, once described as “the last town of Islam at the beginning of the desert.”⁵⁶ From this base these and other “Berber” groups, namely, the Masūfa, Lamtūna, Gudāla, and Gazūla (distant ancestors of the Tikna), partook in caravan organizing for centuries.⁵⁷

Tenth-Century Caravanning

The “Book of the Description of the World” (*Kitāb Ṣūrat al-Ard*) by Abū al-Qāsim Muḥammad al-Nuṣaybī, known as Ibn Ḥawqal, contains the first concrete information about the organization of long-distance trade.⁵⁸ Based on his mid-tenth-century travels, this trader provided invaluable insights about the western Saharan economy.

Ibn Ḥawqal mentions two types of camel caravans that undertook trans-Saharan crossings. The first was a “heavy” or large convoy (*qāfīla*; plur. *qawāfil*) that tended to be organized on an annual basis, aggregating caravans from multiple locations and consisting of several thousand camels and hundreds of men. The second was a “light” individual caravan (*mufrāda*) typically of less than 100 animals and smaller teams of men. Both types circulated in western Africa and along routes linking Sijilmāsa to Awdaghust in the south, via Nūl Lamṭa.⁵⁹ This route was the famous *Ṭarīq al-Lamtūna* described by al-Bakrī a century later. Then tolls were exacted by an emissary from Sijilmāsa on all northern caravans to and from ancient Ghana. Ibn Ḥawqal further reveals the former existence of a transversal route linking Ghana to Egypt, possibly via Gao and Kufra, which went out of use on account of sandstorms and desert marauders.⁶⁰ Moreover, he discussed the “kingdom” of Tadmākka (or Essuk), to the east of Gao, which was then an important center of trade.

Ibn Ḥawqal made the first mention of salt since Herodotus. As the main good transported from the Sahara into western African markets further south, salt may at times have been exchanged for its weight in gold. He described Ghana’s dependency on Saharan trade thus:

Heavy caravans are incessant to obtain enormous profits, fat gains, and abundant benefits. . . . They stand in pressing need of [the goodwill of] the kings of

⁵⁶ *Corpus* (al-Bakrī), 69.

⁵⁷ Norris, *Arab Conquest*, 139–47.

⁵⁸ *Corpus* (Ibn Ḥawqal), 43–52.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*; Norris, *Arab Conquest*, 139; De La Chapelle, “Esquisse,” 59.

⁶⁰ Lewicki, *Études Maghrébines et Soudanaises*, 51–2 (his assumption is based on Ibn Ḥawqal).

Awdaghust because of the salt which comes from the lands of Islam. They cannot do without salt, of which one load, in the interior and more remote parts of the land of the Sudan, may fetch between 200 and 300 dinars.⁶¹

Awdaghust, settled in the seventh or eighth century, was by then a dynamic center of trade and agricultural production.⁶² Furthermore, Ibn Ḥawqal described how Masūfa families of the Ṣanhāja were by that time dominant players in western crossings. Not only did they own a large camel stock, and outfit and guide caravans, but they also levied “dues from every camel and load belonging to those who pass through their territory to trade and from those returning from the land of Sudan with gold.”⁶³ The Masūfa would lead caravan trade for several centuries.⁶⁴ According to a Timbuktu chronicle (*Tārīkh al-Sūdān*), they migrated from the northwest to Arawān, before settling in Timbuktu in the twelfth century.⁶⁵

In his account, Ibn Ḥawqal neatly summarizes the skills, knowledge, and financial tools required to succeed in trans-Saharan trade. Most notably, he reveals one of several credit mechanisms for settling sizeable debts across long distances:

I saw at Awdaghust a warrant in which was the statement of a debt owed to one of them [of the merchants of Sijilmāsa] by one of the merchants of Awdaghust, who was [himself] one of the people of Sijilmāsa, in the sum of 42,000 dinars. I have never seen or heard anything comparable to this story in the East. I told it to people in Iraq, in Fars, and in Khurasan [both in Iran], it was considered remarkable.⁶⁶

It was probably the size of the sum that most impressed traders in the Middle East and not the use of debt contracts so common in the Muslim world of the tenth century.⁶⁷

Several tenth-century fatwas document the legal and financial world of Muslim caravaners, pointing to the fundamental problem of enforcing Islamic law in non-Muslim lands. One question addressed by a jurist of Qayrawān concerned a *qirād*, or partnership agreement,

⁶¹ *Corpus* (Ibn Ḥawqal), 45, 49.

⁶² McDougall, “View from Awdaghust,” 11.

⁶³ *Corpus* (Ibn Ḥawqal), 49–50.

⁶⁴ Traveling some four hundred years later, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s trans-Saharan caravan was guided by this group. *Corpus* (Ibn Baṭṭūṭa), 282.

⁶⁵ Hunwick, *Timbuktu*, xxxv–xxxvi.

⁶⁶ *Corpus* (Ibn Ḥawqal), 45. Levtzion (“Ibn-Hawqal, the Check and Awdaghust,” 223–33) doubts Ibn Ḥawqal was in Awdaghust but he suggests he saw this promissory note in Sijilmāsa.

⁶⁷ Udovitch, “Reflections on the Institutions of Credit and Banking.”

negotiated between a sedentary merchant in Ifrīqiya and his agent who set off to trade on their behalf in Tadmākka (Map 3). As argued in Chapter 6, these types of contracts, framed in the language and legal parameters of Islam, facilitated the operation of commercial ventures big and small. The said agent reached the destination but traveled onward to “Ghana and Awdaghust” where, after eleven years, his contractual obligation remained unfulfilled and his estate was being liquidated by the local *qāḍī*, or Muslim judge, on account of his debts.⁶⁸ So the creditor demanded a fatwa or legal opinion to determine whether after such a delay he was entitled to collect his due as did his agent’s other creditors. The jurist gave the merchant the right but not before bluntly stating that “the giving of a qirād which stipulates a journey to the *Bilād al-Sūdān* is not permissible” on the grounds that this region was “not trustworthy.”⁶⁹ As Brett explains, this was the legal position of the contemporaneous Mālikī authority Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī, who considered with contempt trade with non-Muslim western Africa.⁷⁰ Such institutional problems faced by Muslims engaged in cross-cultural exchange outside the lands of Islam put in perspective the interests of the Almoravids, a century later, in spreading acceptance of Mālikī law in western Africa.

FIRST TRADING COMMUNITIES

In the first half of the second millennium, the movement and volume of trans-Saharan trade would accelerate in terms of both multiregional span and multinational involvement. Before the Muslim conquest and after the subsequent spread of Islam into western Africa, a variety of people came to specialize in long-distance trade. The first and foremost were the Wangara, who crisscrossed large expanses of the northern half of the African continent, mainly circulating between the southern desert edge and the eastern Hausa region. In northern Africa, Jewish traders and later Muslims of the Ibādīya (or Abādīya) sect came to play a prominent role in organizing camel caravans to the western Sudan. Meanwhile the Masūfa continued to prevail on the western routes as caravaners, expert guides, and camel ranchers.

⁶⁸ Brett, “Islam and Trade,” based on A. b. Y. al-Wansharīsī, *Miʿyār al-muʿrib*.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 433.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, n. 10. See Chapter 6 for a discussion of Abī Zayd.

The Omnipresent Wangara

Much has been written about the elusive Wangara, who formed one of the earliest trade networks in western Africa.⁷¹ They were long-distance traders of Mande origin, some of whom were speakers of Azer, a Soninké-based commercial lingua franca in the western Sudan.⁷² The Wangara specialized in the trade of gold for salt and of other highly valued commodities, such as kola nuts. Interestingly, early accounts in Arabic and European languages mistakenly held Wangara to be a place and not a people. The “land of the Wangara” believed to be the “land of gold” perhaps was akin to former European understandings of Guinea or southern West Africa, as Law has suggested.⁷³ Consequently, Wangara became a point of interest to foreigners exploring or writing about western Africa from the twelfth to the nineteenth century and continue to intrigue scholars of Africa today.

The sixteenth-century chronicler of Timbuktu, Maḥmūd Kaʿtī (d. 1001/1593) explains that the Wangara were Malinké “merchants who peddle from country to country.”⁷⁴ In this sense, then, “Wangara became a corporate name for traders who controlled the external trade of Songhay, the Bariba states and Hausa states,” and therefore was synonymous with “trader” in the same way that the word “Jula” would be in a later period.⁷⁵ The Wangara circulated within a vast area from Gao to the central Sudan, which is why foreign reporters placed Wangara anywhere between the south of Timbuktu and Katsina in Hausaland.⁷⁶ The Wangara occasionally crossed the Sahara on caravan to trade their gold directly in North African markets.⁷⁷ To safeguard their precious cargo, the Wangara must have concealed gold dust and nuggets in their clothing, accessories, or baggage. In the sixteenth century, a Portuguese observer may well have been describing the Wangara when he noted that “the gold is brought in quills of big feathers and in bones of cats, hidden and strapped to their clothing. They do this because they cross many kingdoms, and they are often robbed, in spite of the fact that their caravans include officers and guards.”⁷⁸ A

⁷¹ Bovill, “Silent Trade”; De Moraes Farias, “Silent Trade”; Lovejoy, “Role of the Wangara”; Adekunle, “Borgu and Economic Transformation”; McIntosh, “Reconsideration”; Law, “Central and Eastern Wangara”; Kuba, “Wasangari et les chefs de la terre”; Brégrand, *Commerce caravanier*.

⁷² El-Chennafi, “Sur les traces d’Awdağust,” 101.

⁷³ Law, “Central,” 288.

⁷⁴ Maḥmūd Kaʿtī, *Tarikh El-Fettach*, Houdas and Delafosse (trans.), 65.

⁷⁵ Lovejoy, “Role of the Wangara,” 175. ⁷⁶ Bovill, “Silent Trade,” 34.

⁷⁷ Lange, “Un document,” 679, 681.

⁷⁸ André Álvares de Almada cited in De Moraes Farias, “Silent Trade,” 17.

seventeenth-century document, discussed below, describes the activities of Wangara caravaners, the Wangara community, and their slaves residing in Tripoli.⁷⁹ While Lange admits that the land of Wangara is ill-defined in this source, and that it may be referring to Hausaland, he leans toward a western Sudanic orientation because of the location of the gold fields.⁸⁰ While the Wangara occasionally traveled on trans-Saharan caravans, however, their main focus was trade between the southern desert edge and riverine and overland trade to the south.

The wide diffusion of the Wangara makes it difficult to pinpoint their origin, and despite their prominence and enduring commercial role, they continue to elude precise identification.⁸¹ Paul Lovejoy posits that the Wangara formed a corporate commercial group “straddling the southern edge of the Sahara between the upper Senegal and middle Niger bend.”⁸² Their origin was Malinké or Soninké but their identity shifted over time and place. In the fifteenth century, they would have become Muslim “Songhay citizens” moving among the main markets of the western and central Sudan.⁸³ Conversion to Islam led to a religious vocation for some families who, while continuing to self-identify as Wangara, became full-time Muslim scholars and teachers. The Kano Chronicle, for instance, identifies the Wangara as having brought with them the Muslim faith to northern Nigeria.⁸⁴ That literate traders could be scholars, and vice-versa, was common throughout western Africa.⁸⁵ After the Moroccan invasion of Songhay in the 1590s, many Wangara families gradually resettled to the south and southeast. They came to dominate in markets such as Borgu (Benin) and in western and northern Nigeria, where today they are survived by their descendants.⁸⁶

Jewish Caravaners

Jewish communities of northern Saharan oases long were involved in the trans-Saharan economy. The antiquity of Judaism in northern and

⁷⁹ Lange, “Un document,” 679.

⁸⁰ Ibid., n. 73.

⁸¹ The word Gangara survives in southern Mauritania to designate early inhabitants who left their stone tools strewn across the desert sands, while in Senegal it designates a region to the east of Bambuhu. See Mauny, *Tableau*, 65–6; McDougall, “View,” 4; Curtin, “Lure,” 623.

⁸² Lovejoy, “Role of the Wangara,” 176. ⁸³ Ibid., 179–85.

⁸⁴ Adekunle, “Borgu,” 3–4.

⁸⁵ Levtzion, “Merchants vs. Scholars,” 22; Lewis, “Introduction,” in Lewis (ed.), *Islam in Tropical Africa*, 20.

⁸⁶ Kuba, “Wasangari”; Brégand, *Commerce*.

western Africa is confirmed by recent and not-so-recent scholarship.⁸⁷ In today's Mauritania, endogamous groups of blacksmiths claim Jewish descent, and some oral traditions maintain that its early inhabitants, the Bafūr, were "Jews from the Wādī Nūn."⁸⁸ Reportedly, a Jewish Ṣanhāja leader once ruled in the Ādrār region and his authority would have extended northward to Wād Nūn (Map 1).⁸⁹ Other oral traditions from Mali document the prevalence of Jews in the pre-Islamic period, some claiming that Maghribi Jews from the Dra'a and the Sūs regions shared with the Mande their knowledge of blacksmithing.⁹⁰

The history of African Jews, one of the most understudied chapters in African history, would extend back to the days of King Solomon. There is debate about the origin of North African Jews. On one extreme, they are held to be descendants of Palestinians whose presence would date back to Phoenician times and, on the other, they are thought to be "Berbers" who converted to Judaism in the earliest of periods.⁹¹ The great majority of Moroccan Jews, like Sephardic Jews, are supposed to be descendants of "Berber" converts.⁹² By the eighth century, there were communities of Jews in most major oases on the desert edge such as Sijilmāsa, Tuwāt, Gurāra, Ghadāmis, Sūs, and Wād Nūn.⁹³

According to Nehemia Levtzion, "Jewish traders did not cross the Sahara" in the period before the ninth century, yet he recognizes that "they did control much of the trade in Sudanic commodities between the desert posts on the fringes of the Sahara and the Mediterranean coast."⁹⁴ Evidence mined by Goitein may suggest that this pattern continued into the twelfth century. He noted that "Sudanese gold fed the entire economy

⁸⁷ Zafrani, *Deux mille ans d'histoire juive au Maroc*; Abitbol, "Juifs maghrébiens et commerce transsaharien"; Schroeter, "La découverte des juifs berbères"; Camps, "L'origine des juifs des régions nord-sahariennes"; Hirschberg, *History of the Jews of North Africa*.

⁸⁸ Levtzion, "The Jews of Sijilmāsa," 254. For another version of the oral tradition regarding the Jewish origin of blacksmiths, see Caro Baroja, *Estudios Saharianos*, 46; McDougall, "View," 4–5; Prussin, "Judaic Threads."

⁸⁹ De La Chapelle, "Esquisse," 53 and n. 2 citing Delafosse and Gaden, "Chroniques du Fouta Sénégalais," RMM 25 (1913): 183.

⁹⁰ Mauny, *Tableau*, 459. Delafosse ("Les relations," 158–9) further explains that "the Mandinka label all Moroccans under the name Darâ-nka," or people of the Dra'a valley of today's southern Morocco.

⁹¹ These positions are summarized in Schroeter, "La découverte des juifs berbères." See also M. Shatzmiller, *Berbers of the Islamic State*, 18–19. Mauny, "Judaïsme"; Camps, "L'origine"; Zafrani, *Deux mille ans*.

⁹² Schroeter, "La découverte," suggests this to be the case based on the work of Paul Wexler.

⁹³ Lewicki, *Études*, 94–5; Abitbol, "Juifs," 231–2; Naïmi, "Wādīn," E13 (XI: 19b).

⁹⁴ Levtzion, "Jews," 255.

of the age, yet we do not have a single letter [by a Jewish trader] from the Sudan nor even a report of a voyage made there.”⁹⁵ But other sources point to the presence of Jewish merchants in western Africa in the late medieval period. Labelle Prussin’s scholarship demonstrates that there is a lot more depth to the Jewish presence in western Africa than has hitherto been recognized.⁹⁶

Discussing the business behavior of the eleventh- and twelfth-century Maghribi and Genoese Jews who traveled between Morocco and Egypt and across the Mediterranean Sea, Greif established that they relied on elaborate commercial institutions to succeed in long-distance trade.⁹⁷ While he focused on maritime trade, their interests extended into the African hinterland. Hilmar Krueger’s data on twelfth-century Genoese trade in northwest Africa, examined below, give a sense of the far-reaching activities of these traders, the most prosperous of whom were Jewish and presumably a majority.⁹⁸ In the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries Genoese ships even entered the Atlantic coast for direct access to western African goods. By at least the twelfth century, and possibly centuries before that, Maghribi Jews resided in western African markets. In the fifteenth century, a handful of Jews were settled in Walāta, frequented Timbuktu and Gao, and formed a small quarter in the once prosperous oasis of Wādān.⁹⁹ Idrissa Bâ recently combed through the sixteenth-century *Description de l’Afrique* of Leo Africanus (alias al-Ḥasān b. Muḥammad al-Wazzān) to study the Jewish presence in the western Sudan prior to the reign of Askiya Muḥammad Turé (1493–1528).¹⁰⁰ But he admits that the paucity of sources makes it difficult to confirm its extent.

Just as early Muslims were court accountants, intermediaries, and advisers to non-Muslim African rulers, so, too, were Jewish professionals similarly employed in the Muslim world, including in the Maghrib.¹⁰¹ Jews played a pivotal role in the “Berber” Marīnīd state founded in the

⁹⁵ Goitein, *Letters*, 24–5.

⁹⁶ Prussin, “Judaic Threads.”

⁹⁷ Greif, *Institutions*.

⁹⁸ Krueger, “Genoese Trade with Northwest Africa,” 388–9.

⁹⁹ Mauny, *Tableau*, 50, 376, and “Judaïsme”; Abitbol, “Juifs”; Diadié Haïdara, *Juifs*. The Jewish quarter is still visible in Wādān today where the most prominent Muslim family of Jewish ancestry (ʿAbd al-Salām) has a sizeable library. The CEDRAB in Timbuktu contains several folios written in the Hebrew script probably dating from the nineteenth century (see Chapter 4). Jews may have settled in Walāta after the 1350s, since their presence was not noted by the keen observer Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (discussed below).

¹⁰⁰ Bâ, “La problématique de la présence juive au Sahara et au Soudan,” 160.

¹⁰¹ Schroeter, *The Sultan’s Jew*, 1–4.

twelfth century in the wake of the Almohad Empire. In the 1160s, the ruler negotiated with Genoa a commercial treaty shortly after the founding of Ceuta (*Ṣabtā*), which became an active port reviving Mediterranean commerce disrupted since the Almoravid jihad, discussed below. In the early fourteenth century, the officially appointed treasurer (*khāzin al-māl*) in the caravan terminus of Sijilmāsa was Jewish.¹⁰² The royal mint in Fez was managed by Jews, and it was then that, according to one local source, “the Jews, may the curse of Allāh be upon them, took over the trade in gold and silver for themselves.”¹⁰³ Aside from services to royal courts, Maghribi Jews primarily were active in commerce, finance, and the production of crafts, especially leatherwork, blacksmithing, and jewelry.

Literacy, codes of law based on the Torah, the Mishna, and the Talmud, and enforcement mechanisms (similar Islamic institutions would benefit literate Muslims) gave Jews a “comparative advantage” in economic efficiency.¹⁰⁴ Like their Ibādī counterparts, discussed next, they put their literacy, record keeping, and economic *savoir-faire* to profitable use in trans-Saharan trade. Like Muslims, Jews benefited from a “paper economy of faith” reliant on religious-based institutions that upheld legal codes. Collaboration in trade between Muslims and Jews was commonplace since, as Goitein observed, international trade “naturally was interdenominational.”¹⁰⁵ Jews partnered in caravans with Muslims, sharing trust and commercial agreements that prevailed into the twentieth century.¹⁰⁶

Jews among Muslims were collectively relegated to the status of *dhimmīs*, or non-Muslim “people of the book” (*ahl al-kitāb*). They paid a yearly tributary tax (*jizya*) to Muslim rulers who ensured their protection and secured their property rights. Although Islamic legal codes sheltered members of the “*ahl al-dhimma*,” in practice Jews were considered second-class citizens subjected to discrimination and proscriptions restraining their appearance, conduct, and mobility.¹⁰⁷ In the 1390s, the persecution of Jews at the hands of Christians in Spain, including in

¹⁰² Shatzmiller, *Berbers*, 63; Hunwick, “Al-Ma[g]hīlī.”

¹⁰³ Shatzmiller, *Berbers*, 63–4.

¹⁰⁴ Botticini and Eckstein, “Jewish Occupational Selection.”

¹⁰⁵ Goitein, *Letters*, 8. I return to this point in Chapter 6.

¹⁰⁶ Hunwick, “Al-Ma[g]hīlī,” 164–5, and *Jews*, 5–9.

¹⁰⁷ Hunwick, “Al-Ma[g]hīlī,” 167–70. Elsewhere (*Jews*, 63), Hunwick describes how members of the Jewish community in Tuwāt had to abide by a dress code and were not allowed to ride the same animals as Muslims.

Castille, Aragon, and the Balearic Islands, brought a new wave of refugees to the Maghrib – a group sometimes referred to as “Jews of the hood” (*yahūd al-kabbūs*).¹⁰⁸ Large communities settled in Tuwāt, a gateway to western African commerce, and Tlemcen, nicknamed “The Jerusalem of the West,” both in present-day Algeria. They also joined Jewish communities in Moroccan cities and desert oases such as Tafilālt, the Sūs, the Dra‘a Valley, and the Wād Nūn.¹⁰⁹

Fifty years later in 1447, Malfante, the Genoese merchant trading in the oasis of Tuwāt, whom I introduced at the beginning of this chapter, reported on the commercial prosperity of the Jewish community in Tamentit, declaring, “Trade is in their hands and many of them are to be trusted with the greatest confidence.”¹¹⁰ While most Jewish trans-Saharan merchants would have contracted itinerant Muslim agents to trade on their behalf, some Jews did embark on caravans. But ten years prior to Malfante’s passage, the Jewish community of Tuwāt had suffered persecution by locals who condemned the business associations of Muslim and Jews. Accordingly, one mid-fifteenth-century scholar “strongly condemned the situation in which Jews went out on trading journeys with Muslims.”¹¹¹ It would have been after these events, according to Charles De La Roncière, that the Sultan of Bornu (Niger) sent a letter in 1440 to the Jews of Tamentit, inviting them “to *return* there (Bornu) ‘as was customary.’”¹¹² But by then, the Ṭuāreg nomads who exerted their dominance in the area between Timbuktu and Tuwāt were “the declared enemies of the Jews.”¹¹³ This obviously would have deterred Jews from venturing into the western African interior.

Indeed, before the pogroms in Tuwāt starting in the mid-fifteenth century, there is reason to talk about a “Jewish era in the Sahara.”¹¹⁴ This was true not only for the northern desert edge, where were located many of the *mallāḥs*, as Jewish quarters were designated in Morocco (a term derived from the Arabic for salt), but it may well be warranted for the other shore of the Sahara as well. It is hardly coincidental, then, that the 1375 map of the Mediterranean world, known as *The Catalán Atlas*, commissioned by Charles V of Aragon, was drawn by a Jewish cartographer of Majorca. Abraham Cresques, whose descendants had migrated

¹⁰⁸ Hunwick, *Jews*, 2, n. 7 and 24.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹⁰ Malfante, “Copie d’une lettre,” in De La Roncière, “Voyages d’explorateurs,” 152.

¹¹¹ Al-‘Uqbānī, *Tujat al-nāzir* quoted in Hunwick, “Al-Ma[gh]hili,” 164.

¹¹² De La Roncière, “Voyages d’explorateurs,” 145–6 (emphasis added).

¹¹³ Malfante, “Copie d’une lettre,” in De la Roncière, “Voyages d’explorateurs,” 153.

¹¹⁴ De La Roncière (1925) cited in Mauny, *Tableau*, 460.

from North Africa, probably derived most of his information from members of the Jewish diaspora to create the first comprehensive depiction of the routes and realms of northern and western Africa (Map 4).¹¹⁵ By this time, Jewish traders of Barcelona and Majorca had long assured “the most secure and direct contact between the Crown of Aragon and the gold of the Sudan,” in partnership with Jews of Tlemcen and Sijilmāsa involved in trans-Saharan trade in slaves and precious metals.¹¹⁶

Influential Ibādī Merchants

It may be an exaggeration to claim that Sijilmāsa “ruled the caravan trade of the Sahara and connected the Mediterranean and Islamic worlds with West Africa.”¹¹⁷ Yet there is little doubt that a large portion of the gold that flowed across the larger Muslim world and beyond from the ninth century onward passed through this town, which became the principal northern terminus for caravans of gold shortly after its founding in 757. It remained important through the eleventh-century Almoravid revolution and the Almohad takeover the following century, but a fourteenth-century civil war would cause its final demise. In its heyday Sijilmāsa was connected to Tāhert, another important northern market as well as the political capital of the Rustamid Ibādī Imamate (Map 3). There resided the largest community of members of the Ibādīya, a sectarian (*khārijī*) Islamic faction.¹¹⁸

The research of Lewicki, and more recently Savage, shows that traders of the Ibādī orthodox sect were active trans-Saharan traders in the eighth and ninth centuries. Their caravans traveled from Tāhert to Sijilmāsa, and from there to Awdaghust and Ghana, while others went to Kukiya, and later Gao and Tadmākka.¹¹⁹ It seems clear that these Ibādī “Berber” caravaners were early conveyors of Islam in the *Bilād al-Sūdān*, in other words about two centuries before the Almoravids.¹²⁰ From the major towns of Ifrīqiya, starting with their stronghold of Tāhert, Ibādī Muslims had a heavy hand in proselytizing and proliferating Islamic

¹¹⁵ Diadié Haïdara, *Juifs*, 9; Levtzion, “Jews,” 262; Mauny, “Judaïsme,” 375.

¹¹⁶ Dufourcq, *L’Espagne Catalane et le Maghrib*, 141–2, quoted in Hunwick, *Jews*, 82, fn. 110.

¹¹⁷ Lightfoot and Miller, “Sijilmassa,” 83; Messier, “Local Economy and Long Distance Trade,” 2.

¹¹⁸ Lewicki, “Al-Ibādīyya.”

¹¹⁹ Lewicki, *Études*, 91; De Moraes Farias, *Arabic Medieval Inscriptions*, xxvii.

¹²⁰ Lewicki, “Traits,” 297–8, 311; A. al-Yās Ḥusayn, “*Dawr fuqaha’ al-ibādīya fī mamlaka Mālī*.”

literature in the western African interior.¹²¹ Moreover, just as Ibādīs were associated with Wangara merchants, so, too, did Ibādī and Jewish traders often collaborate in commerce, as the former apparently were more “egalitarian” and tolerant of exchanges with “people of the book” than other Muslims.¹²²

After the demise of Tāhert in the early tenth century, many Ibādīs settled in towns further east, especially Wārglān in Algeria and Ghadāmīs in Libya. Ibādī involvement in trans-Saharan caravans remained strong until the eleventh-century Arab migration of the Banū Hilāl, which “considerably modified the economic, political and religious situation in the Maghrib and led to a disintegration of the [Ibādī] sect in most of its historical space of North Africa.”¹²³ That same century, the Almoravids, with their competing Sunni Mālikī traditions, further displaced Ibādīs in western Africa. But many Ibādī communities prevailed, congregating in the Mzāb region and other Saharan enclaves. Lewicki uncovered evidence of a voyage in the second half of the twelfth century of an Ibādī trader from Wārglān, who returned from western Africa with, “among other things, gold and slaves, especially women.”¹²⁴ By this time, as al-Idrīsī, the twelfth-century Moroccan geographer, explains, “most of the gold is brought by the people of Wārqaḷān and al-Maghrib al-Aqṣā’ who export it to the mints of their own country.”¹²⁵ Two hundred years later, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, the world traveler discussed below, described a “big village” southwest of Timbuktu (probably Jenne), “inhabited by traders of the Sūdān called Wanjarāta [i.e., Wangara] with whom live a company of white men who are Kharijites of the Ibādī sect.”¹²⁶ This observation is indicative of the preponderance of the Wangara, their early engagement with Muslims, and the presence of Ibādīs in the region.

“GOLDEN TRADE OF THE MOORS”

The period from the eleventh to the fourteenth century brought about a new era in trans-Saharan trade in western Africa, Ifrīqiya, and the western Maghrib, captured by Bovill’s celebrated phrase, “the Golden Trade of the Moors.”¹²⁷ Commercial expansion was especially important

¹²¹ Lewicki, “Traits,” 296–7; “L’état nord-africain de Tāhert.”

¹²² Abitbol, “Juifs,” 231; Shinar, “Réflexions sur la symbiose judéo-ibadite,” 84–94.

¹²³ Lewicki, “Traits,” 296.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 309, citing al-Wisyanī’s *Kitāb al-Siyār*.

¹²⁵ *Corpus* (al-Idrīsī), III.

¹²⁶ *Corpus* (Ibn Baṭṭūṭa), 287.

¹²⁷ Brett, “Ifrīqiya,” 347.

from the 1250s to the 1350s due in large part to the stability offered by the good governance of the Mali Empire. But it is important to recognize that this traffic rested on older entrepreneurial traditions developed centuries before by long-distance traders such as the Wangara, Jews, and Ibāḍīs.

The eleventh century is marked by the Almoravid jihad of western Africa led by Ṣanhāja groups, especially the Lamtūna, bent on reforming religious and legal practice while proselytizing in western Africa, Morocco, and later Spain. The historical contours of this Islamic movement are sufficiently known to not warrant a recap here. What is less commonly understood is the movement's decisive role in Islamic institution building in western Africa, namely, in the area of education and the spread of the Mālikī legal doctrine. As De Moraes Farias demonstrated, and more recently others have underscored, the Almoravids and their followers shaped the Islamic traditions of the western Sudan.¹²⁸

But while it marked an institutional turning point, this movement also provided a climate conducive to long-distance trade by Muslims. The jihadists took an active part in the regional economy, namely, the exchange of Saharan salt for gold. They frequented the *Ṭariq al-Lamtūna*, or route of the Lamtūna Ṣanhājas, which extended from Nūl Lamṭa to Awdaghust, via the oasis of Azūgī in the Ādrār region.¹²⁹ As McDougall convincingly argues, environmental factors, namely, drought and the demands placed on pastoral economies, as well as the exigencies of warfare, factored into the Almoravid movement.¹³⁰ A decisive moment was the year 446/1054–5 when the jihadists took control of the entrepôt of Awdaghust from Ghana. Whether or not they did overrun Ghana's capital of Kumbi Saleh, or contribute to the empire's downfall, Almoravid crusaders were temporarily in command of both the northern and the southern Saharan trade termini.

The Almoravids unified the region from Mauritania to Morocco under the banner of the Mālikī doctrine. But Islam was not the all-time regional integrator, as Norris has underscored, because the “cultural overlap” between southern Morocco “and the vast Sahara of Mauritania and Mali, has been a great feature of this region since prehistoric times.”¹³¹

¹²⁸ De Moraes Farias, “The Almoravids”; Ould Cheikh and Saison, “Le théologien somnambule”; El-Hamel, “Transmission of Islamic Learning.”

¹²⁹ Norris, *Saharan Myth*, 90–125, and *Arab Conquest*, 141.

¹³⁰ McDougall, “View,” 15–16.

¹³¹ Norris, *Arab Conquest*, 139.

Awdaghust, over which Ṣanhāja and Ghana leaders had disputed control since the early ninth century, remained a critical cross-cultural market until the twelfth century.¹³² Then its gradual decline, due to environmental factors perhaps as much as political struggles, caused trans-Saharan traffic to shift eastward.

Of Routes and Realms

From the mid-eleventh century onward the most detailed sources of the region begin with al-Bakrī, a man who never set foot outside of his native Andalusia. Based on oral and written sources, al-Bakrī’s “The Book of Routes and Realms” (*Kitāb al-masālik wa al-mamālik*) discusses three routes leading to Awdaghust, including a step-by-step caravan itinerary of the *Tariq al-Lamtūna* adopted by the Almoravids from the town of Nūl Lamṭa, in the Wād Nūn region, to Awdaghust via the oasis of Azūgī.¹³³ Writing in the 1060s, al-Bakrī remarked that “the town of Nūl is the last town of [the domains of] Islam before the beginning of the desert.”¹³⁴ In this town, the ruins of which lay just to the east of today’s Guelmīm in the community of Āsrīr, the Almoravids established the earliest mint in the Maghrib where the stamping of gold coins continued even after the Almoravids’ demise in the mid-twelfth century.¹³⁵

All the routes leading to the Sudan, al-Bakrī noted, intersected at “Wanzāmīn,” a watering hole no longer in existence but once “a dangerous spot, for the Lamṭa and the Ghazūla [Gazūla] attack caravans there.”¹³⁶ Located northeast of Wādān, an oasis town founded several decades later, this was an obligatory passageway for all western traffic still dominated by the Masūfa, the expert camel riders described a century earlier by Ibn Ḥawqal.¹³⁷ Al-Bakrī also revealed important information about the salt mines on the northern desert edge (either Ijīl or Taghāza) and on the western Atlantic coast (Awlīl) where camel caravans came to stock up. Besides salt, he listed cowry shells, copper, and euphorbium (a medicinal gum resin) as the most common merchandise imported into the western Sudan at that time.¹³⁸

¹³² McDougall, “View”; De La Chapelle, “Esquisse,” 59–61.

¹³³ *Corpus* (al-Bakrī), 65–70.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹³⁵ U. Āfa, *Mas’alat al-nuqūd*; Naīmi, “Wādī Nūn” and *Dynamique*.

¹³⁶ *Corpus* (al-Bakrī), 67.

¹³⁷ Norris, *Arab Conquest*, 141–5.

¹³⁸ *Corpus* (al-Bakrī), 83.

Remnants of a Capsized Caravan

A twelfth-century caravan wreck, excavated by Monod in the 1960s, corroborates al-Bakrī's information about a typical cargo of merchandise destined for western African markets.¹³⁹ Originally thought to be the remains of a caravan that had capsized in the difficult sands of Ma'din Ijāfin (in the extreme north of present-day Mauritania), Monod speculated that the bundles of metal rods and cowry shells, together with remains of rope and woven baskets, constituted a loot that was purposefully hidden. Perhaps the caravaners foresaw an attack by desert marauders, or a number of their camels had perished and they had to abandon cargo. Alternatively, perhaps the brigands themselves stored their stash for future retrieval. In any event, they surely intended to recover their neatly stacked and buried goods at a later date but failed to do so. According to Monod's careful calculations, about 2,000 copper and brass rods (each around 7.5 cm in length) and several baskets of cowries comprised the loads of five to six camels carrying between 180 and 200 kilograms each.¹⁴⁰

Although the exact provenance of the caravan was not determined conclusively, in all likelihood it originated from the northwestern desert edge, with some of the goods probably purchased on the Mediterranean coast. In the twelfth century there were at least two copper mines in and around Tamdult known to export to the Sudan, according to al-Bakrī. Tamdult, located in the Sūs region of the Anti-Atlas Mountains of southern Morocco, was a copper and silver mining town and also an established caravan staging point.¹⁴¹ Copper was once mined in the central Saharan region of Agades, but the presence of cowries on this caravan indicates that it was headed for southern markets. Both cowries and copper/brass rods were used as currency in western Africa; the latter were typically cast into tools or jewelry. The evidence of "massive imports [of copper] from North Africa" is well established for the first half of the first millennium.¹⁴² As for cowries, these were being imported as early as the eleventh century at the hands of Jewish merchants operating an expansive trade network from the Indian Ocean to North Africa.

¹³⁹ Monod, "Ma'den Ijāfen: une épave caravanière ancienne."

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 298–303.

¹⁴¹ Rosenberg, "Tamdult cité minière."

¹⁴² Herbert, *Red Gold of Africa*, 114–15.

Caravans of Cowries, Copper, and Tanned Leather

From at least the tenth century until the beginning of the twentieth century the cowry shell (*Cypraea moneta* and *Cypraea annulus*; *wadaʿ* in Arabic) was one of the main currencies for daily transactions in many markets of the western and central Sudan.¹⁴³ When Kankan Mansa Mūsa, Emperor of Mali, visited Cairo in the 1320s on his ostentatious pilgrimage caravan boasting one hundred camel-loads of gold and several hundred slaves, he reportedly explained to his hosts that the main currency in his country was the cowry shell and that “the merchants, whose principal imports these are, make big profits on them.”¹⁴⁴ The *Atlas Catalán* depicts the Emperor of Mali (most probably Mansa Sulaymān) holding a large gold nugget, while from the northwest a traveler approaches on camelback (Map 4). Three decades later, a Muslim traveler to Mali noted that cowries, “the currency of the Sūdān,” were exchanged in the capital of Mali and in the market of Gao at 1,150 for one gold mithqāl (about 4.25 grams).¹⁴⁵

It is not known precisely how or when cowries filtered into western Africa, but they may have been first imported via the Mediterranean from Persia before the Maldives in the Indian Ocean became the main source.¹⁴⁶ The shell money made its way into western Africa via various routes. By at least the eleventh century, Jewish merchants stationed in Tunisia, Morocco, and as far south as Tāhert (Algeria) imported cowries by corresponding with their trade partners in the Indian Ocean.¹⁴⁷ Trade in cowries and beads “loomed large” in the trade records of an eleventh-century Jew documented in the Geniza papers analyzed by Goitein.¹⁴⁸ Despite their bulkiness, cowries were big business. One bale of cowries sold for 11,000 dirham in 1055. About the seasonality of the cowry trade, another trader station in Al-Mahdiyya, Tunisia, explains that “cowrie shells have no market in the winter. They are traded only with people coming by sea during the summer. There is no one here who would travel [with cowries] by

¹⁴³ Johnson, “Cowrie Currencies of West Africa.” Cowries originating from the Indian Ocean were found in the archaeological digs of the political capital of Ghana (Kumbi Saleh), which suggests that they circulated since at least the ninth century (Mauny, *Tableau*, 59).

¹⁴⁴ *Corpus* (al-ʿUmarī), 269.

¹⁴⁵ *Corpus* (Ibn Baṭṭūta), 281. On the mithqāl see Chapter 5.

¹⁴⁶ Hiskett, “Materials Relating to the Cowry Currency.” For the theory that Atlantic shells may have first circulated as currency before Indian Ocean imports, see Mauny, “La monnaie marginelloïde.”

¹⁴⁷ Goitein, *Mediterranean*, I, 373 sec. 15; 153–4, 275, and *Letters*, 199–200.

¹⁴⁸ Goitein, *Mediterranean*, I, 153–4.

land.”¹⁴⁹ The cowry endured as a major item transported on caravans into the nineteenth century, by which time European maritime merchants, of mainly British origin, virtually monopolized cowry imports to Africa, causing an irreversible inflation of the shell currency.

Aside from Maghribi Jews, Genoese merchants also may have engaged in importing cowries, since they otherwise played a significant part in the Mediterranean trade, primarily in Alexandria (Egypt), Bejaïa (Algeria), and Ceuta (Morocco). Krueger, who mined twelfth-century contracts, noted that the bulk of Genoese trade, concentrated in Ceuta, was comprised of copper imports, and lamb- and goatskin exports, but he does not mention cowries. Yet he illustrates the global dimensions of Mediterranean and African exchange in this period.

The sixty wares mentioned in rather scattered fashion throughout the thousands of contracts of Genoese merchants suggest a commercial activity that was carried on over three continents; they portray a unity that included such distant lands as Turkestan, India and the East Indies in the East [cowries (?)], Champagne, Flanders, and Germany in the North, and the Sahara and Central Africa in the South [goatskins, lambskins, gold, indigo].¹⁵⁰

Krueger also notes that Spain supplied linens and spices, primarily saffron, and paper from Xátiva, discussed below.

Other Caravan Cargoes

Textiles of bewildering varieties and origins circulated along transcontinental trade routes. Al-Bakrī mentioned red and blue cloaks as well as silk, cotton, and brocades worn by the inhabitants of Ghana.¹⁵¹ Two hundred years later cloth from Egypt, Yemen, and Grenada was sewn into clothes and sheets for African tents. By the fifteenth century, Kano (in what is today northern Nigeria) was a major center of the textile industry and well on its way to becoming the “Manchester of West Africa.” Woven on small looms and dyed in vats with indigo, cotton cloth strips were objects of a voluminous trade radiating outward as far north as the Maghrib and central Libya.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 275.

¹⁵⁰ Krueger, “Wares of Exchange in the Genoese-African Traffic,” 70.

¹⁵¹ *Corpus* (al-Bakrī), 80.

¹⁵² The dyeing pits of Fez bear a striking resemblance to those of Kano, suggesting long-distance exchanges in technology and culture.

All sorts of beads made their way into western Africa from the Mediterranean, Egypt, and beyond.¹⁵³ Found throughout the markets of Africa, local and foreign beads were in high demand. Egyptian glass bracelets were also common archaeological finds and predated Mansa Mūsa’s pilgrimage that revived east–west trade.¹⁵⁴ At the same time, other manufactured goods were transported on camelback, including blankets, rugs, metalware (jewelry, brass lamps, nails, needles, bridles, door knobs, padlocks, and weapons such as daggers), wooden objects (doors and window frames, locks, bowls, and tent poles), pottery, and ceramics. Even marble tombstones carved in Andalusia made it across the desert.¹⁵⁵ Moreover, the increased popularity of Islam created demand for religious supplies such as prayer rugs, chaplets, writing paper, copies of the Qur’ān, and Arabic manuscripts.

Aside from such merchandise, animals together with water and feed were transported on interregional caravans. Horses, first reported in Ghana by the eleventh-century al-Bakrī, traveled regularly on caravans to western Africa.¹⁵⁶ Fed largely with camel milk, horses were sold in great numbers and at premium prices to wealthy individuals and powerful polities on the southern desert edge. It goes without saying that the trade in camels was particularly important throughout the region. Caravans from the north returned with fresh and usually fewer camels. But smaller animals such as sheep and goats were regular caravan passengers for consumption and exchange. Moreover, there was an active trade going northward of “exotic” animals such as parrots, monkeys, and the occasional giraffe.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ Bead production and importation remains poorly documented. Al-Idrīsī explains that all kinds of glass, shell, coral, and pearl beads were imported (*Corpus* (al-Idrīsī), 107–9), while in the early thirteenth century Yāqūt discusses blue beads from Sijilmāsa were included in caravan loads to the western Sudan (*ibid.*, 169). Excavations of Awdaghust, Jenne, and Gao have revealed the presence of these international beads. See Mauny, *Tableau*, 371–2; Insoll, “The Road to Timbuktu.”

¹⁵⁴ Mauny, *Tableau*, 372.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 373; De Moraes Farias, *Arabic Medieval Inscriptions*.

¹⁵⁶ *Corpus* (al-Bakrī), 80. He described the Emperor of Ghana surrounded by ten horses decked in gold-embroidered cloaks. In the twelfth century, al-Idrīsī (*Corpus*, 110) reports that horses were an important feature of the Emperor’s regalia. Although direct evidence of a large volume of trans-Saharan horse trade is lacking until the fourteenth century (when Mansa Mūsa’s cavalry is said to have numbered 10,000), Hunwick (*Timbuktu*, xxxv, n. 49) argues that the horse trade was substantial in earlier periods since a large cavalry was necessary for the military might of ancient Ghana. He takes issue with Law’s (*The Horse in West African History*) position that the horse trade was not important before the thirteenth or fourteenth century.

¹⁵⁷ Brûlard, “Aperçu sur le commerce caravanier,” 205.

Subsistence goods, especially foodstuffs, were always part of caravan cargoes. Saharan oasis dates were popular and circulated in all directions. Dates reached high prices in western Africa because of their sugar content and long-term preservation qualities. Other dried fruit was commonly purchased in southern markets, such as raisins and figs, as well as spices, herbs, cereals (barley, millet, and wheat), nuts, condiments (including sugar of Moroccan origin), honey, and dried meat. Furthermore, the diffusion across northern Africa in the first three centuries of Islam of diverse “strains of rice, sorghum and hard wheat, and such new crops as cotton, coco-yams, sour oranges, lemons and limes,” eventually would reach western Africa, causing what Lovejoy called an “agricultural revolution.”¹⁵⁸

Alongside comestibles, there was an active trade between markets in specialty goods such as wax, medicinal plants (herbs, bark, roots, gazelle dung, and various concoctions), tobacco, kola nuts, incense, indigo, perfumes, henna, and other plant- and mineral-based cosmetics. West African shea butter, used mainly in cosmetics and reportedly popular in fifteenth-century Tuwāt, probably was exported at a much earlier date.¹⁵⁹ North African wool was traded in the south. Finally, leatherwork in the form of pouches, bags, rugs, cushions, and both raw and tanned hides for the manufacture of shields, clothing, and bookbinding was the subject of extensive trade from southern to northern markets.

By the mid-fourteenth century, when the intrepid globe-trotter Ibn Baṭṭūṭa was visiting the area, Timbuktu was not quite the prominent market that it would soon become. This was the last leg of his thirty-year journey from his native Tangiers. Traveling to western Africa, he hoped, no doubt, to generate enough riches to secure his retirement. His *riḥla* is the earliest eyewitness account of the Empire of Mali, which he visited at its zenith.¹⁶⁰ Ibn Baṭṭūṭa’s caravan traveled from Sijilmāsa to Walāta and from there to the Malian capital of Niani where he obtained 100 gold mithqāl as a personal gift from the emperor whose wealth he described in awesome detail. Later he headed toward Timbuktu and eastward to the then more active market of Takedda where he was hosted by Saʿīd b. ʿAly al-Gazūlī, the most prominent merchant, who probably was from the Wād Nūn region. After attempting to purchase a

¹⁵⁸ Lovejoy, “Role of the Wangara,” 186.

¹⁵⁹ Malfante, “Copie d’une lettre,” in De La Roncière, “Voyages d’explorateurs,” 152.

¹⁶⁰ The rest of the paragraph is based on *Corpus* (Ibn Baṭṭūṭa), 279–304. Ibn Baṭṭūṭa produced the earliest and most vivid account of the dangers of caravan crossings discussed in Chapter 5. See Dunn, *Adventures of Ibn Battuta*.

young female slave for a quarter of his gold, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa departed on a caravan that transported “about 600 slaves” destined for Tuwāt. Eventually he reached the Moroccan capital of Fez where the sultan would commission the recording of his remarkable travels across the Muslim world.

SAHARAN MARKETS OLD AND NEW

When trans-Saharan trade was expanding in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a number of Saharan oases emerged, sometimes replacing older markets. This new urban development was entirely due to the rhythm of Saharan caravan traffic circulating between desert oases. By then Awdaghost began its decline, eventually to be abandoned by the fourteenth century, and other burghs (*qṣars*) arose. Some of these included Wādān, Shinqīṭi, Tīshīt, and Walāta in the western Sahara, Timbuktu in the center-south, Agades and Takedda to the east, and Ghāt, Murzuq, and Ghadāmis in north-central Sahara. Little is known of the history of Tinīgi, once a significant market to the northeast of Wādān and home to the scholarly Tajakānit clan (which became especially active in nineteenth-century caravan trade) but abandoned in the sixteenth century after a civil war.¹⁶¹ Commerce radiated toward southern desert edge markets including Kano, Katsina, Zinder, and Bornu in the center-east.

Some towns, such as Shinqīṭi and Takedda, doubled as rallying points for pilgrimage caravans combining commerce and religious duty. Until the late nineteenth century when this pilgrimage route became less frequented, several trans-Saharan caravans led to Mecca via Cairo, either across Morocco and Libya or through northern Nigeria and over to the Sudan.¹⁶² Caravan traffic across Africa’s northern half was now sufficient to support a network of market oases. The development of Saharan urban centers, with fortified stone houses and locked doors, contributed to providing secure facilities for sheltering caravaners, merchandise, and camels, greatly assisting long-distance trade.

Jenne and Timbuktu: Cross-Cultural Markets

On the southern desert edge along the Niger River, Jenne continued as of old to flourish as a central commercial gateway and the most ancient

¹⁶¹ Whitcomb, “New Evidence on the Origin of the Kunta II,” 410–12.

¹⁶² Schmitz, “L’islam en Afrique de l’Ouest,” 123, 126.

continually inhabited city in western Africa. Jenne was home to notable families thriving on trade and Islamic learning, and was an international crossroads peopled by Wangara, Soninké, Halpulaar, and Ṣanhāja traders as well as numerous Maghribi merchants, including a community from Fez.¹⁶³ Such activity prompted the early-seventeenth-century chronicler of Timbuktu ‘Abdarrahmān al-Sa‘dī, to declare that “Jenne is one of the great markets of the Muslims” where the two principal mined goods traded hands: salt and gold.¹⁶⁴ By the early sixteenth century, the Moroccan traveler Leo Africanus remarked that gold dust and pieces of iron were the main currencies, and every year a million gold ducats left Jenne for northern markets such as Tunis and Tripoli.¹⁶⁵

In its early days, Timbuktu was but a small encampment near the Niger River where the flood levels reached furthest north and camel herders and caravans came to resupply. Apparently, the Ṣanhāja Masūfa (or the Ṭuāreg?) in the twelfth century would have created the first permanent settlements. According to the seventeenth-century chronicler al-Sa‘dī, Timbuktu was

a refuge of scholarly and righteous folk, a haunt of saints and ascetics, and a meeting place of caravans and boats. The Tuāreg [read Masūfa] made it into a depot for their belongings and provisions, and it grew into a crossroads for travelers coming and going.¹⁶⁶

Once described as “the mouth of the Sudan,” Timbuktu rose to become a beacon of intellectual activity and Islamic learning as well as a cosmopolitan market.¹⁶⁷ But according to Elias Saad, its wealth rested first on local commerce and only second on trans-Saharan trade.¹⁶⁸

The Songhay, the Ṭuāreg, especially the Kel-Es-Sūq, Iwillimidan and Kel Intsar, the Mande, the Bozo, the Kunta, the Berābīsh, the Ṣanhāja, and other local groups were Timbuktu’s primary inhabitants. Other trading communities were represented, including Maghribis and Andalusians, on the one hand, and the Wangara, the Fulbe, the Jula, and the Hausa, on the other. At least by the fifteenth century, Timbuktu entertained constant commercial relations with key markets to the south, including Kano, Kastina, Sokoto, and Gobir, and as far east as Njimi and Gazargamo, the

¹⁶³ Oral traditions maintain that at some point Jenne was the home of about 4,200 Muslim scholars (see Hunwick, *Timbuktu*, 17, n. 2, 18–19, and 23–8).

¹⁶⁴ Hunwick, *Timbuktu*, 17–18. ¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 278 and 17, n. 2.

¹⁶⁶ Hunwick, *Timbuktu*, 29 and n. 1. Brackets in the original.

¹⁶⁷ Norris, “Ṣanhājah,” 639, citing al-Ṭālib Aḥmad b. al-Tuwayr al-Janna.

¹⁶⁸ Saad, *Social History of Timbuktu*, 5.

capitals of the kingdom of Kanem-Bornu. Traders from the northeastern Saharan oases of Ghât, Ghadâmis, and even Murzuq joined those from Wârglân. The Tuwâtis were then the largest Maghribi community, and, like the Ghadâmisîya, whose hometowns once were considered part of the *Bilād al-Sūdān*, they formed distinct neighborhoods.¹⁶⁹ In fact, one tradition claims the oasis of Tuwât was “founded by a Mālinke who had accompanied Mansa Mūsa on pilgrimage.”¹⁷⁰ A fifteenth-century imam of Timbuktu’s central mosque, named Jinger-ebir (from the Arabic for great mosque, *jāmi‘ al-kabīr*), was originally Tuwâtī, as were several Jewish merchants residing there at the time.¹⁷¹ Conversely, the Wangara and Tuāreg of the Kel Es-Suk clan formed communities in Tuwât and Ghadâmis.¹⁷² By the early sixteenth century, a Moroccan community from Fez, large enough to sustain a chief, resided in Timbuktu.

Timbuktu was also closely connected to Jenne since both were “linked by such strong reciprocal ties that the families of traders have representatives in both towns.”¹⁷³ This was the case even before the fifteenth-century rise of Songhay when Timbuktu gained most prominence.¹⁷⁴ Six camel-days to the north, the town of Arawān, in the Azawād region, was the main stopover for salt caravans and traffic from the northwest. Settled in 787/1385, Arawān was home to some of the region’s most celebrated Ṣanhāja intellectuals, including Aḥmad Bāba (1556–1627).¹⁷⁵ But Timbuktu’s early ties had been especially strong with the more ancient city of Wādān.¹⁷⁶

Wādān and Shinqīti: Cities of the Ādrār

By the late twelfth century Wādān was on its way to becoming a veritable Saharan metropolis and caravan hub, deriving most of its wealth from the nearby Ijil quarry.¹⁷⁷ Like most western Saharan oases, including Tīshīt discussed below, the people of Wādān were originally speakers of Azer, the Soninké-based language of commerce prevalent among many groups

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 8, 128.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 128; Norris, *Tuareg*, 115.

¹⁷¹ Saad, *Social History*, 134.

¹⁷² Hunwick, *Timbuktu*.

¹⁷³ Monteil, *Une cité soudanaise: Djénné*, 261.

¹⁷⁴ Hunwick, *Timbuktu*, 20–2; Hofheinz, “Goths in the Land of the Blacks,” 160–1.

¹⁷⁵ Al-Ṭālib Aḥmad b. al-Ṭuwayr al-Janna, *Tā’rikh*, 43, n. 4.

¹⁷⁶ Norris, “Ṣanhājāh.”

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 635–6; Webb, *Desert Frontier*, illustration 3.1, 57; Bonte, “L’émirat,” 380–6; Ould El Kettab, *Ouadane*.

including the Wangara.¹⁷⁸ The town's most recent name was derived from the Arabic for two valleys: the valley of dates (*wād al-tamr*) and the valley of knowledge (*wād al-‘ilm*), and there once were as many as forty scholars on just one street of Wādān.¹⁷⁹ In its heyday, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Wādān was the largest oasis in the area with a population of perhaps 5,000, including a small Jewish quarter where the star of David remains inscribed above a doorway. Wādān was under the sway of the Idaw al-Hājj, a clerical group operating a large commercial network that much later extended south of the Senegal River. This group entered into conflict with recently arrived families of the Idaw ‘Aly clan in the early 1700s, and then the Kunta, who took control of the Ijl salt mine in the 1760s, precipitating the city's decline.¹⁸⁰

A two-day camel ride to the west took one to Shinqīti, which gained commercial prominence after Wādān's final demise in the early nineteenth century due to a series of wars involving the Kunta.¹⁸¹ Sitting atop the Ādrār plateau, it was settled by the mid-thirteenth century near the ruins of the more ancient town of Abbayr.¹⁸² From the Azer *sin-gedde* meaning "the horses' spring," Shinqīti became the intellectual capital of the region, center of scholarship and Islamic learning. The two main clans were the Laghlāl and the aforementioned Idaw ‘Aly. This second group splintered after a late-seventeenth-century civil war when factions moved south to settle the small oasis of Tijikja, while others moved further west to the Gibla region.¹⁸³ From the late eighteenth century dates the earliest written record of the term "the land of Shinqīt‘" (*Bilād Shinqīt*), which came to designate the intellectual world emanating from Shinqīti.¹⁸⁴ Both Wādān and Shinqīti communicated regularly with perhaps the more ancient oasis of Tishīt, located seven to eight days to the south.

¹⁷⁸ Norris, "Šanhājah," 635.

¹⁷⁹ Ould Bah, *Littérature juridique*, 234; Norris, "Šanhājah," 639. See M. Wuld Hāmidun, *Hayāt Muritāniya Hayāt al-thaqāfiya*, 61 for alternative explanations.

¹⁸⁰ Norris, "Šanhājah," 640, n. 20; Bonte, "L'émirat," 459–74, 1365–73; Webb, "Evolution of the Idaw-al-Hajj."

¹⁸¹ Al-Shinqīti, *Wasīt*, 422. He cites Sīdī ‘Abdallah b. al-Hājj Ibrāhīm as his source, no doubt referring to his *al-Sahīḥāt al-Naqlī*. Shinqīti was also spelled with a *jīm* instead of a *qāf*, especially in later periods. See also Bonte, "L'émirat," 1365–73.

¹⁸² Ould Cheikh, "Société," 153. The year 660/1262 is the most commonly agreed on date for the founding of Shinqīti.

¹⁸³ Ould Khalifa, *La région du Tagant*; Bonte, "L'émirat," 1373–84.

¹⁸⁴ Lydon, "Inkwells"; El-Chennafi, "Sur les traces d'Awdağust," 100, n. 1. Mauritians like to say that Shinqīti is the "seventh city of Islam," but this claim belongs to popular lore.

The Oasis of Tīshīt

Tīshīt, located in the northern Awukār bordering the Tagānt region, was described by the nineteenth-century ethnographer Aḥmad al-Shinqīṭī as “the closest city to Bilād al-Sūdān.”¹⁸⁵ Its founding is disputed between the Māsna, the original inhabitants, and the Shurfa, a group claiming Sharifian descent. A Shurfa poem asserts the following: “In the year of *thalwīn* (536/1141–2) the city of Tīshīt was built and the knowledge among the people was plentiful. There were many descendants of Khadīja and very few ḥasānī [warriors, as opposed to zwāyā].”¹⁸⁶ The mention of Khadīja, the caravanning businesswoman and Prophet Muḥammad’s first wife, is an allegorical reference to the Shurfa. That Wādān and Tīshīt both have contemporaneous dates is not surprising since an oral tradition contends they were “founded” by two scholarly colleagues.¹⁸⁷ Both Sharīf ‘Abd al-Mū’min, who settled in Tīshīt, and al-Ḥājj ‘Uthmān, the supposed founder of Wādān, traveled to the region together in the mid-twelfth century after completing their studies under the well-known Mālikī jurist Qāḍī ‘Iyāḍ of Ceuta.

The Shurfa obviously reimagined history to give prominence to their ancestors because, like many Saharan towns, Tīshīt was founded not by northern but by western Africans. The Māsna, of Soninké origin, founded Tīshīt sometime in the eighth century and named it after a word for the sound of spraying water (*shitu*).¹⁸⁸ They have always owned the rights to the pans of *amersāl*, a brownish lower-quality salt used mainly for animal consumption and the town’s main export before dates.¹⁸⁹ A history of the Māsna is sorely needed, but as noted by al-Sa’dī in his *Tārīkh al-Sūdān*, they once belonged to the Empire of Ghana.¹⁹⁰ The Māsna were actively involved in commerce and until recently were Azer speakers – facts that

¹⁸⁵ Al-Shinqīṭī, *Wasīt*, 459.

¹⁸⁶ Poem shared by Dāddah Wuld Idda of Tīshīt (04/19/97) and also by Jily b. ‘Abd al-Qādar b. Intahā in Touizekt (09/25/97).

¹⁸⁷ Ould Cheikh, “Société,” 150.

¹⁸⁸ Al-Shinqīṭī, *Wasīt*, 459; Jacques-Meunié, *Cités anciennes*, 58; Oßwald, *Die Handelsstädte der Westsahara*, 355–80; interviews in Tīshīt with Muḥammadu Wuld Aḥamdī (04/14/97); Ḥamallah Wuld Bāba Mīn, Chief of the Māsna (04/15/97); Dāddah Wuld Idda (04/97).

¹⁸⁹ Interviews in Tīshīt with Ḥamallah Wuld Bāba Mīn, Chief of the Māsna (04/15/97) and Muḥammadu Wuld Aḥamdī (04/30/97); and Jacques-Meunié, *Cités*, 58–9. See also Wuld Ḥāmidun, *Hayāt Muritāniya*, 62; McDougall, “Salts,” 250–251; and Cleaveland, *Becoming Walāta*, 105, 201–6.

¹⁹⁰ Hunwick, *Timbuktu*, 31 and n. 16; Saad, *Social History*, 41.

they have in common with the Wangara.¹⁹¹ Moreover, oral traditions collected by Claude Meillassoux in Mali among the descendants of the “Masinanko” or “Maxanbinnu” (meaning “black servants of the Māsna”) of Tīshīt reveal a history of migrations into the markets of northwestern Mali. These Māsna “servants” originally specialized in working on salt caravans from Ijil, and it is tempting to associate them with the ‘*aqādīm*’ caravan laborers of Tīshīt discussed in Chapter 5. The largest Māsna out-migration in the late eighteenth century was probably connected to the northern arrival of the Awlād Billa.¹⁹² But sixty years later, the Māsna succeeded in driving out the Awlād Billa permanently from Tīshīt.

Tīshīt was long a major distribution center for salt mined locally and imported from Ijil.¹⁹³ It is perhaps to the fifteenth century that the following remark, written by Sīdi ‘Abdallāh b. al-Ḥājī Ibrāhīm (see Chapter 6), may be referring:

There once left Shinqīṭi a caravan of 32,000 camels loaded with salt, of which 20,000 belonged to the people of Shinqīṭi and 12,000 belonged to the people of Tīshīt. All these loads were sold in Zāra [Diara].¹⁹⁴ The people were seized with admiration and wondered which of the two cities was most prosperous.¹⁹⁵

Oasis dwellers of Tīshīt were in permanent contact with those of Shinqīṭi, whose scholarly prestige and closeness to Wādān and Ijil made theirs a necessary caravan stop along western trade routes. But centuries later, the prosperity of Tīshīt would surpass that of other towns in the region, rivaling Timbuktu when the latter was occupied by the Masina Caliphate.

Walāta: Commercial Crossroads

Together with Walāta, its neighbor seven camel-days to the east, Tīshīt was one of the last Saharan markets on the southern desert edge before the millet-producing regions of the western Sudan. Founded sometime between the sixth and eighth century by the Mande, Walāta, formerly named Biru, became a commercial crossroads several centuries later,

¹⁹¹ The late Bāba Ghazzār was the last fluent speaker of Azer in Tīshīt (interviewed in April 1997).

¹⁹² Meillassoux, “A propos de deux groupes Azers,” 528–9; McDougall, “Sahara Reconsidered,” 278.

¹⁹³ De Cénival and Monod, *Description de la côte d’Afrique*, 85.

¹⁹⁴ McDougall, “The Quest for ‘Tarra,’” 276, n. 38.

¹⁹⁵ *Al-Sahīḥāt al-Naqlī* cited by Ould Cheikh, “Nomadisme,” 71. This quote is often repeated by the inhabitants of Tīshīt and Shinqīṭi today.

especially after camel-owning “Berber” pastoralists settled there from the twelfth century.¹⁹⁶

Like Awdaghust, Walāta was probably an agricultural settlement before becoming a regional market in the early thirteenth century.¹⁹⁷ As Cleaveland notes, “Birū seems to have completely replaced Awdaghust as the primary southern terminus of trans-Saharan trade.”¹⁹⁸ When visiting a century later in greener times, Ibn Baṭṭūta referred to Walāta as “the first district of the Sūdān.”¹⁹⁹ Walāta also became a center of scholarship and learning. In its prime, “caravans came from all directions [and] the cream of scholars and holymen, and the wealthy from every clan and land settled there – men from Egypt, Awjila, Fezzan, Ghadamès, Tuvat, Dar’a, Tāfilalt, Fez, Sus, Biṭū [Begho].”²⁰⁰ Although it was surpassed in the fifteenth century by Timbuktu, farther toward the rising sun, Walāta remained a sizeable market into the nineteenth century.²⁰¹

By the fourteenth century, as trade shifted eastward, the Saharan economic and urban landscape had changed considerably. By then the newly settled North African migrants led by the Banū Ma‘qīl, especially the Banū Ḥasān, would profoundly influence western Saharan societies, starting with the spread of the Arabic-based language of Hasaniya. Trans-Saharan traffic flourished in this century due in large part to a favorable political climate in the heyday of the Empire of Mali. Walāta and Timbuktu and the oases of Tafilālt and Tuwāt had replaced the termini of Awdaghust and Sijilmāsa. By this time, the active salt pan of Taghāza, halfway between Tuwāt and Timbuktu, “under the sway of a slave woman of the Masūfa,” regularly supplied caravans on the eastern trail.²⁰² In the west, salt bars from Ijil were transported south, redistributed in Tishīt and Walāta, before being exchanged further south as currency for food, cloth, slaves, and gold. While a number of new oases sprung up in the twelfth century in response to increased migrations from the north and the expansion of trans-Saharan traffic from the south, several older markets, such as Jenne and Gao on either side of the Niger River bend, endured these economic shifts. But this second market, which would become the capital of the Songhay Empire, would barely survive the Moroccan conquest on the eve of the Islamic millennium.

¹⁹⁶ Cleaveland, *Becoming Walāta*, 37–73.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 47, 49–60.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 52; El-Chennaï, “Sur les traces d’Awdaghust;” Levtzion, “Ibn-Hawqal,” 227.

¹⁹⁹ *Corpus* (Ibn Baṭṭūta), 284.

²⁰⁰ Hunwick, *Timbuktu*, 30, 18 n. 4.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 30.

²⁰² *Corpus* (al-Qazwīnī), 178.

LATER TURNING POINTS

Traveling along a vast network of trade routes across the northern half of the African continent, international merchants and Muslim pilgrims regularly linked the distant markets of Timbuktu, Kano, and Cairo by the fifteenth century.²⁰³ Gold and enslaved Africans as well as other goods such as ivory and spices were traded for fine fabrics, glassware, paper, and book manuscripts. At the same time, this century witnessed the beginnings of European incursions into Africa. Some of these foreigners were accidental tourists shipwrecked and ransomed by nomads. Others traveled on their own accord into the Sahara in pursuit of information and riches. This was the case of Spanish Muslims and Jews fleeing repression in Christian-controlled Andalusia.

Among the most remarkable of these emigrants was the scholarly family of Maḥmūd Ka'ti, the above-mentioned chronicler of Timbuktu. His father traveled from Toledo through Tuwāt before settling permanently in Timbuktu in the 1460s.²⁰⁴ According to Isma'el Diadié Haïdara, this family's name, long misread by interpreters, is actually Cota, of the Jewish family once well represented in Spain, especially Toledo where they were persecuted starting in the 1440s.²⁰⁵ In other words, the Ka'ti family may have been originally Jewish, as may have been also the case of the Kūhin (Cohen) family that settled in Timbuktu in the 1700s. More than a century later, other Andalusians, including those collectively named the "Arma" who joined the Moroccan royal army sent to conquer the Songhay Empire in the late sixteenth century, came on a less peaceful mission.

Portuguese Ports of Trade

The search for gold precipitated the exploration of Africa due to an acute shortage in Europe, starting in the fifteenth century. The Portuguese had colonized Maghribi enclaves such as Ceuta in 1415, where young Prince Henry most probably developed his African interests. Soon he promoted maritime innovations that would change the course of long-distance trade throughout most of the navigable world. A caravel equipped with a lateen sail and commissioned by Henry "the Navigator" reached and passed Cap Bojador in 1434, marking a turning point in European exploration along

²⁰³ Walz, *Trade Between Egypt and Bilād As-Sūdān*, 16–17.

²⁰⁴ Hofheinz, "Goths."

²⁰⁵ Diadié Haïdara, *Juifs*, 22–5.

Africa's Atlantic coast. In 1445, a Portuguese trade fort was erected at the site of Arguin to the south (Map 3). In time, the regularity of maritime trade attracted larger numbers of camel caravans to the ocean.

In the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, first a Venetian trader and explorer commissioned by Portugal named Alvise Ca' Da Mosto and then the Portuguese Valentim Fernandes both remarked on the importance of the salt and slave trades in the markets of Wādān and Tishīt. Forty years after establishing the fort at Arguin, a Portuguese deputation traveled to Wādān in 1487 where they created a short-lived trade factory (*feitoria*).²⁰⁶ The Portuguese previously had organized a diplomatic mission to the Malian emperor, but even less is known about its outcome.²⁰⁷ Although they remained largely on the coast, the arrival of the Portuguese in western Africa announced a new era in the economic history of the region.

Anti-Jewish Repression

Concurrently, the late fifteenth century saw the escalation of Muslim repression against Jews in Andalusia and North Africa. Assaults, targeting their wealth but justified with religious theories, surely disrupted the finances of northern caravan trade. The repression began in the Fatimid period and came to a head in 1492, coinciding with the final stages of the Spanish Reconquista that caused the exodus of Jews who became known as Sephardim. Maghribi Jews had undergone persecution in the past. The year 1492 marked the ruthless massacre of the Jewish community of Tuwāt and the destruction of their synagogue in Tamentit. The pogrom was instigated by Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Maghilī, who, along with several other Muslim scholars, wrote fatwas expressing violent anti-Semitism, calling on Muslims to “rise up and kill the Jews.”²⁰⁸

While these opinions hinged on religious fundamentalism, John Hunwick suggests that the true motivation behind the massacre was economic.²⁰⁹ As noted earlier, Maghribi Jews had a heavy hand in trans-Saharan trade, especially the gold trade. At the same time, Portuguese trading posts in Africa, from the western Mediterranean to the Atlantic

²⁰⁶ Mauny, *Tableau*, 69.

²⁰⁷ Ly-Tall, “Decline of the Mali Empire.”

²⁰⁸ Al-Maghilī described Jews as “the enemies of God,” “pigs and monkeys,” and “pigs who care not for the name of Muḥammad” (Hunwick, *Jews*, 12–13, “Al-Ma[ghilī],” 161–2). Apparently he “offered seven *mithqāl* for anyone who killed a Jew (for him)” (Hunwick, *Jews*, 62).

²⁰⁹ This paragraph is based on Hunwick, *Jews*, 61–7.

coast, attracted increasing numbers of gold traders. Since much of the gold entering Europe passed through the hands of Jewish merchants, conceivably they secured an early position as intermediaries to Europeans at least in the north and possibly as far down the African coast as Arguin. Moreover, as noted above, Jewish traders probably had by then a small presence in Saharan oases such as Wādān, Walāta, and Timbuktu.

Following the violent affair of 1492, some Jews were forced to convert to Islam while others fled Tūwāt. For his part, al-Maghīlī traveled south shortly after these events where his ideas would continue to influence many, including Sarkin Rumfa, the ruler of Kano, and the emperor of Songhay, Askiya Muḥammad. In fact, as a result of al-Maghīlī's legal "teachings" issued to the emperor, Jews and anyone who associated with them were henceforth banned from entering the western African markets of Songhay.²¹⁰ By the early sixteenth century, Africanus would note when visiting Timbuktu: "The king [of Timbuktu] is a declared enemy of Jews. He does not wish any to live in the town. If he hears it said that a Berber merchant frequents them, or does trade with them, his [the merchant's] goods are confiscated."²¹¹ But elsewhere, small Jewish communities survived. Previously, the Portuguese Fernandes had reported a community of "Jews very rich but very oppressed who are itinerant traders, or blacksmiths and jewelers" in Walāta in the early 1500s.²¹² Several years later, Africanus wrote about the three hundred Jews residing in the Wād Nūn where yearly caravans "go to Timbuktu and Walāta, to the Bilād al-Sūdān."²¹³

The Moroccan Factor

In the 1520s, Africanus described the gift presented by merchants to the Moroccan Sultan in Fez that consisted of a large bundle of commodities originating from the well-established trade with western Africa.

Fifty men slaves, and fifty women slaves brought from the land of the Negroes, ten eunuchs, twelve camels, one giraffe, sixteen civet-cats, one pound of civet, a pound of amber, and almost six hundred skins of a certain beast called by them Elamt [Lamṭa], whereof they make their shields, every skin being worth at Fez

²¹⁰ Hunwick, *Sharr'a*, 32–42, and *Jews*, 63–4. These Jewish traders must have settled there after the 1350s. Importantly, Askiya Muḥammad refused to follow al-Maghīlī's recommendation to kill several Jews in Timbuktu after hearing about the death of his son in Tūwāt at the hands of Jews. See also Bâ, "La problématique," 159.

²¹¹ Quoted in Hunwick, *Jews*, 63.

²¹² Cited in Mauny, "Judaïsme," 374.

²¹³ Cited in Abitbol, "Juifs," 241.

eight ducats; twenty of the male slaves cost twenty ducats a piece, and so did fifteen of the female slaves; every eunuch was valued at forty, every camel at fifty, and every civet-cat at two hundred ducats: and a pound of civet and amber is sold at Fez for threescore ducats.²¹⁴

By this time, the slave trade was in full swing, western African tanned leather was in even higher demand in Europe for bookbinding, among other uses, and the civet cat (*zabād*) had become a most prized good sold in North Africa by way of trans-Saharan trade. The essence extracted from the civet's testicular glands for the manufacture of musk or perfume was prized for several centuries. Amber, collected on the Atlantic coast and elsewhere, was also continually in demand

By the second half of the sixteenth century the Ottoman Empire, under the leadership of Sulaymān the Great, stretched across the northern coasts of Africa with the exception of Morocco. In what is known as the first Ottoman period in North African history, imperial control was far-reaching, from Cairo and Tripoli to the city of old Carthage and Algiers. But unlike the Romans and Byzantines before them, the Ottomans' rule in Africa extended into the Saharan interior through the creation of a series of forts reaching the Fezzān in the southern fringes of modern-day Libya by 1558. Such a presence undoubtedly stimulated eastern trans-Saharan traffic.²¹⁵ Trade between Tripoli and the Kanem-Bornu Kingdom (including in early muskets) increased the regularity and volume of commerce along central Saharan caravan routes.²¹⁶ It is not coincidental that shortly thereafter in the 1580s, the Sa'adian Moroccan king, Mūlāy Aḥmad al-Manṣūr, later nicknamed the "Golden Sultan," decided to conquer the western Sahara.

Mūlāy Aḥmad al-Manṣūr's first move was to visit the Awkār region, including perhaps Walāta. Then he sent a contingent to occupy Tuwāt and Gurāra, frequented by trans-Saharan caravans on the northwestern desert edge.²¹⁷ He soon laid claims over Taghāza, the "salt bank" of Songhay. This strategic salt mine was then under the control of Songhay Emperor Iṣḥāq II, the son of the aforementioned Askiya Muḥammad. Under the pretext of organizing a jihad to reform Islamic practice in Songhay, and in consultation with a dissenting brother of the Songhay emperor, the sultan of Morocco forcefully declared a tax "of one [gold]

²¹⁴ L'Africain, *Description de l'Afrique*, II, 309.

²¹⁵ Martin, "Kanem, Bornu and the Fazzān."

²¹⁶ Fischer and Rowland, "Firearms in the Central Sudan," 215.

²¹⁷ "Al-Ifrānī's account," in Hunwick, *Timbuktu*, 309; Cissoko, *Tombouctou et l'empire Songhay*.

mithqāl on each and every camel that goes [to Taghāza], proceeds to it, or makes for it, from any direction.”²¹⁸ Taghāza was promptly abandoned as the main source of Saharan salt bars and replaced by Tawdenni, a salt quarry located just twelve days due north of Timbuktu. In time the Moroccan king raised an army of no fewer than 5,000 men, including 1,000 “Armas” Andalusian musketeers, and quickly moved to conquer the Songhay Empire in the fall of 1590. According to an eyewitness account, this army required a caravan “comprised of more than 10,000 camel-loads” to transport equipment, ammunition, and provisions.²¹⁹

The Moroccan royal army easily overran the main cities of Songhay, including its capital of Gao, in 1591.²²⁰ Ironically, immediate market repercussions were favorable to western African demand due to a marked drop in the price of salt.²²¹ But in the long run, the conquest of Songhay markets, of which Timbuktu was then the most prosperous, failed to generate the growth in trade and gold revenues that Morocco was banking on. In a letter addressed to the leader of a small town south of Timbuktu, the sultan complained that southern trade routes were being blockaded and accused him of “closing the path to those who come from kingdoms which lie beyond you, such as the people of Kano and Katsina, and those around them who desire to enter into obedience with us . . . blocking their way from the path which brings success.”²²² In fact, the turmoil that ensued temporarily halted traffic along western routes because the Moroccan governor was unable to control trade radiating to or from Timbuktu. Conversely, the Ghadāmis trading community, then considered the most prosperous of Timbuktu, was sacked and caused to flee.²²³ The aftermath of the Moroccan invasion brought long-lasting instability in the region. By the mid-seventeenth century, the power of the Armas had waned and the Iwillimidan clan of the Ṭuāreg regained control of Timbuktu. Yet subsequent Moroccan sultans would carry on their involvement in Saharan politics.

EARLY MODERN SAHARAN TRADE

Caravan traffic in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries continued to supply Saharan oases, linking northern and western African markets.

²¹⁸ “Letter from Mūlāy Aḥmad al-Manṣūr to Askiya Ishāq II, Ṣafar 998/december 1589,” in Hunwick, *Timbuktu*, 294.

²¹⁹ “Account of the Anonymous Spaniard,” in Hunwick, *Timbuktu*, 319–20.

²²⁰ Cissoko, *Tombouctou*.

²²¹ Ka‘ti, *Tarikh El-Fettach*, in Houdas and Delafosse, 236.

²²² Hunwick, *Timbuktu*, 303.

²²³ Saad, *Social History*, 123, 128.

Trade emanating from central Sudanic towns such as Kano and Gazargamo via Agades, Ghât, Murzuq, and Ghadāmis, toward the Ottoman markets of Tripoli and Cairo, was revived in this period.²²⁴ This was true even after the first Ottoman period ended with the rise of the Qaramanli dynasty, which took over Tripolitania and Cyrenaica in 1711 and promoted Tripoli's international trade.

Trans-Saharan traffic along western routes, on the other hand, was hindered in these two centuries by severe political and environmental crises. In 1670, the Moroccan sultan destroyed the town of Illigh in the Tazerwālt region (Map 5), which had risen to become an important terminus for trans-Saharan trade housing a sizeable Jewish community.²²⁵ This market town was successfully competing with trade to Tafilālt, which the sultanate controlled. Moreover, Illigh was profiting from direct access to European trade on the coast at Wād Massa. This small trading post competed with Morocco's southernmost port of Agādīr, located about forty kilometers to the north (Map 3). Agādīr, then known as the "Door to the Sudan" (*Bāb al-Sūdān*), was originally established by the Portuguese in the early sixteenth century.

This period saw the rise of the European-led trans-Atlantic slave trade that forced enslaved Africans into the world economy with detrimental ramifications on African societies and economies. The coveted port of Arguin was occupied successively by Spain, the Dutch Republic, Britain, Brandenburg-Prussia, and France in the course of the seventeenth century. Commercial activity for gum arabic along the Atlantic coast and in now well-established European enclaves, such as the burgeoning French colony of Senegal, would bring about what Ould Cheikh called "the age of gum."²²⁶ At the same time, Sufi-based networks provided institutions and social capital that offered some protection to traders against regional instability.

Late-Seventeenth-Century Trends

Sources for this period do not always document how the political and environmental crises of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries determined market conditions. While the Timbuktu chronicles are generally silent about commerce, Saharan legal sources from the seventeenth century onward, examined in Chapter 6, inform about the concerns of

²²⁴ Walz, *Trade*, chap. 2.

²²⁵ Pascon, *Maison d'Illigh*, 48, 105.

²²⁶ Ould Cheikh, "Nomadisme," 92–108.

trans-Saharan traders. Among these was the question of whether trading in slaves with Christians was legal in the eyes of Islam. Entries in the chronicles of Wādān, Walāta, and Tishīt are laconic until the early eighteenth century. For Walāta, there is only one mention of the movement of trade before the eighteenth century when it is reported that an entire caravan from that town “was lost” in the season of 1091–2/1680–1.²²⁷ Whatever the circumstances of this event, it was rendered more tragic given the severe drought that prevailed in the second half of the seventeenth century, especially the 1670–80s, and during several decades in the mid to late eighteenth century.²²⁸ Oral traditions written in the eighteenth century about Nāṣir al-Dīn’s jihad, discussed below, suggest that the main disputes of southwestern Saharans in the 1670s revolved around food and property rights over cows, sheep, and goats.²²⁹

A European document from the early 1680s, analyzed by Lange, sheds light on the eastern branches of trade revitalized by Ottoman agency to the detriment of Morocco. It was produced by a French doctor enslaved on the infamous “Barbary Coast” who collected data on caravan traffic to Tripoli, where reportedly resided a community of enslaved and free people “from Wangara,” Bornu, and Timbuktu, as previously noted.²³⁰ Just as in the days of Ibn Hawqal centuries before, small caravans and large annual caravans circulated along central trans-Saharan routes. The yearly convoy, traveling from fall to spring, numbered 4,000 armed men leading an equal number of camels loaded with paper, glass beads of various origins, textiles, and cowries. Interestingly, the main “secretary” of the convoy was a Jew named Isouf Coja, who also was previously enslaved before being ransomed by Italian Jews from Livorno who then employed him as a trade agent. The caravan congregated in the Fezzān region of southern Libya where it would split, with one branch heading to Timbuktu and the other toward Bornu.²³¹ Caravaners, including Wangara, returned with gold nuggets and enslaved Africans as well as loads of quality pewter and senna, or séné (*Cassia angustifolia*), a plant used as a

²²⁷ Marty, “Chroniques,” 357. Although not specified, this conclusion is reached based on descriptions of the movement of caravans in other entries where incidents such as the ransacking of caravans are listed. See Appendices 1 and 2.

²²⁸ Brooks, *Landlords*; Curtin, *Economic Change*, 54; Brooks et al., “The Environment-Society.” Baier (*Economic History of Central Niger*, 30) reports similar drought conditions in Niger.

²²⁹ Hamet, *Chroniques de la Mauritanie-Sénégalaise/Nubda fī Tāʾrīkh al-Ṣaḥrāʾ*, 186–8/ ٢٣٠ ٢٦, 198–201/٣٤–٣٥.

²³⁰ Lange, “Un document,” 681.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 677–8.

laxative. In Lange's opinion, senna, regularly traded since 1657, was by the end of the century "unquestionably the most important article of trade re-exported from Tripoli to various destinations, including France and Italy."²³² Senna from the central Sudan was still traded into the twentieth century. Moreover, the report indicates continued commercial activity between Cairo and markets as far west as Timbuktu. It is noteworthy that in this period Ismā'īl Abū Taqīyya, a Cairene merchant, had a trade agent in Kano.²³³

Jihad in the "Age of Gum"

In southwestern Sahara north and south of the Senegal River, the most consequential event of the seventeenth century was the jihad led by Nāṣir al-Dīn, mentioned in Chapter 1. According to oral traditions, this Muslim leader was himself a trader and it is said that he was often entrusted to trade on behalf of others, including those of "lowly status." It is said that through generous piety, "he would fill their wares with his own supplies."²³⁴ Nāṣir al-Dīn was critical of the ways Saharans were starting to accumulate wealth, including storing gold in clay pots.²³⁵ The protracted struggle that pitted zwāyā against ḥasānī groups in the Trārza and Brākna regions of the southwestern Sahara would spill over into the neighboring Kingdom of Waalo of Senegal.

The causes of this early modern jihad, starting perhaps in the 1640s, are debated by historians.²³⁶ Stewart identified Nāṣir al-Dīn's struggle, popularly known as *Sharr Bubba*, as a watershed that laid the foundations of social hierarchy and political order in southwestern Sahara.²³⁷ The victors were the ḥasānī, descendants of Banū Ma'qīl, who infiltrated the region in the fourteenth century and now assumed political dominance. Consequently, they came to found nomadic emirates in the Trārza, Brākna, and Tagānit and much later the Ādrār regions (Map 1).

²³² Ibid., 679, n. 55.

²³³ See Hanna, *Making Big Money*.

²³⁴ Hamet, *Chroniques*, 165/1-4; Norris, "Znāga," 509.

²³⁵ Hamet, *Chroniques*, 60.

²³⁶ Wuld al-Sa'ad, *Ḥarb Sharr Bubbab*; Hamet, *Chroniques*, 60; Ould Cheikh, "Herders," 204-9; Curtin, "Jihad in West Africa"; Barry, *Royaume du Waalo*, 111-31; and Webb, *Desert Frontier*, 32-5. See also Marty, *L'émirat du Trarza*; Curtin, *Economic Change*, 46-51; Cleaveland, "Islam and the Creation of Social Identity"; Bonte, "L'émirat," 608-31.

²³⁷ Stewart, *Islam and Social Order*. Stewart sees Sharr Bubba as a "foundational myth," while others, including Ould Cheikh ("Herders"), Cleaveland ("Islam"), and Bonte ("L'émirat"), are more cautious given the complexity of the event, the paucity of reliable sources, and the flexibility of social categories.

Another result of this political about-face was the further spread of Hasaniya, which supplanted Azer and Znāga. In time, Hasaniya reached across the western Sahara to become a lingua franca spoken from Mali and Senegal, and northward to the regions of Tindūf and Wād Nūn.

Several scholars placed this religious struggle within the larger context of the commercial tensions arising between trans-Saharan and maritime trades, particularly the competition between caravans and caravels. In this view, the jihad was a “reaction of self-defense of the trans-Saharan economy against the increasingly powerful trade monopoly of Saint-Louis,” the French enclave in Senegal.²³⁸ In other words, the competing interests of Saharan caravaners and Senegalese and French merchants drove the jihadists’ struggle to extend the frontiers of Islam. While this was an attractive theory, Ould Cheikh demonstrated that it not only was an oversimplification but was based on an erroneous assumption that southwestern Saharans had no interest in the Atlantic trade.²³⁹ The seminal research of Muḥammad al-Mukhtār Wuld al-Sa‘ad further shows to what extent the zwāyā, who controlled the pastoral economy and harvested gum arabic, were then fully engaged in international trade. They exchanged this commodity along the Senegal River trading posts as well as on the Atlantic coast at Arguin where various European traders followed in the footsteps of the Portuguese.²⁴⁰

Gum arabic was of vital interest to Europeans for it was a key ingredient used as a solvent in the early days of the textile industry. Wuld al-Sa‘ad sees this trade, as well as the drought conditions of the second half of the seventeenth century, as fomenting the Islamic movement, and the leader’s incentive to collect the Islamic tithe or *zakāt* as precipitating the militant phase of the struggle. Consequently, from the late seventeenth century to mid-eighteenth century the southwestern Saharan region became the theater of great competition principally among Dutch, French, and English merchants who fought in what André Delcourt dubbed “the gum wars.”²⁴¹ That gum arabic was primarily exchanged for goods such as reams of paper but also industrial cotton cloth (manufactured primarily in South Asian enclaves such as Pondicherry), a topic we return to in the next

²³⁸ Barry, *Royaume*, 121, 120–2. See also Barry, *Sénégal du XVe au XIXe siècle*; Curtin, “Jihad in West Africa”; and Hamès, “L’évolution des émirats maures.”

²³⁹ Ould Cheikh, “Nomadisme” and “Herders.”

²⁴⁰ Wuld al-Sa‘ad, *Harb*, 27–43. See also Curtin, *Economic Change*, 215–18; Webb, *Desert Frontier*, 97–113; Delcourt, *La France et les établissements français au Sénégal*.

²⁴¹ Delcourt, *La France*.

chapter, is critical for understanding the interests of Muslim clerical groups in the Atlantic economy.

Morocco's Saharan Policy

It was in this period that Morocco renewed its interest in Saharan politics. Following Sharr Bubba and a century after the fall of Songhay, the Moroccan Sultan Mūlāy Ismā'īl (1083–140 / 1672–1727) came to power with a vision of a “Greater Morocco” extending to the Senegal River. He raised a large army composed of enslaved western Africans and sent several expeditions to the Sūs, the Wād Nūn, the area of present-day Mauritania, and the Senegal River valley. In the 1670s he dispatched royal troops to assist warriors in the Trārza region. Then, in 1101/1689, the Sultan himself led a large expedition via Tuwāt to Shinqīṭi and Tīshīt, before heading further south to Diara.²⁴² To be sure, given that Sultan Mūlāy Ismā'īl was a Sharifian of the newly established 'Alawī dynasty boasting the title of “Commander of the Faithful” (*Amīr al-mu'minīn*), his visit was of enduring symbolic significance.²⁴³ It served to lubricate relations with local leaders and obtain their favor. Clearly, Moroccans were attempting then to steer them away from French commerce along the Senegal River, which threatened Moroccan trans-Saharan trade interests, including their access to gum arabic.²⁴⁴ In the eighteenth century, Mūlāy Ismā'īl's son, born to a western Saharan mother, continued his father's Saharan policy by organizing expeditions to the Ādrār region and later to Tīshīt, in attempts to renew local allegiances.²⁴⁵

During his reign, the emir of Trārza, named 'Aly Shandhūra (1703–27), faced a war with the neighboring Brākna Emirate (Map 1). He decided to seek Mūlāy Ismā'īl's backing, and after a successful mission, he returned from Morocco with the title of “Commander of the region of South-western Sahara.” As Ould Cheikh admits, by then Morocco's “*politique d'investiture*,” by which ḥasānī emirs swore allegiance to the Moroccan Sultan, was well established in the southwestern Sahara.²⁴⁶ This time, the sultan presented a pair of white cotton trousers to the Trārza emir as a

²⁴² Curtin, *Economic Change*, 52 and n. 5, 53–4; McDougall, “In Search”; Marty, *L'émirat*, 69. De La Chapelle (“Esquisse,” 81) gives the date 1769 for the Moroccan expedition to Tīshīt.

²⁴³ Ould Cheikh, *Éléments d'histoire*, 79. ²⁴⁴ Barry, *Sénégalie*.

²⁴⁵ Al-Nāṣirī, *Kitāb al-istiṣā'*; A. b. Aḥmad al-Zayyānī, *Al-Turjīmān al-Mu'arrib*, 11; Marty, *L'émirat*, 69; De La Chapelle, “Esquisse,” 81; Curtin, *Economic Change*, 51–4.

²⁴⁶ Ould Cheikh, *Éléments d'histoire*, 77.

symbol of his authority to contrast with the dark indigo-dyed cloth worn by his constituents. Subsequent emirs continued the tradition, while the name Shandhūra (probably derived from the Indian port of Chandor that exported cotton) came to designate a popular white brand of cotton cloth.²⁴⁷ More important, ‘Aly Shandhūra was given a sizeable Moroccan military contingent of men and cavaliers (some speak of 300 men, others of 500) to assist him in the battle against Brākna.²⁴⁸ As the oral traditions explain, this northern army included numerous Wād Nūn men, a majority of whom were from the Tikna Izargiyīn clan.²⁴⁹ The alliance between the people of Wād Nūn and the Trārza, discussed further in Chapter 4, encouraged subsequent Tikna migrations to the Senegal River region in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

Timbuktu, Sufis, and the Kunta

Meanwhile in Morocco a short-lived but noteworthy Sufi movement flourished in the Dra‘a Valley with positive consequences for the regional economy connected to trans-Saharan commerce, according to David Guletius.²⁵⁰ The Shādhīliya-Nāṣiriyya Sufi order led by Muḥammad b. al-Nāṣir (1603–74) provided a favorable climate in southern Morocco for traders. While supplying similar administrative functions of the kind assumed by legal service providers throughout the Muslim world (see Chapter 6), the reputation of those connected to the Nāṣiriyya, at least during the lifetime of its powerful saint, Muḥammad b. al-Nāṣir, and his son, ensured spiritual and material protection to several trans-Saharan travelers. Gutelius recounts the telling story of an agent working for the account of a Nāṣirī leader who joined a large caravan destined for Timbuktu sometime in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century. En route, nomads from the Awlād Dīm descended upon the caravan but spared the agent after discovering his ties to

²⁴⁷ Interviews in Nouakchott with Sīd Aḥmad dit “Dah” Fall (07/28/95) and family group interview with Zaynabūh Mint Būbakar Sīra (06/03/98). See also Bonte, “L’émirat,” 1418–19.

²⁴⁸ Marty, *L’émirat*, 69–70. For a discussion of ‘Aly Shandhūra, see also Barry, *Royaume*, and Barrows, “General Faïdherbe, the Maurel and Prom Company.”

²⁴⁹ Interviews with Trārza emiral family in Nouakchott (06/98); with Sīd Aḥmad dit “Dah” Fall (07/28/95) in Nouakchott; with Ibrāhīm b. ‘Aly b. al-Ṭālib in Līksābī (08/01/99), Yaḥdhīh b. ‘Abdallah b. Bayrūk with Khadaīja Mint Muḥammad b. Laḥbīb b. Bayrūk in Guelmīm (07/31/99).

²⁵⁰ Gutelius, “The Path Is Easy.”

the Nāṣiriyya.²⁵¹ Indeed, in the right time and the right place, Sufi connections, like other sources of solidarity, clan allegiance and symbolic capital, could prove extremely useful to the commercial traveler.

The period from the mid-eighteenth to the early nineteenth century was one of great insecurity for trans-Saharan traders. The southwestern desert edge was then so plagued with desert pirates and caravan raiders that it was nicknamed the “frightful” zone.²⁵² It was tempered by a string of crises in and around Timbuktu. From 1161/1748 until 1216/1801, the city saw the rise and fall of no less than twelve rulers.²⁵³ In the 1730s there had been a famine that caused a shortage of food as well as kola nuts and gold, and then at least four episodes of plague in the decades that followed.²⁵⁴ The year 1162/1748–9 was named “the year of the calamity” (*‘am al-nāzila*) due to a devastating epidemic that claimed the lives of many, rich and poor alike. In 1165/1752, violent clashes erupted in the marketplace that lasted for four months, leading to several murders. Although the cause of the initial fight was undisclosed, it was followed three years later by a fifty-day war. In 1166/1753, after a Ṭuāreg attack, “a great number of the inhabitants of Timbuktu . . . died.”²⁵⁵ Two years later, the Berābīsh overran the city, causing more deaths. This and the following decade witnessed similar battles fought within Timbuktu. By the early 1790s, the bubonic plague was so devastating that the notables of Timbuktu led massive demonstrations imploring God’s mercy.

It was in this very turbulent period that an enduring Sufi movement led by the Bakkāy branch of the scholarly Kunta clan would emerge, with positive ramifications on regional commerce. In the early part of the seventeenth century, this nomadic group engaged in transhumance in a large region extending from the northern oasis of Tuwāt, the regions of Tiris and Zemmūr, over to the Tagānit and the Ḥawḍ and into present-day Senegal. Eventually, one family came to settle in the Azawād region, to the north of Timbuktu, in the mid-seventeenth century, and shortly after, Kunta relatives would follow. There, Shaykh Sīdī al-Mukhtār b. Aḥmad al-Bakkāy (1142–1226/1729–1811) became a charismatic Sufi and powerful entrepreneur. As representative of the Kunta clan, he formed the main

²⁵¹ Gutelius (ibid., 34) notes that the caravan financier was named Aḥmad b. [al-]Nāṣir, who would have died in 1717.

²⁵² Bibed, “Les Kountas,” 64, citing the work of Shaykh Sīdī al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī.

²⁵³ Hunwick, *Timbuktu*, vii.

²⁵⁴ Abitbol, *Tombouctou*. B. Mawlāy Sulaymān’s chronicle was edited by Abitbol. The remainder of this paragraph is based on this source (2–7, 22–5).

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 5.

chapter of the Qādiriyya Sufi brotherhood in western Africa.²⁵⁶ In the eighteenth century other Kuntas migrated to the Ādrār where they came to control the oasis of Wādān to the detriment of Idaw al-Ĥājj. Other groups moved to Walāta and in the Ḥawḍ region, while another branch settled in the oases of Qṣar al-Barka and neighboring Rashīd, to the north of Tijikja, from whence they organized regional caravans (Map 6).²⁵⁷

The Kunta asserted their prestigious scholarly and Sufi status while engaging in regional diplomacy between warrior and clerical groups, as well as in commerce. In effect, they succeeded in filling a political vacuum in the region. But it was only in the second half of the eighteenth century, however, that the Kunta became more actively involved in caravanning. Then they took a leading position in the salt trades of Ijīl, from their new base in Wādān, and later from Tawdenni, through alliances with the Ṭuāreg Iwillimindan and tangential relations with the Berābīsh.²⁵⁸ By the turn of the century, the Kunta operated what Aziz Batran has called “a holy economic empire.”²⁵⁹ They represented the model “merchant-scholar,” as McDougall explains.²⁶⁰ Through patron–client relationships and a vast Sufi network, the Kunta commanded a sizeable portion of caravan traffic, specializing in both the salt and tobacco trades, extending from the western Sahara to the Hausa markets of Sokoto. At the same time, they were involved in other areas of the regional economy from herding and rearing camels, horses, cattle, and goats to redistributing slaves, cotton cloth, book manuscripts, and paper. Until the first decade of the nineteenth century, the Kunta of Azawād along with their Sufi disciples established regional order of a kind that had not been known since the fall of Songhay.

European Commercial Imperialism

Since the fifteenth century, the growing presence of European merchants on the Atlantic coast influenced the movement of caravans. The Portuguese and Dutch were joined by French and English merchants who built trade forts competing for access to gold and then enslaved Africans. By the late eighteenth century, the confluence of European and African trades in and around three key Atlantic ports, Saint-Louis

²⁵⁶ Stewart, *Islam*, 34–6; Batran, *Qadryya*; Bibed, “Kountas”; Whitcomb, “New Evidence I and II”; Norris, *Arab Conquest*, 127–32, 227–41; Genevière, “Les Kountas et leurs activités commerciales.”

²⁵⁷ Ould Khalifa, *Région*.

²⁵⁸ Batran, *Qadryya*, 30–1; Bibed, “Kountas,” 67–9.

²⁵⁹ Batran, *Qadryya*, 167–96. ²⁶⁰ McDougall, “Economics of Islam,” 45.

(Ndar) in Senegal, Mogador (Al-Ṣawīra) in southern Morocco, and the Mediterranean port of Tripoli (Ṭarāblus) in Libya, would lead to a revitalization of trans-Saharan trade along western routes in the course of the nineteenth century, as seen in the next chapter.

The port of Saint-Louis, locally known as Ndar, was occupied by various European powers before the French settled there in 1659.²⁶¹ It became France's main enclave and the launching pad for the eventual conquest of the western African interior. Very shortly after establishing a presence there, the French busied themselves with finding the mysterious sources of western African gold that had long eluded foreign merchants. In the early eighteenth century, under the leadership of André de la Brüe, the French organized a series of expensive albeit unsuccessful expeditions into the region of Bambuhu, or Bambuk, attempting to lay claims over the gold fields.²⁶² After the French and English abolitions of the Atlantic slave trade in the first decades of the nineteenth century, the bulk of the trade exported from Ndar consisted of ivory, hides, and gum arabic (Map 5).

In 1127/1764, one century after the French took Ndar, the sultan of Morocco, Muḥammad III, later known as the “architect of modern Morocco,” commissioned the refurbishing of an Atlantic port in the southwestern corner of his kingdom to replace the now defunct port of Agādīr.²⁶³ His reign (1170–1204/1757–90) ushered in a peaceful political climate favoring the expansion of international commerce. Relying on Maghribi Jewish merchants as cross-cultural brokers, Morocco's aim was to monitor incoming trade and collect royal duties. Al-Ṣawīra, known to Europeans as the port of Mogador, would transform the nature of caravan traffic, causing a westward shift of markets and routes. From then onward, significant developments would further link African and European markets in the nineteenth century through trade with the region of Wād Nūn on the northern desert edge, which would regain its former commercial prominence.

REFLECTIONS ON THE BOOK AND PAPER TRADE

It is not known precisely when the trans-Saharan paper and book trade began in earnest. Presumably by the eleventh century copies of the Qurʾān

²⁶¹ Curtin, *Economic Change*, 102–4.

²⁶² Curtin, “Lure,” 624.

²⁶³ Schroeter, *Merchants of Essaouira*, 7–20; Miège, *Le Maroc et l'Europe*. In former times, coastal trade was conducted in Agādīr farther south and far from the sultan's effective political control.

and classic Islamic literature were in circulation. Whether it was the object of sales or not is questionable since according to Mālikī law “is prohibited the sale of a Muslim [slave] and a copy of the Qur’ān (*muṣḥaf*).”²⁶⁴ When Ibn Baṭṭūṭa visited the capital of the Empire of Mali in the mid-fourteenth century, he commented on the strict training of children who recited the Qur’ān by heart. By the time Africanus reached Timbuktu in the early 1500s he marveled that “many book manuscripts coming from *Berbérie* [i.e., North Africa] are sold. More profits are realized from this sale than any other merchandise.”²⁶⁵ So expensive were book manuscripts at this time that they were exchanged for hefty weights of gold. A copy of the twelfth-century Moroccan jurist Qādī ‘Iyād’s *Kitāb al-Shifā’* was originally purchased in Tuwāt by Maḥmūd Ka’ti’s father on his way to Timbuktu in 1468 for no less than 45 mithqāls (approx. 191 grams) of gold.²⁶⁶ Some four hundred years later, an unidentified book was valued at 15 mithqāls (approx. 64 grams) of gold in the inheritance proceedings, discussed in Chapter 7, that unfolded in 1850s Tishīt.

For Saharans, acquiring literature represented an investment in what Bourdieu calls “cultural capital,” which strengthened reputations that in turn could serve to produce economic capital, as I have argued elsewhere.²⁶⁷ Saharan scholars’ thirst for knowledge would lead them to spend sizeable sums in search of Arabic literature. Books could be ordered from trans-Saharan traders, purchased from itinerant booksellers, and copied or purchased directly in specialized markets. Muslims on their return from pilgrimage typically carried large quantities of books acquired not only in Mecca, but also in Cairo, and elsewhere. On his way back from the Hijāz in the early nineteenth century, al-Ṭālib Aḥmad carried “400 books from the sacred city of the Prophet.”²⁶⁸ His pilgrimage travelogue is replete with comments about caring for his books, and he lists and thanks all those who gave him manuscripts.

Wealthy scholars organized special caravan trips bound north to Moroccan book markets such as Marrakech or Fez. To replenish his library, Shaykh Sidiyya al-Kabīr (d. 1284–5/1868), of the scholarly group of the Awlād Ibīri residing in the Gibla region and a student of Shaykh Sīdī al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī, went on a book shopping spree to Morocco in 1245–6/1830. He purchased approximately two hundred books in Marrakech and his

²⁶⁴ Khalīl b. Ishāq al-Jundī. *Al-Mukhtaṣar ‘ala madhhab al-Imām Mālik ibn Anas*, 122.

²⁶⁵ L’Africain, *Description*.

²⁶⁶ Hunwick, “Islamic Manuscript Heritage of Timbuktu”; Hofheinz, “Goths.” On gold weights, see Chapter 5.

²⁶⁷ Lydon, “Inkwells.”

²⁶⁸ Norris, *Pilgrimage*, 102.

book list, described by Stewart, gives a sense of the subjects such imported literature typically covered.²⁶⁹ Works on Islamic jurisprudence were the most common. Other subjects included, in decreasing order of importance, the tradition of the Prophet, the science of reading the Qurʾān, grammar and the Arabic language, theology, mysticism or Sufi literature, and medicine. Most of these works were by Maghribi, Andalusian, and Middle Eastern authors, pointing to scholarly networks across the Muslim world.

From an early period, skilled calligraphers and professional transcribers copied manuscripts locally. In Timbuktu there was a veritable manuscript industry by the sixteenth century where copyists, proofreaders, and editors were well known for their skills. Such copying took place in other Saharan towns and under nomadic tents as well, but perhaps on a much smaller scale. The art of calligraphy was extremely valued and good copyists were paid well.²⁷⁰ They wrote in the Maghribi script with certain innovations of letters for non-Arabic phonetics.²⁷¹ Many students were put to work copying manuscripts while some became professional copyists. Such was the case of Muḥammad Yahyā b. Muḥammad al-Mukhtār al-Walāṭi, the legal scholar whose life was immortalized by his popular *riḥla* describing his pilgrimage to Mecca (1311–17/1894–1900).²⁷² There is evidence that women also engaged in copying manuscripts.²⁷³

Linked to this industry was that of book binderies. As mentioned above, western African tanned leather was exchanged in Europe by the 1100s and possibly since earlier times when Cordova reputedly produced the finest book binding skins. By at least the sixteenth century, the cities of Sokoto and Kano specialized in crafting the best quality tanned leather, namely goatskin, but also sheepskin. There, a sophisticated industrial procedure involving timed soaking, scudding, liming, tanning (with *Acacia niloticus* pods), drying, and dyeing (with unique organic colors found locally) produced fine and firm tanned leather that long was the standard against which later western European tanning industries measured quality.

Western African tanned hides and skins were a staple of the trans-Saharan trade, together with indigo and indigo-dyed cotton from the same manufacturing regions. Because the leather made its way into European

²⁶⁹ Stewart, “New Source on the Book Market in Morocco.”

²⁷⁰ M. Ould Hamidoun, *Précis*, 61.

²⁷¹ An example of this is the *kāf* with three dots for the hard “g” known as the *kāf al-mugamgam*.

²⁷² Al-Walāṭi, *Al-Riḥla*.

²⁷³ Simon-Khedis (“Mauritania,” 291–3), mentions several women copyists, including Khadījatu Mint al-ʿĀqil.

markets via Moroccan ports of trade, it was dubbed “morocco” leather by the English and “maroquinerie” by the French. Saharans, who also tanned leather, used it among other things for bookbinding, typically decorating it with designs and insignia in bright colors such as yellow, red, green, and indigo. In Tīshīt women of the blacksmith class (*maʿalimāt*) commanded the craft of creating strapped leather boxes to protect manuscript folios. Because of the tremendous growth in the book trade worldwide in the nineteenth century, the demand for tanned leather grew considerably, as noted in the next chapter. From the 1870s onward, scholars and traders began importing printed books more regularly after lithograph printing saw the light of day in Morocco.²⁷⁴

But if books were expensive in these times and places, so, too, was the price of paper. Paper was a rare commodity in western Africa where it was not produced locally. The rising demand for paper in world history may be more attributable to the spread of literacy than the tradition of parcel wrapping. Developed in Ancient Egypt, papyrus was the earliest form of paper used by Muslims, and some of their eighth-century writings have survived. Like other literate societies, Muslims also used vellum or leather parchment, but this was not the preferred recording medium, especially in the age of paper. The technology of paper making spread from China to Iraq, Syria, and Iran, before reaching Egypt, the Maghrib, and later Spain.²⁷⁵ By the eleventh century when the Almoravid jihad spilled over into Spain from the southern coasts of the western Sahara, it is said that there were over one hundred paper mills in the Moroccan city of Fez manufacturing paper from linen and hemp.²⁷⁶ By the twelfth century the best quality paper was produced in Spain at Xàtiva (*Shāṭiba*), and later the regions of southern France and Italy took the lead in paper production and exportation.²⁷⁷

Amalfi, Venice, Genoa, and Marseille became the most active ports supplying paper to North Africa, from Ceuta and Tangiers to Cairo from whence it traveled into the interior.²⁷⁸ It would be at a comparatively much later date, in the eighteenth century, that places such as England began to seriously manufacture paper, “an indispensable ingredient in every industrial and commercial process,” as A. Dykes Spicer recognized a hundred

²⁷⁴ Stewart, “New Source,” 245.

²⁷⁵ Bloom, *Paper before Print*; Burns, *Society and Documentation in Crusader Valencia*.

²⁷⁶ Benjelloun-Laroui, *Bibliothèques du Maroc*, 23; Braudel, *Structures of Everyday Life*, 397–9.

²⁷⁷ “Shāṭiba” *El3* (IX: 362b). See Burns, “Paper Comes to the West, 800–1400.”

²⁷⁸ Walz, “Paper Trade of Egypt and the Sudan,” 29–48.

years ago.²⁷⁹ Interestingly, from the 1860s to as late as 1907, “Algiers, Tripoli, North Africa and Almeria in Spain [were England’s] chief sources of esparto.”²⁸⁰ This coarse grass was then the principal material in paper making before wood pulp prevailed, which contributed to significantly lowering the price of paper. By the 1870s, England joined France and Italy as the leading exporters of writing paper to the four corners of the world.

Writing paper, first produced in North Africa, then in Spain and later elsewhere in Europe, circulated into western Africa by way of caravan trade. It also was imported via eastern trade routes from as far away as India, which since the sixteenth century had become one of the most important paper economies in Asia.²⁸¹ In former times, literate western African Muslims depended on caravan traffic and the arrival of pilgrims for their paper supplies. By the eighteenth century, European ships were transporting writing paper into Al-Ṣawīra, Ndar, Banjul, and other Atlantic ports. Muslims now acquired their writing paper in outposts along the Senegal and Gambia Rivers supplied by French and British commercial intermediaries. Saharans in particular demanded paper in exchange for gum arabic, as noted above. This was the case of the aforementioned enterprising Qādiriyya leader Shaykh Sidiyya al-Kabīr, who put his followers and slaves to work collecting gum.²⁸² Gum arabic in Europe was used not only as a solvent in the textile and printing industries, but also as an adhesive in bookbinding.

In the course of the nineteenth century, when paper was more readily available and Arabic literacy was widespread, proportionally more trans-Saharan traders than in the past recorded in writing their business transactions. At the same time that trans-Saharan trade grew in volume and value, western Africa experienced a veritable boom in the production of Islamic knowledge. Muslim intellectuals and scholars of Islamic law doubled as caravan merchants to sustain their livelihoods while building their symbolic capital by acquiring manuscripts and writing paper. The fact that both scholars and traders used paper to record their transactions,

²⁷⁹ Dykes Spicer, *Paper Trade*, 1–2, and Hills, *Paper Making in England*, 1488–1988.

²⁸⁰ Dykes Spicer, *Paper*, 34–5, 89.

²⁸¹ See Tapiéro, “A propos d’une manuscrit arabe.” This author examines watermarks on the paper of a manuscript written by early-nineteenth-century jihad leader from northern Nigeria, the Sufi ‘Uthmān Daḡ Fodio (his work is entitled *Shams al-Ikhwān* or the sun of the brotherhood), to determine its northern Italian provenance (30). Interview in Tishīt with Muḥammad Wuld Aḥamdi (04/21/97), who confirmed information on the provenance of paper in the history of western Africa.

²⁸² Stewart, *Islam*, 121.

and to otherwise operate in a paper economy, is extremely significant to understanding the organization of caravan trade.

Since paper must have fetched high prices and its supply was subject to the hazards of caravan crossings, maintaining a paper supply was no easy task for residents of the African interior. Whether one examines the margins of their manuscripts with their small, tight script or the multiple uses of loose paper folios, it is clear that most used paper sparingly. As Norris explains, “the scribe, both historian and copyist, in the past has had the leisure to assemble his facts, but meager resources, the ravages of climate and termite and above all the lack of printing, have compelled him to be brief, concise and to compress.”²⁸³ In the absence of paper, Saharans made parchment out of the tanned skins of antelope such as gazelles (*riqq al-ghazāla*). The rarity of such vellum suggests that it was the less-preferred medium or that it was used for documents of great value. But if paper was not easy to come by, Saharans had no trouble keeping their inkwells filled. They used the finest of inks simply prepared by mixing crushed charcoal and gum arabic with saliva or water. This concoction produced a jet-black, shiny, and durable ink known in Hasaniya as *ṣamgha* (derived from the Arabic for gum). Saharan writers dipped wooden plumes or reeds into small vessels (*duwāyāt*) typically made of hollow stones. Students applied a diluted form of erasable ink to their wooden learning tablets. Only after years of training would they be initiated into the art of copying on paper.

By the nineteenth century, the paper revolution was worldwide. It was being imported into the region of western Africa by both caravan and caravel. Then, interactions intensified among Muslims linked to the spread of Sufi orders, the organization of Islamic states, and the expansion of trans-Saharan trade. The encroaching Europeans among western Africans also led to an escalation of diplomatic negotiations held in Arabic, Africa’s first written diplomatic language. Such activities provoked a growth in correspondence requiring a stable paper supply. Accordingly, the availability of paper goes a long way in explaining the remarkable growth of library collections, scholarly production, and the paper economy discussed in subsequent chapters.

CONCLUSION

Several observations emerge from this long history of the trans-Saharan trade in western Africa. First, before the beginning of desertification in

²⁸³ Norris, “History of Shinqīt,” 393.

3000 B.C.E. and after becoming the world's largest continuous desert, the Sahara was never disconnected from the mainland. In other words, it was never a barrier but always a bridge to intercontinental exchange, albeit one that required faith, resources, dexterity, and patience either to inhabit or to cross. Long-distance trade within and across the Sahara expanded gradually with the growth of the camel population and thanks to a group of desert-edge "Berbers" specializing in camel herding and steering convoys. The beginning of European commercial imperialism did not bring an end to transcontinental contact nor did the caravel replace the caravan, as camels continued to serve the transportation needs of Africans on all shores of the Sahara.

Second, there was a great deal of continuity in the engagement of several groups operating long-distance trade networks. From the ninth century C.E., sources reveal that the expert navigators of trans-Saharan crossings along the western routes tended to originate from the extreme southern part of present-day Morocco. The caravaning expertise of the *Ṣanhāja*, and especially the *Masūfa* clan, was passed down to their distant *Wād Nūn* descendants, as seen in the next chapters. Moreover, while the *Wangara* were the earliest western African merchants of gold and held on to their specialty for centuries, their North African counterparts were probably Maghribi Jews. Indeed, even before the rise of Islam Jews were active on trans-Saharan trails, preceding Muslims including the *Ibādīs*, with whom they would collaborate. The Jewish factor is critical for understanding the early history of trans-Saharan trade. Jewish traders were not simply financiers of caravans of gold and importers of cowry shells; they had a small presence in key markets. Their ban from Timbuktu, lifted in the nineteenth century, did not prevent Jews from settling in other oasis towns or continuing their off-shore financing of caravan trade.

Third, the expansion of trans-Saharan trade in the early part of the second millennium was linked to an increased demand for metal and leather. It was also related to the spread of literacy in Arabic and of Islamic institutions framed in *Mālikī* law that promoted the operation of long-distance trade. After the eleventh century, caravan routes shifted eastward, eventually leading to the establishment of permanent Saharan oases acting as relay stations. Trade intensified from the twelfth century onward, with the growth of Mediterranean-side exchanges, and then in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when the Empire of Mali was at its zenith. Western and central Africans needed copper and brass to manufacture tools and equipment. They also depended on Saharan rock salt as a mineral supplement, while the rising demand for foreign imports,

including cowries, beads, and textiles, propelled their enterprising activities. For northerners, the demand for gold, tanned leather, raw hides, civet glands, and other western African products, as well as enslaved Africans, drove their caravanning expeditions. As the eminent fourteenth-century scholar Ibn Khaldūn, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, recognized, this trade while fraught with high risks offered the promise of great rewards. Saharans residing in desert oases also relied on regional caravans for basic needs, namely, cereal, cotton cloth, and wood. The Middle Niger River region, stronghold of the great empires wherein lay the gold, became the epicenter of trans-Saharan traffic and cross-cultural exchange.

From the fourteenth to the sixteenth century, caravan commerce continued to flourish. But the stifling Moroccan conquest of Songhay in the 1590s caused trans-Saharan trade to shift further to the east. Ottoman-monitored North African and central Saharan oases, from Tripoli to Ghāt and Murzuk, stimulated trade from the sixteenth century onward with the Hausa markets of Kano, Sokoto, and Katsina and especially with the kingdom of Kanem-Bornu further east. At the same time, the increased presence of Europeans on the coasts of Africa brought a new kind of commercial activity to bear on older patterns of long-distance trade. But while the movement of trans-Saharan caravans ebbed and flowed in the *longue durée* it sustained the efforts of Europeans to divert the desert trade until the twentieth century.

One of the main points of this chapter has been to show the permanence of exchanges among Africans within and across the Sahara Desert even before the region experienced the levels of desertification that made crossings a specialized and challenging business. At the dawn of the nineteenth century, long-distance trade networks were fully involved with the world economy through exchanges with seafaring European merchants. This long century, to which I now turn, would close with the European “scramble” and conquests of the African continent. But in the early part of the century, and with the involvement of the Wād Nūn network, discussed in Chapter 4, the movement and volume of trans-Saharan commerce would accelerate considerably, reviving the *Ṭariq al-Lamtūna* that had been so prominent in the days of the Almoravids.

Markets and the Movement of Caravans: Nineteenth-Century Developments

The exchange of the cotton bale (*bayša*) in gold is one-and-a-half mithqāl (approx. 6.5 grams), and [the *bayša*] in silver is three *ūqiya* (ounces). The female slave (*al-khādim*) is between ten and thirteen *bayšas*. The [price of ostrich] feathers is seven *bayšas* . . . when before it was five *bayšas*. And the exchange of the *bayša* in millet is eight *mudds* of Walāta (approx. 24 kgs). . . . I inform you that I sent to you [his brother in Shinqīti] a load of ostrich feathers with Bātin Ibn Zaydān: six *ūqiya* of *salātīn* (good quality, white), one-quarter of a *raṭl* (approx. 125 grams) of *‘ayār* (medium quality, white), four *raṭl* (approx. 2 kgs) of black feathers worth one-and-a-half mithqāl. . . . Be informed that a group of Rgaybāt from Guelmīm arrived here in Walāta . . . among them there is Ibrāhīm Wuld Aḥmad Wuld ‘Aly to whom you owed a debt. . . . As for Buhay, he is well and currently in Timbuktu with ostrich feathers and gum arabic that he wants to forward for sale in the north (*fī al-sāḥil*). . . . Be aware that we have learned that the son [Aḥmadu al-Kabīr] of al-Ḥājī ‘Umar has joined the Christians (*al-Naṣārā*; i.e. the French) with numerous contingents of Futis [Fulbe]. If cloth does not arrive from their direction, it will become unavailable here.

Letter from Walāta, circa 1880¹

Caravans were the lifelines of Saharan oasis towns. Their departures marked the yearly calendar as did their most anticipated returns. These merchant ships of the desert supplied much more than provisions, merchandise, and enslaved laborers. They opened trans-Saharan lines of communication, bringing stories of faraway places and news about distant relatives, political events, and the latest fashions. In this respect, Bovill was correct in describing the western trans-Saharan passage to and

¹ Letter 1 (circa 1880s) from Muḥammad b. Sālim (Walāta) to his brother Ibrāhīm (Shinqīti), Buhay Family Records (Shinqīti); group interviews in Shinqīti with Muḥammad Sa‘īd Wuld Buhay, Khadijatu Mint ‘Abdullah Wuld ‘Aly, and Fāṭima Mint ‘Abdarrahmān Wuld Buhay (02/25/97 and 09/27/97). On weights, measures, and trade correspondence see Chapter 5.

from Timbuktu as “a cultural highway.”² For while traders transported goods, so, too, were they catalysts of change shaping cultural trends and consumer behavior as well as perceptions about the world at large. This is why the movement of caravans was followed closely and with great anticipation by both sedentary and nomadic communities via messengers and reported sightings.

Trans-Saharan trade in the long nineteenth century ebbed and flowed in relationship to a variety of factors unrelated to the demand for goods on either side of, and within, the great desert. Political instability tempered commerce throughout the century. The occurrence of jihads, civil wars, and armed struggles against colonial invasions both impeded and provided opportunities to trans-Saharan traders. At the same time, inter-regional and transcontinental caravan traffic became more intensively linked to the international maritime trade of European and Afro-European (métis) merchants established in several ports on the Atlantic coast and in outposts along the Senegal and Gambia Rivers. The convergence of African and European cross-cultural exchange was ongoing since before the Phoenician emporium of Carthage or the flourishing Genoese and Jewish commerce of twelfth-century North Africa, as seen in Chapter 2. But by the nineteenth century, Maghribi Jews, joined by Mediterranean Jews, resumed their preponderant role as international brokers of maritime and trans-Saharan commerce, regaining some of the economic prominence they had lost since the pogrom of 1492.

The winding down of the trans-Atlantic slave trade following European abolitions in the early part of the century, coupled with the expansion of cross-cultural trade between local and foreign merchants who now targeted a handful of commodities, provoked a significant growth in the volume of transcontinental commerce. While the nineteenth century witnessed the continuation of centuries-old caravan trade, new products filtered into and out of African markets that had a transformative effect on consumer behavior in Africa, Europe, and beyond. Firearms, gunpowder, industrial cotton cloth, green tea, and refined sugar were the primary European imports. The proliferation of firearms, the consolidation of Islamic polities, and organized resistance to European occupation contributed to an escalation of violence and enslavement, and the trans-Saharan slave trade supplying African and Middle Eastern markets endured. Aside from enslaved Africans, the bulk of goods traveling in the opposite direction ranged from gum arabic, gold, ivory, and indigo-dyed

² Bovill, *Golden Trade*, 235.

West African cotton cloth to lighter loads of ostrich feathers. Indeed, by the early nineteenth century, European markets were seized by the lure of these feathers used for hats, coifs, fans, boas, and quills.

As Marion Johnson argued, trans-Saharan caravans were not limited to transporting luxury goods, such as gold, slaves, and silk, but they also carried cotton cloth for the common folk. Bales of industrially manufactured cotton calicos from Europe and South Asia, locally known as *bayša*, became so popular by the beginning of the nineteenth century that they functioned as a currency (examined in Chapter 5). Yet it is important to recognize how the massive importation of such textiles would transform calicos from foreign luxury to commonplace necessity in the course of the century.³ Moreover, the nineteenth-century growth in the African demand for cloth must be considered in light of the rising ranks of Muslim converts adopting Islamic dress and burial-cloth requirements. At the same time, new imports such as green tea and sugar filtered into western African markets with tremendous cultural as well as physiological repercussions.

Climatic shifts also had a bearing on trans-Saharan traffic. While the first part of the century was particularly dry, causing several severe sandstorms, the region of western Africa went through a prolonged wet phase from the late 1850s onward that favored agriculture and livestock development, including camel-herding activities (Appendix 1).⁴ Also, as in 1830s Guelmīm, smallpox claimed the lives of locals and trans-Saharan travelers in late 1840s Tishīt, and then in 1860s and 1870s Walāta. This, and other diseases of sometimes epidemic proportions, coupled with periodic famines, further determined the movement of caravans. In the year 1282/1865–6 famine prevailed simultaneously “in Shinqīti, Tishīt, Walāta, Arawān and Timbuktū, and even the entire land of Takrūr,” as reported in the Tishīt Chronicle.⁵ That year was also marked by a devastating locust invasion on top of a livestock epidemic.

It was long thought that trans-Saharan trade had reached its climax during the “golden trade of the Moors” of the fourteenth century. It

³ Johnson, “Calico Caravans: The Tripoli-Kano Trade,” 96. Her argument for eastern caravan trade is applicable to trade along western routes.

⁴ Reported in the Chronicle of Tishīt (*Hawliyyāt Tishīt*), Family Archives of Muḥammadu Wuld Aḥamdī (Tishīt). See also the translation by Monteil, “Chroniques de Tichite,” and the recent version by M. Ould Maouloud, “Nouvelle traduction de la Chronique de Tishīt.” On the environmental history, see McIntosh, *Peoples*, 72–3 (Table 2.1); Brooks, *Landlords*, chap. 1., and Webb, *Desert Frontier*, chap. 1.

⁵ Chronicle of Tishīt (*Hawliyyāt Tishīt*).

would have begun an irreversible decline following the European encroachment on the African coast, starting in the mid-fifteenth century, which siphoned off a significant portion of the trade, the late-century disruptions caused by Sunni Ali's establishment of the Songhay Empire, and finally the Moroccan invasion of Songhay a century later. Soon thereafter, the European merchant ship was thought to have replaced the Saharan caravan.⁶

Relying on data gleaned primarily from European sources, scholars recently revised the view that trans-Saharan trade declined in the era of maritime trade. In fact, they have demonstrated to what extent the volume of transcontinental caravan trade actually experienced remarkable growth in the course of the nineteenth century.⁷ The trend is especially well documented for the central and eastern caravan routes where, by all accounts, the volume of trans-Saharan trade was the largest. A plausible explanation is the role of the second Ottoman administration in Libya, starting in 1835, which promoted caravan trade by ensuring security and mildly taxing, but not constraining, the flow of traffic from the port of Tripoli and strategic Saharan outposts.⁸ The most popular caravan route linked the commercial centers of Kano in Hausaland and Ghadāmis in Libya via Ghāt. Ottoman rule contrasted with France's military attempts to control Algerian caravan traffic in the second half of the nineteenth century, resulting in it being diverted away from In Salah ('*Ayn Ṣalāḥ*) and Algiers (Map 1).

There is no doubt that the colonization in 1830 of Algeria, France's first African colony, caused a shift in caravan traffic toward Timbuktu and the markets of Morocco and Libya.⁹ As Colin Newbury explains, "the immediate effect of military intervention and customs regulations along the southern frontier of Algeria in 1843 was to divert the trade of El Golea and

⁶ Bovill, *Golden Trade*, 135; Adu Boahen, *Britain*, 103–6. For a discussion of caravels versus the caravans, also referred to in Chapter 2, see Barry, *Sénégalie*; Hopkins, *Economic History*, 79–80.

⁷ For the revisionists' position, see Newbury, "North African and Western Sudan Trade"; Baier, *Economic History*; Miège, "Commerce transsaharien"; Ogunremi, *Counting the Camels*; Holsinger, "Trade Routes of the Algerian Sahara"; Lovejoy, "Commercial Sectors in the Economy of the Nineteenth Century Sudan"; McDougall, "Salt, Saharans and the Trans-Saharan Slave Trade"; and Austen, "Marginalization"; Webb, *Desert Frontier*.

⁸ Saïed, "Commerce et commerçants dans le Sahara central"; Baier, "The Sahara in the Nineteenth Century."

⁹ Baier, *Economic History*; Newbury, "North African"; Miège, "Commerce transsaharien"; Abitbol, "Maroc et le commerce transsaharien"; Holsinger, "Trade Routes."

Wargla to the markets of Tafielt and Ghadamès in the west and east.”¹⁰ While Newbury’s pioneering article went a long way toward dispelling the myth that trans-Saharan trade had been reduced to nil since the sixteenth century, other scholarship by Johnson, Lovejoy, Stephen Baier, and more recently by Ralph Austen and Dennis Cordell, has shown that rather than decline after 1875, traffic actually continued to grow into the early twentieth century.¹¹ In this respect, as Johnson acknowledged, the earliest scholarship on the subject of caravan trade produced in 1933 by Bovill had been accurate all along.¹²

Like most scholars after him, Bovill focused mainly on the eastern routes from Timbuktu and especially the markets of the central Sudan. Few have examined the western branches of trans-Saharan trade in this momentous century. Nor is it generally recognized to what extent the Wād Nūn market of Guelmīm in the western Sahara, which is the subject of the [next chapter](#), captured a sizeable portion of nineteenth-century caravan trade. The present study, however, is the first history of western trans-Saharan trade in the nineteenth century based on a systematic examination of both the records and family histories of the merchants and traders involved. These original sources support the prevailing conclusions reached by others in terms of the volume of caravan trade in this period, but they also allow for a better understanding of how this traffic was organized. Still, at this stage of research, and due to the unevenness of sources, it has been possible to provide only qualitative and not quantitative data documenting this trend.

Two types of caravans (discussed further in Chapter 5) circulated along Saharan trade routes in the nineteenth century. The first was the large trans-Saharan caravan that typically traveled annually the longest distances between African markets. The second comprised smaller, seasonal, and increasingly more frequent caravans engaged in local and interregional exchange primarily in salt and consumables. Trans-Saharan traffic grew along western routes where it was far from being “limited to the single large annual caravans to and from Timbuktu.”¹³ While Albert Adu Boahen, in his remarkable study, rightly points to the chronic warfare that

¹⁰ Newbury, “North African,” 235.

¹¹ Johnson, “Calico Caravans”; Baier, *Economic History*; Lovejoy and Baier, “Desert-Side Economy of the Central Sudan”; Austen and D. Cordell, “Trade, Transportation, and Expanding Economic Networks”; Holsinger, “Trade Routes.”

¹² Bovill, *Caravans*, 246, cited in Johnson, “Calico Caravans,” 96, n. 12. Bovill had felt compelled to revise his initial contention in his later *Golden Trade*.

¹³ Adu Boahen, *Britain*, 105.

obstructed western trans-Saharan trade in the nineteenth century, it did not altogether stop the circulation of caravans. But as the century drew to a close, the state of heightened insecurity pushed many trans-Saharan traders to migrate further south and west to engage in new business activity in the burgeoning protocolonial economies of Senegal and Mali.

This chapter focuses on nineteenth-century developments that influenced the world of merchants, markets, and the movement of caravans along the western trade routes. The first section deals with the interactions between long-distance trade and the activities of Muslim revolutionaries, such as jihad leaders. Then, I examine the correlated trends in the regional slave trade into and across the Sahara. I consider European and Moroccan commerce, and the rise and fall of market towns in relationship to commercial flows. The main conclusions are that while camel caravans continued to supply markets within and across the western Sahara until the end of the century, despite the warfare and violence that tempered traffic, they transported more cargo, including enslaved Africans and new products linked to renewed exchanges with the world economy. Larger numbers of professional and literate long-distance traders from the Wād Nūn region successfully engaged in cross-cultural trade in multiple locations throughout western Africa, often partnering with an international network of Maghribi Jewish traders. The use of firearms changed the size, structure, number, and frequency of caravans. At the same time, Muslim revolutions, and the activities of European merchants operating in the African hinterland, now focused on the gum trade, stimulated inter-regional commerce.

CARAVANS IN THE AGE OF JIHAD

The nineteenth century saw the emergence of great Muslim state builders in Africa. The 1804 jihad of ‘Uthmān Daṅ Fodio, leading to the foundation of the Sokoto Caliphate in Hausaland, became a model to subsequent Muslim leaders. Fifteen years later in the western Sudan, Aḥmad Lobbo launched a jihad to establish the Caliphate of Masina in Ḥamdullahi. Starting in the 1850s al-Ḥājj ‘Umar Tāl of Futa Toro’s jihad would transform the region encompassing present-day Mali, Mauritania, and Senegal. In the last part of the century, the Futa Jallon Muslim entrepreneur, Samori Turé, fought a protracted war against European incursions, while in the northwestern Sahara, Shaykh Mā’ al-‘Aynayn’s men successfully staved off the French conquest until the early twentieth

century. All of these events had important repercussions for caravan traffic.

Like other forms of warfare in this period, nineteenth-century jihads created both breaks and barriers to the conduct of caravan trade. Typical of the collusion between politics and commerce, Muslim leaders worked closely with profiteering merchants to finance their administrations. Trans-Saharan traders equipped them with strategic imports such as horses and firearms needed to wage wars and establish fiefdoms. They supplied food, writing paper, and cotton cloth to an ever-growing community of western African Muslims, who adopted local identity markers by wearing long full robes and headdresses. Consumption of white cloth by Muslims to bury the dead also must have increased in this period with both conversions and the death tolls caused by warfare on the rise. Despite the counterproductive economy of raiding that supplied the bulk of their revenue, the activities of nineteenth-century revolutionary Muslim leaders contributed significantly to the expansion of trans-Saharan trade. Yet at times the relationship between Muslim leaders and commercial entrepreneurs was clearly antagonistic when the former seized the convoys of competing traders or otherwise obstructed commerce. Nevertheless, with the exception of Richard Roberts, historians have paid only scant attention to how these leaders financed their Islamic projects.¹⁴ The embeddedness of the caravan economy in wartime commerce during nineteenth-century revolutions is illustrated in several Saharan sources.

The Caliphate of Masina

The jihad of Aḥmad b. Muḥammad Lobbo (d. 1261/1845), alias Seku Aḥmadu Lobbo (hereafter Aḥmad Lobbo I), announced a disruptive period in the region of present-day northwestern Mali and eastern Mauritania.¹⁵ This Fulbe cleric founded the Masina Caliphate with its

¹⁴ Roberts, *Warriors, Merchants and Slaves*, 76–134. Robinson (*The Holy War of Umar Tal*, 55, 359–63) makes numerous observations about the Fulbe economy, but still the economics of nineteenth-century jihads remains poorly documented.

¹⁵ For biographies of rulers of Masina, see Sanankoua, *Empire peul*, 51–3, 116–32, 146–54; Hunwick, *Arabic Literature of Africa, the Writings of Western Sudanic Africa*, IV, 209–11; Ba and Daget, *L'Empire Peul du Macina*; Brown, “Caliphate of Hamdullahi”; Ly-Tall, “Massina and the Torodbe (Tukuloor) Empire”; Robinson, *Holy War*, esp. 77–81; and Gomez, *Pragmatism in the Age of Jihad* (for an excellent discussion of the regional context).

capital in Hamdullahi in the inner Niger River delta in 1233/1818 (Map 1). In time, Aḥmad Lobbo I extended his authority to Kaarta and Sokolo, occupying Jenne and then Timbuktu in 1241/1826. His state was based on an austere vision of Islam inspired by Askiya Muḥammad's fifteenth-century rule of Songhay. It had a tangential relationship with the prestigious Kunta family of Shaykh Sīdī al-Mukhtār, representing the Qādir-iyya Sufi order. It ran an autocratic administration, known as the *Dīna*, with stringent controls over both morals and markets.¹⁶

Armed with this dogma the caliph launched a jihad "of the sword" against non-believers especially targeting the Bamana state and its capital, Segu. At one time, the caliphate's military might rested on "8,000 cavalry, 5,000 infantry and 1,000 musketeers."¹⁷ The war caused regional insecurity, hindering mobility and holding up some commerce while promoting that of the Kunta clan that controlled a sizeable portion of the Saharan salt trade.¹⁸ Like most Muslim revolutionary leaders in the nineteenth century, Aḥmad Lobbo I partly financed his state through revenue and resources derived from the slave trade with Morocco.¹⁹ According to Caillié, the French adventurer who traveled to Timbuktu in the 1820s disguised as a Muslim, Aḥmad Lobbo I's administration relaxed taxation of certain local or foreign caravans (although it imposed a 10% duty on all trade).²⁰ Caillié admitted, however, that his "war is seriously detrimental to trade."²¹ In studies of the economic policies of Masina, scholars left unexamined the Islamic state's relationship with trans-Saharan trade or the occurrence of caravan raids that characterized Masina's "war economy."²² Mostly, they have focused either on the tenuous alliances among the Masina Caliphate, the Tūāreg, and the

¹⁶ Johnson, "Economic Foundations of an Islamic Theocracy," 483–4; Sanankoua, *Empire peul*; Willis, "Jihād fi Sabīl Allāh"; Ly-Tal, "Massina" (who draws attention to how the jihad caused commercial stoppages in Jenne and Timbuktu). For a discussion of the relations between the Kunta and the Masina Caliphate, see Stewart, "Frontier Disputes and Problems of Legitimation, Sokoto-Masina Relations, 1817–1837."

¹⁷ Roberts (*Warriors*, 82), discussing the 1861 offensive of Hamdullahi against the forces of Shaykh 'Umar Tāl. Robinson (*Holy War*, 295) estimated the caliphate's army at 50,000 in the 1862–4 Umarian campaign.

¹⁸ On the Kunta and the salt trade, see McDougall, "Economics of Islam."

¹⁹ According to Schroeter ("Slave Markets and Slavery in Moroccan Urban Society," 187), "the slave-hunters frequently mentioned [in consular records] in the nineteenth century were Arabs [*sic*] of the caliphate of Hamdullahi (Masina)." He also mentions that the majority of the enslaved were labeled as "Bambara."

²⁰ Caillié, *Journal*, 207, 307.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 214.

²² Johnson, "Economic Foundations," 490.

scholarly Kunta clan, or the conflict with the Umarian state, but not on the impact of the jihad on regional trade.

Masina and the Caravaners of Tishīt

Several letters from two private libraries in Tishīt shed light on how the caliphate sometimes interfered with the peaceful conduct of regional trade. They document an incident when a Tishīt caravan was held up by Aḥmad Lobbo I's military general in the region of Kaarta on the pretext that it had asked for it by entering the *Dār al-ḥarb*, or "the abode of war," where the jihad was being waged. Kaarta, previously dominated by the Bamana state of Segu, was perhaps the most contested terrain in the first half of the nineteenth century. Because of its grain and livestock productivity, its raising and exportation of the Barb horse, and its centers of exchange, it is no coincidence that Kaarta was the theater of the heaviest fighting between Segu, Ḥamdullahi, and later the Umarian forces.

The seizure of a caravan obviously strained relations between the people of Tishīt, their commercial suppliers, and the Masina Caliphate. To negotiate its release, the most reputable Tishīti scholar, Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr (d. 1272/1855–6), wrote on behalf of his people to the caliph's general in Kaarta. In his letter he praised the jihadists' efforts to extend the frontiers of Islam to the *Bilād al-Sūdān*. But he described the particular predicament of his people, which was similar to that of all Saharans, including residents of Timbuktu, namely, their dependency on interregional trade to market salt bars for millet, the staple of their diet. Their town, he explained:

is the center of gravity of this land (*qutb hadhā al-balad*), all the people come to Tishīt to seek [Islamic] knowledge (*ilm*) but it has no markets to obtain supplies. And the region of Kaarta [known in Hasaniya as Bāghana] is the granary (*balad al-zirā'a*) of the people of Tishīt.²³

For this reason, their survival depended on commercial exchange with "the land of unbelief (*ard al-kufr*).” Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr reasoned on legal terms that this instance of long-distance trade was justified because of necessity, before pleading for Masina's protection and the release of

²³ Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr to the Caliph of Aḥmad b. Muḥammad Lobbo (AS12), Muḥammad Wuld Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr Library (Tishīt). Correspondence of an official political nature, such as the letter of Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr to Aḥmad Lobbo I, typically was duplicated for record-keeping purposes. I thank Yahya Ould El-Bara for his assistance with the translation and understanding the context of these letters.

the Tīshīt caravan. The letter ended by wishing the caliph success “in dominating the entire region from the island of the Christians (*jazīra al-Naṣārā*; meaning the French-dominated port of Ndar in Senegal) to Timbuktū.”²⁴

In his response to their request, fortuitously found in another private library, the caliph of Masina showed little patience. He took issue with Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr’s attempt to legitimize the travel of Tīshīt traders into the jihad zone. He opined that his army had rightly seized their caravan because, while they were not explicitly targeted, they were indistinguishable from non-believers in the battlefield. The Muslim leader concluded that the laws of Islam were not applicable in such a context of sedition (*fitna*).²⁵ While there is no way of knowing what became of the seized caravan and its crew, altercations of this sort had serious consequences on the relationship between Tīshīt and Masina. Like most letters, these were not dated. But the incident evidently took place in the early to mid-1820s when the jihad was in full swing. It was in those years that, according to the regional chronicles, the Ṭuāreg fought the warring Fulbe of Masina to fend their invasion of Timbuktu. At the same moment in time, traffic was suspended between Morocco and Timbuktu for a full year, Tīshīt was attacked by the northern Awlād Dīm, and famine followed (Appendix 1).²⁶

Shaykh ‘Umar Tāl’s Holy War

Several years later, another Muslim leader waged militant jihad with different consequences on regional caravan traffic.²⁷ He was the prime promoter of the Tijāniyya that rivaled the Qādiriyya Sufi orders of the Kunta clan. In 1268/1852, after several years of preparation, Shaykh al-Ḥājj ‘Umar Tāl, of the Futa Toro region, launched a jihad aimed at extending the domination of his Fulbe ethnic group as much as gaining converts to build an Islamic state, as Robinson suggests.²⁸ That same year Aḥmad Lobbo II, who had replaced his father as caliph of Masina,

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Letter by Aḥmad b. Muhammad Lobbo to Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr (SS16), Family Archives of Sharīfnā Wuld Shaykhnā Bū Aḥmad (Tīshīt).

²⁶ For a discussion of the attack on Timbuktu based on oral traditions, see Ly-Tall, “Massina,” 605.

²⁷ On the relationship between ‘Umar Tāl and the Kunta, see Willis, “Writings of al-Ḥājj ‘Umar al-Fūtī.”

²⁸ Robinson, *Holy War*, 4.

died, leaving his eldest son and namesake Aḥmad Lobbo III as his successor. Unable to withstand the Umarian opposition, this third and last caliph would lead the state of Masina to its downfall. Against the backdrop of the imperial expansion of the French, Shaykh ‘Umar’s army, estimated at 25,000 cavalry and infantry, targeted non-believers.²⁹ It also fought against other Muslims and rival Sufis in direct confrontations with Masina.

In time, the Umarians would control a large area from the mountains of Futa Jallon in present-day Guinea to the Masina capital in the northeast of Mali. By 1271/1855, Shaykh ‘Umar’s army occupied Nioro, a town that would become a regional capital, a center of Islamic teaching, and, more important, the largest market in Kaarta.³⁰ By 1277/1860–1, he seized the seat of power of the Bamana kingdom of Segu from under Masina’s control. The following year, he occupied the capital of Ḥamdullahi and promptly had Aḥmad III and his entourage tracked down and killed. Heading to the northeast, his army struggled to overrun Timbuktu in the face of the armed resistance of the Tūāreg and their Kunta allies. Then, in 1280/1864 after being pursued by the forces of Masina, Shaykh ‘Umar mysteriously died after leaving state leadership in the hands of his eldest son Aḥmadu al-Kabīr. In the following three decades, or until the colonial occupation of Nioro in 1891, Aḥmadu would develop ties with the French, while achieving little in the way of state consolidation, economic development, or regional integration.

The Umarians and the Desert-Side Economy

How Shaykh ‘Umar succeeded in financing his jihad remains poorly understood. But despite the lack of sources, scholars recognize that his ties to Saharan markets were extremely significant to the success of his mission. Robinson acknowledged “the very important relationships of the jihad with the desert-side economy.”³¹ It is clear that Shaykh ‘Umar’s administration juggled complex, multiregional commercial operations to access a

²⁹ Ibid., 257–66. Most of the background information for this section is drawn from Robinson, *Holy War*; Hanson and Robinson, *After the Jihad*; Hanson, *Migration, Jihad, and Muslim Authority*; Roberts, *Warriors*; Gomez, *Pragmatism*.

³⁰ Marty, *Études sur l’Islam et les tribus du Soudan*, 204, 208. Shaykh ‘Umar would turn it into one of the capitals of his Islamic state and commission the building of its first mosque.

³¹ Robinson, *Holy War*, 362.

wide range of goods and resources. This complexity is captured in the record of several transactions that took place during the height of the jihad.

In 1276/1859, the Umarian army reportedly plundered a Saharan caravan headed to the French commercial outpost of Podor on the banks of the Senegal River (Map 6).³² While common under his son's watch, I suspect that raids of this nature were the exception rather than the rule in Shaykh 'Umar's time. That very same year, as per the Chronicle of Walāta, Shaykh 'Umar struck a deal that perhaps was more typical of his exchanges with Saharan merchants. He purchased 2,000 bars of Ijil salt, or approximately 400 camel-loads, from a Tishit caravan, reportedly paying for half the cargo in slaves.³³ At the going rate of four to one, this single transaction would have supplied Saharan slave markets with close to 500 slaves.

The following year, the Senegalese interpreter Bū al-Mughdād (discussed in Chapter 1) provided additional information in his report to the French concerning Shaykh 'Umar's trans-Saharan exchanges gathered during his pilgrimage crossing. He described Guelmīm's bustling caravan market where he sojourned for over a week in January 1861. Guelmīm's Tikna ruler Shaykh Bayrūk had recently passed away and his son Muḥammad now ruled. Bū al-Mughdād recorded the presence of trans-Saharan merchants from Tishit and Shinqīṭi, including members of the Awlād Bū al-Sibā', and he remarked on the regularity of caravans from Timbuktu.³⁴ He also noted that the sultan of Morocco's son was in town bearing gifts to coax Muḥammad b. Bayrūk into channeling Saharan and West African goods to Moroccan markets. More germane is Bū al-Mughdād's witnessing of the departure of a caravan headed for Tishit transporting goods on behalf of Shaykh 'Umar, then settled in Nioro and on the verge of occupying Segu. On board were ten skilled workers, namely, blacksmiths and farmers, commissioned by the Umarian state "to teach the people to shoe horses and to till the land with ploughs drawn by oxen or horses."³⁵ In all likelihood, just as his slaves-for-salt deal earlier that year, the bulk of Shaykh 'Umar's business in Guelmīm was settled directly in the human commodity. Bū al-Mughdād remarked that Shaykh 'Umar's reputation was well established in the Wād Nūn region and beyond. He further reported that a trans-Saharan trader from Walāta was

³² Faidherbe, *Sénégal*, 211. The caravan of Tajakānit and Tirkuz clans arriving on the bank opposite Podor in November 1859 lost men, cotton cloth, and cattle.

³³ Marty, "Chroniques," 367.

³⁴ Bou-el-Mogdad, "Voyage."

³⁵ Ibid., 491.

in charge of delivering an official letter to the jihad leader from the Moroccan sultan himself.³⁶

Shaykh ‘Umar’s contacts with the northern desert edge point not only to the multiplicity of his exchanges, but also to the connectedness of Africans across the Sahara. His association was especially strong with what Robinson calls “the Tishiti cluster.”³⁷ The French colonial Islamicist Paul Marty recorded the names of a great number of Tīshīt scholars who followed Shaykh ‘Umar’s branch of the Tijāniyya Sufi order.³⁸ Oral traditions in Tīshīt speak with great reverence of ‘Umar *al-Fūtiyyu* (of the Futa Toro region).³⁹ Moreover, it is telling that after his death the only *muqāddam* or Sufi teacher in Nioro of the Umarian Tijāniyya tradition was a man from the scholarly Muḥammad al-Ṣaghīr family of Tīshīt.⁴⁰

Shaykh ‘Umar clearly succeeded in wedding Sufism to commerce. Sources reveal his close ties with trans-Saharan traders residing in Tīshīt. One letter of a nineteenth-century caravan merchant sheds light on the Sufi leader’s Saharan network. Originally from the Wād Nūn, Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl was an Awlād Bū al-Sibā‘ who resided since the early 1800s in Tīshīt where he was reputedly the wealthiest man of his day.⁴¹ He was a Tijānī, a bibliophile, and an active member of the Wād Nūn trade network who in all likelihood dealt in books as well as in general merchandise. It is therefore not surprising that amidst his papers, found in a box in the stone ruins of his Tīshīt house, were legal opinions on how to wage jihad against misbehaving Muslims and on the rules of wartime taxation.

³⁶ Ibid. The letter from the sultan apparently was asking for Shaykh ‘Umar’s military assistance in his war against Spain. The messenger was “Taleb-Mohammed,” a well-known scholar-merchant.

³⁷ Robinson, *Holy War*, 363.

³⁸ Marty, *Soudan*, 69–70, 218–22. He discusses the case of a trader who attached himself to the Umarian state probably as early as the 1840s. It is not coincidental that the family of Shaykh Ḥamallah, the influential Sufi of early-twentieth-century Nioro, was originally from Tīshīt.

³⁹ Interviews in Tīshīt with Dāddah Wuld Idda (04/97) and Muḥammad Wuld Aḥmadī (04/16/97). Group interview with Aḥmad Wuld al-Sharīf al-Mukhtār Wuld Mbacké, Sharīf Wuld Shaykhnā Sīdī Muḥammad Wuld Bāba Wuld Khaṭrī, and Billa Wuld al-Sharīf Aḥmād Wuld Āba (04/27/97).

⁴⁰ Marty, *Soudan*, 205.

⁴¹ Interview in Tīshīt with Dāddah Wuld Idda (04/97). He is featured in contracts with Illīgh merchants collected by Pascon, *Maison d’Illigh*. I discuss him further in Chapters 4 and 7.

Details of Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl's relationship with Shaykh ʿUmar appear in a letter, dating from the mid- to late 1860s, addressed to the trans-Saharan merchant by ʿUmar's son, Aḥmadu al-Kabīr. It begins with the following words of praise: "May God glorify my beloved friend (*ḥabībī*), and the love of my father, and the lover of all Muslims, Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl al-Sibāʿi."⁴² The letter reports that a group of Awlād Mbārak nomads had raided his uncle's compound, probably in Nioro or in Dingiray, and enslaved a number of his female cousins. The girls apparently were then sold to members of Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl's clan, the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ, and transported:

to the farthest northern desert edge (*fī aqṣāʾ bilād al-sāhil*) where they were exploited as they are exploited, and they were turned into concubines (*taṣāraʾū*), as is so done. They [the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ traders] sold a number of them, or hired them out and treated them like the enemy, and they committed freely prohibited acts [upon them].⁴³

Questioning on religious terms this act of enslavement, since the girls were taken "from faithful Muslims" and sold to other Muslims, Aḥmadu al-Kabīr demanded from his addressee that he do everything in his power to assist in the matter. He ended the letter by explaining that he turned to him for help and not local Saharans "because they commit many similar acts like this." As Lovejoy notes, the "illegal" enslavement of Muslims by other Muslims was a common occurrence in the revolutionary environment of nineteenth-century western Africa.⁴⁴

As in the above case of the seized Tishīt caravan, no additional information was found on this reported event. But it is tempting to suggest that it may have influenced Aḥmadu al-Kabīr's decision to discontinue relations with many Saharan groups, despite his father's legacy. Evidence derived from his correspondence translated by John Hanson and Robinson is indicative of this. He seemingly ignored, for instance, the call of allegiance of the people of Walāta when, in the 1870s, they sought the protection of the Umarian state in the face of regional chaos.⁴⁵ For his

⁴² Family records of Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl (Tishīt), IK1. What remains of this family's records were probably destroyed along with many documents in Tishīt following a devastating flood in February 1999. Interview in Tishīt with Bukra b. Muḥammad Sham (04/29/97), a former freed slave and the only one of the family remaining there.

⁴³ Family records of Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl (Tishīt), IK1.

⁴⁴ For background on slave-raiding during this period, see Lovejoy, "Introduction," in Lovejoy, *Slavery on the Frontiers of Islam*, 114; see Roberts, *Warriors*, chap. 3, and Lydon, "Islamic Legal Culture."

⁴⁵ Hanson and Robinson, *After the Jihad*, 153–62.

part, Aḥmadu al-Kabīr also engaged in capturing caravans and confiscating their cargoes (Appendix 2), including caravans of the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ, who had acquired a reputation for raiding and dealing in slaves.⁴⁶

Samori's Revolutionary War

The Muslim leader Samori Turé, whom the French nicknamed “the Black Napoleon,” waged the longest and most successful war of resistance against the European conquest of Africa from the 1860s until his final capture in 1898. Samori's achievements rested not only on his piety and military genius but also on his business acumen, as Yves Person explains.⁴⁷ At the pinnacle of his power Samori's army would have numbered more than 20,000 armed soldiers and a cavalry of 12,000 men strong. The French tended to dismiss Samori as “merely a slave merchant supplying the Moors of the Sahara.”⁴⁸ Yet there is more than a modicum of truth in this statement.

Samori's name and slave-trading activities survive in the memory of Mauritanian oasis elders, including those whose relatives were originally sold by his agency.⁴⁹ The father of the charismatic Sufi saint Shaykh Ḥamallah (Ḥamāhullah), originally from Tīshīt, is said to have transacted directly with Samori in the late nineteenth century.⁵⁰ In the same period, Shaykh Māʿ al-ʿAynayn, who led a jihad against the French invasion of what would become Mauritania, also bankrolled his war of resistance through the slave trade and perhaps had dealings with Samori. Still, like most of the scholarship on the nineteenth-century jihads, research has tended to stop at the desert edge, and consequently, we know far too little about the links between West African revolutions and Saharan economies.

Through sophisticated long-distance transactions, nineteenth-century Muslim leaders financed their wars, supplying their armies with horses, weapons, gunpowder, food, and cloth. Like Aḥmad Lobbo I and Shaykh

⁴⁶ Ibid., 170–6.

⁴⁷ Person, *Samori: Une révolution Dyula*, esp. I: 89–116, II: 875–81. In his monumental study, Person provides scant detail of Samori's commercial activities.

⁴⁸ Faidherbe, *Sénégal*, 318. See also Guillaumet, *Soudan en 1894*, 119, 122, who repeats the cyclical argument that the wars of Shaykh ʿUmar and Samori Turé were simply pretexts to generate slaves to acquire firearms and gunpowder.

⁴⁹ Interviews in Tīshīt with Bāba Ghazzār (04/16/97), Muḥammad al-Amīn Wuld Muissa “al-Mashbūh” (04/16/97); interviews in Shinqīti with Dhahabiya Mint ʿAmāra (10/01/97), Aḥmad Wuld Jiddu (09/29/97). Samori's popularity was such that Saharan children were named after him.

⁵⁰ Interview in Nioro with Shaykh Muḥammad b. Shaykh Ḥamallah (05/15/98).

Umar, Samori combined military campaigns with systematic and extensive slave raids for currency, while employing great numbers of slaves as domestics, farmers, couriers, porters, and soldiers. Moreover, in all of these cases, the demand for slaves was not just trans-Saharan but regional as well. Discussing the eastern branch of trans-Saharan trade in the context of nineteenth-century Sudan, Abdullahi Mahadi goes as far as to suggest that nineteenth-century jihads were simply pretexts to generate slaves as booty.⁵¹ While this is somewhat of an exaggeration in the western African context, there clearly was a confluence of the political and the economic motivations of these revolutionary leaders.⁵² In any event, their commercial activities explain in part the growth in trans-Saharan slave trade in this period.

TRANS-SAHARAN SLAVE TRADE

Muslim leaders were not the only ones engaged in slaving. Saharan nomads mounted on camels and horses were notorious for violent slave raids on agricultural communities and villages.⁵³ Scholars are agreed that the slave trade, by way of camel caravans from western Africa to the Maghrib and over to northeast Africa and the markets of the Middle East, grew significantly in the course of the nineteenth century.⁵⁴ But both the business of slaving and the internal African demand for slaves remain poorly understood. At the same time, the literature is tainted with distortions, misinformation, and prejudice, as McDougall notes.⁵⁵ By failing to problematize the nineteenth-century Orientalism of their European sources, scholars have tended to propagate the erroneous conjecture that the trans-Saharan slave trade was perpetrated by “Muslims” identified as “Arabs,” who supposedly were “alien to Africa.”⁵⁶ Contemporaneous

⁵¹ Mahadi, “Aftermath of the *Jihād* in the Central Sudan.”

⁵² Roberts (*Warriors*, 100–34) and Hanson (*Migration*, 54–8) both argue this for the Umari state.

⁵³ This was confirmed in interviews in northern Senegal, where the trauma of such raids lives on in the collective memory, and in Mauritania, where candid interviewees discussed raids and baby snatching occurring into the mid-twentieth century.

⁵⁴ Newbury, “North African”; Cordell, *Dar al-Kuti and the Last Years of Trans-Saharan Slave Trade*; Lovejoy, “Commercial Sectors”; Baier, *Economic History*; Austen and Cordell, “Trade”; Austen, “Marginalization”; McDougall, “Salt”; Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa*; Ennaji, *Soldats, domestiques et concubines*; Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery*, chap. 7; and Mahadi, “Aftermath.”

⁵⁵ McDougall, “Discourses and Distortions.” Lovejoy (“Commercial Sectors,” 88) previously recognized the slavery bias in European sources.

⁵⁶ McDougall, “Discourses,” 227.

European sources were bent on vilifying Muslims, equating Islamic practice with slavery, and thereby finding moral grounds for conquering the African continent. Such a racially charged paradigm is a product of “the African divide” discussed in Chapter 1. It is perhaps because of an over-reliance on nineteenth-century European sources, as much as a fixation with “Arab Muslims,” that the involvement of Jews in the slave trade together with their contributions to African history have been largely overlooked.

Regardless of the distortions about the trans-Saharan slave trade in the prevailing discourse, these do not significantly alter the overall facts. Based on European consular records, Jean-Louis Miège’s remark that in the nineteenth century “slaves were financially the most important item of exchange” is still valid.⁵⁷ Saharan sources leave little doubt that slavery prevailed in nineteenth-century Africa and that the Sahara continued to function as a middle passage.⁵⁸ Commercial correspondence between two brothers of the Wād Nūn trade network, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, indicates that the price of the female slave (*khādim*), alongside the cotton bale (*bayṣa*), functioned as indices for market conditions. But definitive answers concerning the volume of the trans-Saharan slave trade await a more thorough investigation of the extant historical record, namely, of African sources written in Arabic.

The early-nineteenth-century European abolitions, starting with Denmark, followed by Britain and then France, left many coastal dealers in Africa searching for new opportunities to market their slaves. The slave trade in and across the Sahara did not end with the European abolition of the Atlantic-side traffic or even decades after slavery was abolished within their colonies, as in the French territories in 1848 – quite the contrary. As Martin Klein suggests, the drop in the international demand for slaves in Africa probably caused a temporary drop in prices during the first decades of the century.⁵⁹ Bonte remarks that the slave trade to Morocco increased noticeably after the French 1848 abolition.⁶⁰ Less competition between slave markets rendered slave ownership more affordable in Africa. Moreover, the French conquest actually contributed to expanding the

⁵⁷ Miège, “Commerce transsaharien,” 99.

⁵⁸ Lydon, “Slavery” and “Islamic Legal Culture.”

⁵⁹ Klein, *Slavery*, 42. He admits, however, that a general drop in slave prices in the nineteenth century remains debatable. For a discussion of prices of female slaves in the 1850s, see Lovejoy and Richardson, “Competing Markets for Male and Female Slaves.”

⁶⁰ Bonte, “L’émirat,” 1425–7.

intra-Saharan slave trade, even in the Algerian hinterland, as the research of Cordell and Bonte reveals.⁶¹ While the volume fluctuated before and after the Ottoman abolition in 1857, Libyan markets, which also supplied Egypt, handled the lion's share of the trans-Saharan slave trade to North Africa until the early twentieth century.⁶² As for western routes, the demand remained constant in Morocco where slavery never was officially abolished.

Demand and Supply

It may well have been in this century that prices collapsed to the point that a slave's worth in salt was equivalent to the size of his or her foot cut out of the slab. In other words, there may have been a time when a salt bar could buy several slaves.⁶³ This probably caused a surge in the supply of cheaper slaves traded across and within the region, stimulating the demand for slaves in Saharan oases. Indeed, while on the Atlantic coast they experienced a "slow death," slave markets of the western Sudanic interior were active well into the early twentieth century. For the region of concern, these markets included the Mauritanian desert oases of Tishit, the Senegal River markets from Ndar to Médine, and the Malian markets of Timbuktu, Sinsani, Nyamina, and later Banamba and Nioro (Map 6).

Enslaved Africans were generated, by and large, through warfare, raiding, and kidnapping activities undertaken by individuals as well as the types of organized states discussed above.⁶⁴ The centuries-old practice of slave raiding around the Senegal River and the Middle Niger valleys was

⁶¹ Ibid., chaps. 16 and 17; Cordell, "Mirage of Abolition in the Algerian Sahara."

⁶² Saïed, "Commerce," 208–32; Lovejoy, "Commercial Sectors."

⁶³ Interviews with retired caravaners: Fuḍīr Wuld al-Ṭayr in Aṭār (03/07/98), Bāba Ghazzār in Tishit (04/16/97), and Aḥmad Jiddu in Shinqīti (10/01/97). This oral tradition, still vivid in the memory of Mauritanian elders, is also reproduced in the early-twentieth-century ethnography of Al-Shinqīti, *Wasīt*, 521. McDougall ("Salt," 63) cites a French source dating from the 1880s claiming that in the region of Nioro, an average slave was worth one salt bar. So, conceivably, there may have been a time when enslaved Africans were sold for even less. The same oral tradition about the price of slaves being as low as the size of their foot in salt was recorded in 1883 by a French source as being practiced "in former times" (Colin, "Le commerce sur le Haut Sénégal," 161). So if there is any truth at all in this tradition, which in effect would mean that at least three slaves could be purchased with a salt bar, then such prices probably referred to the early part of the nineteenth century or possibly an earlier time altogether. For a discussion of the size of the salt bar, see Chapter 5.

⁶⁴ Meillassoux, *Anthropologie de l'esclavage*.

rampant in the nineteenth century, as Webb has shown.⁶⁵ A great number of enslaved Africans would have originated from as far as Baghirmi, Sokoto, and Bornu, but clearly most were non-Muslims and many were either of Bamana origin or labeled as such.⁶⁶ Moreover, slave raiding among Muslims in and around Saharan oases for resale in Morocco, for instance, was not uncommon.⁶⁷ Young women and children were victims of this sordid trade, but the demand was equally high for young men, as Bonte has shown.⁶⁸ Although their transportation varied from one caravan to the next, adults and youngsters often were tied to one another and forced to walk barefoot across the hot sands and rocky terrain. Younger children and infants sometimes were contained in leather pouches strapped to a camel's back. While estimates of the death toll of the trans-Saharan slave trade gathered by abolitionists range from 30 to 50 percent, mortality rates probably were closer to 20 percent, as Austen suggests.⁶⁹ Those lucky to survive the ordeal were sold in Saharan oases, North African markets, or farther afield.

The demand for slave labor remained steady, and even grew in the Middle East and North Africa, especially in Morocco.⁷⁰ There, as Mohammed Ennaji explains, male slaves were employed as guards and soldiers to the sultan as well as to wealthy chiefs in the countryside, while female slaves performed as domestic servants, cooks, and concubines.⁷¹ Slaves also labored in production from the manufacture of crafts to farming. The Kingdom of Morocco, Ottoman Libya, and Egypt were the last markets on the continent to drive up the demand for slaves until the turn of the twentieth century.

Salt bars continued to function as the main currency for slave purchases. According to McDougall's findings, a higher demand for slave labor in salt pans to meet the increased demand for salt bars in and across the Sahara gave added impetus to the slave trade.⁷² Bonte's research on the

⁶⁵ Webb, *Desert Frontier*. See also Roberts, *Warriors*; Searing, *West Africa Slavery and Atlantic Commerce*; and Lovejoy, *Slavery*.

⁶⁶ Hanson, *Warfare*, 54–5; Bissuel, *Sahara français: conférence sur les questions sahariennes*, 53.

⁶⁷ This is evident from nineteenth-century letters of complaint, several fatwas on the trade in raided slaves, as well as mentions of such raids in the chronicles of Tishit and Walāta. Interview in Guelmīm with 'Azīza Mint 'Abd al-Mūlāy (07/30/99).

⁶⁸ Bonte, "L'émirat," chap. 17.

⁶⁹ Austen, "Mediterranean Islamic Slave Trade."

⁷⁰ Lovejoy, "Slavery"; Austen, "Trans-Saharan Trade," 23–76; Miège, *Maroc*.

⁷¹ Ennaji, *Soldats*; see also Sikainga, "Slavery and Muslim Society in Morocco."

⁷² McDougall, "Salt," 72–3, 75.

western Saharan region of Ādrār demonstrates how labor-intensive date palm cultivation experienced considerable growth through a reorganization of slave labor in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁷³ Access to male labor was critical for digging wells, drawing water, and the arduous task of climbing trees to desalinate palm tree leaves. At the same time, boys and young men primarily were put to work as shepherds tending to camel, goat, and sheep herds, building, mending and guarding strategic wells and irrigation systems. The development of small-scale cereal farming and vegetable gardens in oases was also realized through slave labor. The Ādrār was described as a “veritable granary of the desert” by General Gouraud, who led the French conquest in 1909.⁷⁴ Conceivably, the growth in Saharan cereal production was prompted by a desire to secure basic needs in the face of the insecurity reigning in nineteenth-century western African markets in the Niger Delta and along the Senegal River.

Late-Century Developments

In the mid-1860s, a number of environmental and epidemiological episodes affected overall caravan traffic (Appendix 1). A famine broke out in the southern desert edge and throughout many parts of western Africa. In 1868 cholera spread from Morocco to Senegal via caravans, and the following year a severe epidemic of smallpox affected the inhabitants of Timbuktu, Tīshīt, and Walāta, reportedly killing three hundred in this last town alone. The epidemic was followed by a cold winter that caused more deaths. Those most prone to starvation or fatal illness during such calamities, as repeatedly acknowledged in Saharan chronicles, were the enslaved.

At the same time, the western Saharan region was politically unstable for a great part of the century, with perhaps the exception of a twenty-year period starting in the early 1870s. As cited in a chronicle of the Ādrār region:

The mayhem prevailed until 1289/1872 and the coming to power of (the Emir of Ādrār) Aḥmād Wuld Muḥammad (a.k.a. Lemḥammad) Wuld ‘Abdy. He was just and he entertained good relations with Bakār Wuld Swayd Aḥmād (Idaw’ish Emir of Tagānit) and ‘Aly Wuld Muḥammad Laḥbīb (Emir of Trārza) and Muḥammad Maḥmūd Wuld Laḥaymīd (Emir of Brākna) and Daḥmān Wuld

⁷³ Bonte, “L’émirat,” chaps. 3, 16, and 17.

⁷⁴ Gouraud, *Pacification de la Mauritanie*, 10.

Bayrūk (Tikna leader of Guelmīm in Wād Nūn) and Mūlāy al-Ḥasan (Sultan of Morocco). . . . This period is well-known for peace and general prosperity. And after this period, the injustice increased and the killing and the bloodshed until the coming of the *Naṣāra* (Christians, French).⁷⁵

The coming to power of Emir Aḥmad Wuld Lemḥammad in the Ādrār reportedly changed the political climate in the wider region. Fondly remembered as *amīr al-‘āfiya*, or the “emir of peace,” his twenty-year reign brought relative peace and great prosperity, assisted by several years of abundant rains.⁷⁶ He was a diplomat who signed agreements with other regional emirs, as well as with Daḥman b. Bayrūk, then the Tikna ruler of Guelmīm. Moreover, in 1297/1880, he was congratulated for his good governance by the sultan of Morocco. This was the emir who probably was the first to become addicted to green tea (see Chapter 4), and he was especially active in promoting political stability and favoring commerce.

But the relative stability achieved in the Ādrār did not always spill over to the other regions. Raids on caravans and camels continued in the east (Appendix 2). In the season of 1292/1875 alone, six raids were reported, including a caravan from Walāta that was “destroyed” and its 500 camels stolen.⁷⁷ At some point in the last decades of the century the Saharan demand for slaves would stabilize or perhaps even decline, since the thinly populated Saharan oases and nomadic communities could absorb only so many slaves. One of the two “Moroccan” (Wād Nūn?) merchants, including one suspected to be Jewish, interviewed in Senegal by the French doctor Léon Colin in 1882, may not have been entirely disingenuous when claiming that he “did not need any [more slaves].”⁷⁸ The merchant did add, however, that he was in the market for two female slaves, one for himself and another for his friend.

By the end of the nineteenth century, European conquests also had an impact on the course and conduct of the slave trade. But as Klein, Roberts, and others have demonstrated, colonialism did not put an end to slavery in western Africa or the trade across the Sahara.⁷⁹ In fact, French colonial administrators became implicitly involved in, and arguably profited from, the slave trade by taxing rather than curbing slave dealers. Beginning in 1896, in the interior of what would become the *Soudan français*, colonial officers were instructed to collect a 10 percent tax on slave caravans in

⁷⁵ ‘Abd al-Wadūd Wuld Aḥmad Mawlūd Wuld Intāha, *Tārīkh Ādrār*.

⁷⁶ Interview in Shinqīṭi with ‘Abdarrahmān wuld Muḥammad al-Ḥanshī (09/19/97). See also Bonte, “L’émirat,” 1255–84.

⁷⁷ Marty, “Chroniques,” 373–4.

⁷⁸ Colin, “Commerce,” 162.

⁷⁹ Klein, *Slavery*; Roberts, *Warriors* and “End of Slavery.”

kind and put the slaves to work on colonial projects. In this regard, the French simply replicated the state policy of the former Masina Caliphate, naming the tax *oussourou*, from the Arabic for one-tenth (*‘ushūr*).⁸⁰ Reporting in the 1890s, an appalled Frenchman declared that the French had turned into local “slave merchants” for whom “the slave, just like for the Blacks, is a currency with which we pay our soldiers, our domestic servants, our porters, just like Samori and Ahmadou.”⁸¹

While the French conquest at the turn of the century had the effect of curbing, to some extent at least, regional violence, as expressed by the Ādrār chronicle cited above, in other respects it did not lead to change. The French turned a blind eye to the vibrant rifles-for-slaves trade. It was perpetrated mainly by French and métis trading houses, such as Maurel et Prom and Devès et Frères, operating out of Ndar and along the Senegal River.⁸² Indeed, it is telling that despite its abolition in French territories, these merchants engaged in the slave trade along with the gum trade, as discussed below, for local labor needs as well as for resale to Saharans. Labeled as “orphans,” enslaved children were even advertised in the Senegalese press such as the *Moniteur du Sénégal*. This activity continued into the early twentieth century when the merchant community was still battling the French to safeguard their right to engage in such “illegitimate” commerce. In 1904, for example, demanding the continuance of “free trade in slaves and the sale of firearms and ammunition,” they voiced their demands in a petition addressed to the French colonial government in Senegal.⁸³

Counting the Slaves?

The actual volume of the trans-Saharan slave trade, like the overall number of camel-loads per annum in any given period, is still a matter of speculation, and likely will remain so until all the available evidence is

⁸⁰ Marchand, “L’esclavage et l’islamisme,” 38–9; Guillaume, *Soudan*, 87. This tax remained current into the twentieth century in the French Soudan and in what would become colonial Mauritania. For a discussion of the *oussourou* of Masina, see Johnson, “Economic Foundations,” 487, and Brown, “Caliphate,” 157. See Klein, *Slavery*, for a discussion of the French colonial policies on slavery and the slave trade in the western Sudan.

⁸¹ Guillaume, *Soudan*, 154–5, referring to Ahmadu al-Kabīr, the son of Shaykh ‘Umar.

⁸² Manchuelle, “Métis et colons: la famille Devès.”

⁸³ Xavier Coppolani citing the petition (*lettre de doléance*) written by the trade agents (*traitants*) of Saint-Louis. “Rapport du délégué du Gouverneur Général en Pays Maures (Coppolani) à Monsieur le Gouverneur Général de l’A.O.F. sur la mission d’organisation du Tagant, Saint-Louis 1er juillet 1904.” CAOM, Série Mauritanie IV, Dossier 1.

mined. Information contained in Saharan sources does not lend itself easily to quantitative analysis. While commercial and legal documents discuss discrete transactions in slaves, the slave trade went largely unrecorded. Few traders held commercial registers such as those occasionally kept by Wād Nūn traders or the prominent merchant of the Morocco's Illigh uncovered by Pascon. Besides, these served mainly to record debt contracts and hardly inform about slavery. And so, to gauge the slave trade, historians have little choice but to engage in piecing together random observations in different places, at different times, and in different currencies. By thoroughly scrutinizing the accounts of European travelers and consular reports, Austen and more recently Austen and Cordell compiled useful tables that give a sense of overall trade volumes.⁸⁴

Working from the receiving end, and using the royal archives documenting tax revenue from the slave market, Daniel Schroeter provides insights into the nature of the demand in Marrakech, Morocco's largest slave market (*sūq al-raḥīq*).⁸⁵ Data from 1876 to 1878 reveal that the average annual volume of traded slaves was 3,788. It increased to 4,781 between 1888 and 1894, with numbers of over 6,300 annual sales for the years 1890–1 and 1893–4.⁸⁶ In the winter of 1887, just a few years prior to these last dates, a Frenchman spotted several slave caravans near Tindūf on their way to Morocco, including one transporting 520 and another 200 enslaved men and women.⁸⁷ Not all the slaves sold in Marrakech were direct imports, but Schroeter suggests that they represented at least 75 percent of total sales. Moreover, he remarked on the seasonality of slave markets held during the spring and summer fairs in the northern desert edge towns.

Guelmīm, in the Wād Nūn region, remained an important slave market in northwestern Africa into the early 1900s.⁸⁸ During his sojourn there in 1836, the British surgeon Davidson recorded the arrival of four caravans, each transporting between 300 and 1,000 enslaved Africans.⁸⁹ Schroeter estimates that the annual volume of slaves imported into this Saharan market alone was 2,000, and he speculates that the number was at least double for Morocco proper. For the period 1840–70, Miège arrived at a

⁸⁴ Austen, "Mediterranean"; Austen and Cordell, "Trade."

⁸⁵ Schroeter, "Slave Markets." See also Ennaji and Ben Sghir, "La Grande-Bretagne et l'esclavage au Maroc," 271–4.

⁸⁶ Schroeter, "Slave Markets," 191–2, 199. ⁸⁷ Douls, "Cinq mois," 215.

⁸⁸ Interview in Liksābi with Muḥammad b. al-Nājim b. Muḥammad b. al-Nājim (08/01/99). See Chapter 4 for a history of Guelmīm.

⁸⁹ Davidson, *Notes*, 87, noted in Schroeter, "Slave Markets," 189.

similar number of 4,000 imported slaves sold annually in Moroccan markets.⁹⁰ But the slave trade did not fall off after 1870 as he claims. For, as Schroeter's data clearly show, a "conservative estimate of annual slave imports from the 1870s to 1894 would range between 4,000 and 7,000 with an apparent upward trend until at least 1894."⁹¹ By way of comparison, a single caravan traveling to central Libya in 1891 was carrying no less than 2,000 slaves.⁹²

Fifteen years after Davidson, in April 1850, Panet witnessed the arrival in Guelmīm of a caravan from Timbuktu. It was carrying 200 enslaved women, children, and men from southern markets. As soon as they were within view, Panet observed that the wealthy women of Guelmīm immediately began to place stakes on incoming slaves.⁹³ By this time, European merchants in Africa, no longer in the market for slaves, focused instead on acquiring legitimate products and creating markets for ever-larger quantities of industrial merchandise.

OLD AND NEW MERCHANDISE

In the course of the nineteenth century, European merchandise circulated along maritime channels, and overland routes, and into Africa's hinterland. Saharan caravans, traveling in all directions, continued as of old to transport luxury goods such as slaves, horses, textiles, gold, ivory, wax, ambergris, cowries, rugs, paper, and books, as well as basic subsistence commodities, namely, salt, cereal, spices, and livestock. Chapter 2 discussed the trade in some of these goods, including the trade in writing paper that grew substantially in this period. Gradually new products imported through European agency began filtering into African markets and influencing local customs.

By the early nineteenth century, both the eastern and western branches of trans-Saharan trade were linked to the world economy through cross-cultural exchange taking place on the Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts, along inland rivers, and beyond. By the 1840s, the French were planting groundnuts, and the process of turning Senegal into a peanut cash-crop economy was under way. Similar export trade was conducted in the British-controlled Gambian port of Banjul (then named Bathurst).

⁹⁰ Miège, *Maroc*, 92.

⁹¹ Schroeter, "Slave Markets," 193.

⁹² Saied, "Commerce," 225; Lovejoy, "Commercial Sectors," 90–4.

⁹³ Panet, *Première exploration*, 176.

Consequently, regional caravan traffic in this period shifted markedly toward the coast or to the newly established French-sponsored trade posts or *escales* along the Senegal River. Saharan traders called these markets *marsa*, a word bearing a resemblance to the French *marché* but derived from the Arabic for anchorage or station.⁹⁴ Senegal River trade followed seasonal patterns determined by the flux of the river, the gum arabic harvest, and the movement of caravans.⁹⁵

By midcentury, French and métis companies operating out of Ndar began branching out into riverine trading posts such as Dagana, Richard Toll, Podor (known to Hasaniya-speakers as *Duera*, meaning “little house”), and eventually Médine and Kayes (Map 6). Protected by the French marines, their agents purchased from local and Saharan traders primarily gum arabic, but also ivory, ostrich feathers, dates, millet and other cereals, tanned leather and hides, salt, wax, and some gold, while purchasing slaves to supply Senegalese towns with servile labor. All these goods were exchanged primarily for industrial cotton bayşas (known as *guinées* in French). A host of other textiles and goods often listed in the French sources under the rubric of *pacotilles*, or third-rate merchandise, were also thrown into the mix. Aside from cotton cloth, Saharans especially were in the market for writing paper, as well as muskets and flints, various receptacles, locks, mirrors, blankets, metal coffers, matches, and miscellaneous items.

As seen in Chapter 2, larger volumes of paper featured in nineteenth-century trans-Saharan and western African trade. A series of caravan operations in Guelmīm, financed in 1265/1848 by the Bayrūk family of the Tikna, involved several hundred camel-loads primarily of cloth but with writing paper (*kāghit*) representing about 2 percent of the cargo.⁹⁶ Based on Barth’s travelogue, Johnson’s figures reveal that one-sixth of the camel-loads leaving Tripoli in the 1850s contained “paper and minor hardware.”⁹⁷ On eastern caravan routes, Tripoli and Cairo were the main ports of entry for industrially manufactured writing paper. In the year 1309/1891 a caravan left Tripoli with 19 of its 81 camels loaded with *kāghit*, giving a sense of the demand for writing paper in western Africa at this

⁹⁴ Wuld al-Sa‘ad, “Masālik al-qawāfil,” 28; Taylor, “Warriors, Tributaries, Blood Money,” 425.

⁹⁵ Curtin, *Economic Change*; Searing, *West Africa*; Brooks, *Landlords*; Webb, *Desert Frontier*; Stewart, *Islam*; Taylor, “Of Disciples and Sultans.”

⁹⁶ Bayrūk, Nineteenth-century Kunnāsh, 12. Of a total amount of 25,606 silver mithqāls, 1,300 were for writing paper.

⁹⁷ Johnson, “Calico,” 102.

time.⁹⁸ The caravan was on its way to Ghāt in southern Libya from where its loads would be distributed to markets as far south as Timbuktu and Kano. Thirteen years later, Lord Lugard, having recently conquered northern Nigeria and imposed a caravan tax, remarked that “a large quantity of paper” was imported via Tripoli in 1904.⁹⁹ As in earlier times, Arabic manuscripts were sold at a premium. From the 1870s, books printed in Morocco and elsewhere in the Middle East started making their way into western Africa. According to Leriche, the colonial ethnographer of Mauritania, the first to import printed books into the region was an Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ of the Awlād al-Baggār branch named ‘Abd al-Maʿṭī.¹⁰⁰

Traveling on camelback to the markets of the interior, European consumer goods became increasingly available in the African hinterland. Similar merchandise, mainly of British origin, was entering the market of Timbuktu by way of Tripoli via Ghadāmis and Ghāt, but also from Morocco. Indeed, as seen in the [previous chapter](#), further up the Atlantic coast, the main port of entry for international maritime trade was Al-Ṣawīra (Mogador) in southern Morocco. The intensification of all this commerce determined the nature of long-distance trade within and across the Sahara.

Caravans of Salt

Salt remained the most important resource of the Sahara Desert and was the currency with which Saharans made the bulk of their purchases. In the nineteenth century, the two most important rock salt pans were still Ijīl, just north of Shinqīṭi, and Tawdenni, twelve camel-days to the north of Timbuktu. The amersāl salt found next to Tīshīt and used primarily for animal feed was also the object of a significant trade.¹⁰¹ According to McDougall’s research on Saharan salt, the Ijīl salt mine was very active in the nineteenth century.¹⁰² Salt bars were purchased in nearby towns or directly from the salt workers controlled by the Kunta clan who held the rights to the quarry. Describing the 1930s, Capitaine Brosset explains:

⁹⁸ Inheritance Document, Family Library of al-Hājj Ibrāhīm al-Anṣārī (Ghāt, Libya).

⁹⁹ Lugard, “Northern Nigeria,” 20.

¹⁰⁰ Leriche, “De l’origine du thé en Mauritanie,” 871.

¹⁰¹ Curtin, *Economic Change*, 224–5; McDougall, “Banamba and the Salt Trade,” 151.

¹⁰² McDougall, “The Ijil Salt Industry” (unpublished dissertation) and “Salt.”

they deliver the bars lined-up on the side of the trench; this is where the caravaners take them and strap them [onto their camels] themselves. The payment is in bars of salt restored in Atar or in Chinguetti. Besides, the caravans bring some provisions, and have the duty of bringing wood and water. The rate of payment is 1 bar for every 6 or 7 bars, or 2 bars for 13 bars, 3 bars for 20 bars, 15 bars for 100.¹⁰³

Salt was not extracted all year round, but seasonally during the winter months, coinciding with the caravan season (October through March) when loaded camels would head south. Capitaine Vincent, a Frenchman who led an exploratory expedition to the Ādrār accompanied by Bū al-Mughdād in the winter of 1860, estimated that more than 20,000 camel-loads of salt (or over 100,000 salt bars) were extracted from the Ijīl mine annually.¹⁰⁴ Throughout most of the nineteenth century a significant portion of salt bars was exchanged directly for slaves, as noted above, but many or most were traded for basic needs such as cereals, namely, millet, and livestock. Salt from Ijīl and Tawdenni circulated on southern trade routes and, apportioned into ever-smaller units, would find its way into western African markets as far south as Kumasi.

Trans-Saharan Horse Trade

While horses long crossed the Sahara, the nineteenth-century jihads and other regional conflicts accelerated the trans-Saharan horses-for-slaves trade.¹⁰⁵ Symbols of military might, prestige, and authority, horses were utilized in combat and pillaging activities, including slave raids, as well as for rapid deployment and to expedite information delivery, to search for wells or pasture, and to round up the herds.¹⁰⁶ Because of environmental conditions, horses had a shorter life span in western Africa as compared with farther north, especially once they entered into the malaria and the tsetse fly zones south of the Sahara. Therefore military rulers and Muslim reformers were constantly looking to replenish their supplies.

With its horse-breeding culture, the Wād Nūn region became a departure point for the trans-Saharan horse trade. Webb notes that in the 1840s “a trade spur opened up that linked Kajoor with Wad Noun via the Adrar and apparently supplementing the coastal route.”¹⁰⁷ Traveling

¹⁰³ Brosset, “Saline d’Idjil,” 264 (see Chapter 5).

¹⁰⁴ Vincent, “Voyage,” 58.

¹⁰⁵ Webb, *Desert Frontier*, 68–96; Diouf, *Le Kajoor au XIXe siècle*; Law, *Horse*.

¹⁰⁶ De La Chapelle, “Esquisse,” 44, n. 1. ¹⁰⁷ Webb, *Desert Frontier*, 94.

along the desolate Atlantic shore, the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ were especially active in this trade. A decade or so later, in the 1850s, Governor Faidherbe described a caravan from Wād Nūn trading on the northern bank of the river “originally composed of 200 camels and 150 mares, of which half had already been sold along the way.”¹⁰⁸ According to Meillassoux’s estimates for the period covering the wars of Shaykh ʿUmar, Samori, and the French conquest in the mid- to late nineteenth century, horses were being traded for 10 to 20 slaves. So this single caravan potentially was exporting at least 1,500 slaves into northwestern markets.¹⁰⁹ French colonial ethnographer De La Chappelle remarked that the price of Arabian thoroughbreds in the western Sahara sometimes reached 100 camels for a single horse. For this reason he argued that quality horses tended to be owned by communities rather than individuals, while thoroughbreds were the subject of written genealogies.¹¹⁰ Saharan sources examined in Chapter 5 confirm nineteenth-century patterns of horse co-ownership.

A veritable equestrian tradition prevailed in western Africa, and horses were highly valued and revered in local poetry throughout the region. From the Wād Nūn to Ghadāmis, where yearly festivals were marked by serious horse races or fantasias (*ḥarakāt*), to the Sokoto Caliphate, where they were mounted with ceremonial regalia, horses were integral to many African political rituals. For this reason they were the most expensive item transported by caravans. But rearing horses was no easy task in western Africa. On the southern desert edge, the Barb horse, already mentioned, was bred in Kaarta. But the finest breeds were reared in the Ḥawḍ and Assaba regions (to the southwest of the Ḥawḍ) where the Shnātar family of the Mashdhūf were “reputed horse-breeders; they used to say that they could not ride a horse of mixed blood, only a thoroughbred.”¹¹¹ In the desert, milch camels were used to feed horses, an expense few could afford. To be sure, only the wealthy and the powerful (such as the Saharan emirs and chiefs of the Djolof, the Waalo, and Kajoore states) tended to be private owners. But as Bonte explains, regular horse imports would cease with colonial conquest and the French prohibition of the horse trade.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Faidherbe, “Renseignements,” 1024.

¹⁰⁹ Meillassoux, “Commerce pré-colonial,” 187. See also Faidherbe, *Sénégal*, 319.

¹¹⁰ De La Chappelle, “Esquisse,” 44 n. 1.

¹¹¹ Interview in Nouakchott with ʿAbdallah b. Muḥammad Sidiyya (10/16/97).

¹¹² Bonte, “L’émirat,” 1428.

Gum Arabic Exports

As previously mentioned, gum arabic (*al-ʿilk*) was a major export item to Europe. It was consumed locally for medicinal purposes, to prepare food and beverages, to make ink, and to starch cloth. In industrializing Europe, gum arabic was applied in textile dyeing processes as a solvent. The natural resin also was used for pharmaceutical, cosmetic, and confectionery purposes as well as in the printing and bookbinding business. As noted in the [previous chapter](#), demand for this product prompted France, Britain, and the Dutch Republic to fight for primary access to Saharan suppliers along the western African coasts in the so-called gum wars.¹¹³ Perhaps largely for this reason, the British occupied France's principal West African port, Saint-Louis, twice, once in 1758–78 and later in 1809–17. Until the mid-nineteenth century, with the rise in gum exports from the region of Kordofan in the British Sudan, Saharans supplied the bulk of gum to Europe.¹¹⁴

Gum arabic, exuded by thorny desert *Acacia senegalensis* trees, was collected by slave labor in the regions of Trārza and Brākna to the West and Kaarta and Sokolo in the East. It was harvested during the colder months, coinciding with the caravan season, according to Wuld Saʿad's seminal research.¹¹⁵ The gum trade along the Senegal River was more or less regulated by Saharan emirs who negotiated terms of trade with the French at every trading season. Gum traders migrated to the riverside markets to sell their gum harvest in exchange for cloth, paper, firearms, and assorted paraphernalia. But it was also transported in large quantities by caravan via Guelmīm for export from the Moroccan port of Al-Ṣawīra, as documented in a nineteenth-century account book of the Bayrūk family.¹¹⁶ This gum would also have originated from trees harvested west of Timbuktu, and in the Sāqiya al-Ḥamrā' and Wād Dra'a regions of the western Sahara.

¹¹³ The best account of this under-researched war remains Delcourt, *La France*.

¹¹⁴ Webb, *Desert Frontier* and "Trade in Gum Arabic."

¹¹⁵ Wuld al-Saʿad, *Imārat Trārza*, 575–663. See also Webb, "Trade"; Curtin, *Economic Change*, 215–16; Gaden, "La gomme en Mauritanie."

¹¹⁶ Muḥammad b. Bayrūk, Nineteenth-century Kunnāsh. Copy originally obtained from Mustapha Nāimi, shared by Daniel Schroeter; See also Miège, *Maroc*, on gum arabic imports.

A Taste for Green Tea

Al-Ṣawīra was also where new goods such as green tea entered the continent. During the 1820s, Caillié was served tea at dinner parties hosted by wealthy Saharans and Moroccans in Jenne and Timbuktu. After a sumptuous meal in Jenne, “we took four cups each with white sugar,” he noted. In Timbuktu, “wealthy merchants . . . take tea. They have [pewter] teapots imported from Morocco.”¹¹⁷ Just as tea with sugar was a luxury in Europe until the eighteenth century when it became cheaper and more available, so was this a sweet caffeinated beverage of the wealthy in Africa until the first half of the twentieth century.¹¹⁸ By then, the tradition of four servings of tea was widespread in the regions of Mali, Mauritania, Senegal, and further east in Niger and southern Libya. It would last until the late twentieth century when four glasses turned to three and eventually two in the face of economic recession.

Green tea, sugar, and the tea-drinking addiction first came into western Africa by way of Muslim pilgrims. But later tea was imported *en masse* through European agency. Naturally, the British initiated the trend, which is why the local word for tea became *atāy*, and not the Arabic *shāy*. A “Berber” poem, collected by John Waterbury, illustrates this point: “the tea of London has beauty and goodness.” The tone of the poem becomes progressively cynical, equating tea to colonial oppression (“The Christian, he who knows well that you are the enemy, he strikes you with his cannons loaded with tea. He tricks you with his scales . . . strikes you in the stomach”).¹¹⁹ In light of the metaphor of the tea-firing cannon, it is interesting to note that “gunpowder tea” was the most popular brand of Chinese green tea imported into western Africa later in the twentieth century.

Tea imports grew dramatically over the course of the nineteenth century. Data collected by Miège suggest that between 1830 and 1840 alone, tea imports to Morocco went from an annual 3,500 to 20,000 kilograms.¹²⁰ Spreading by way of caravans into the western African interior, this newly acquired taste for drinking tea went hand in hand with the adoption of another luxury consumable, refined sugar cones (*galb al-sukkar*). Over the same ten-year period, the importation of this last item tripled in

¹¹⁷ Caillié, *Journal*, 224, 331.

¹¹⁸ Walvin, “A Taste of Empire,” 11–16; Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 116–17.

¹¹⁹ Waterbury, *North for the Trade*, 79. ¹²⁰ Miège, *Maroc*, 73.

value.¹²¹ Only late in the century did French and métis traders catch on when they started importing green tea into Senegal. But little is known about the tea trade and sugar importations into Africa – a trade that closed the Atlantic trade triangle – or how the habit of drinking sweet green tea with fresh mint became a part of western African traditions.

As noted in Chapter 1 and examined in the next chapter, the first to introduce the inhabitants of this region to green tea were traders of the Wād Nūn network, namely, the Tikna and the Awlād Bū al-Sibā'. The wondrous benefits of sweet green tea is a topic that many retired caravanners talked about in interviews. For them making tea was integral to the daily rhythm of caravanning, for this highly caffeinated beverage reinvigorated their stamina on long arduous crossings. Some even wondered how their ancestors ever did without it. R. Drummond Hay, the British consul who served in Al-Ṣawīra in the second half of the nineteenth century, recorded similar sentiments among caravanners who had recently adopted tea:

The mortality in caravans from the fatigues and hardships has greatly decreased of late years which Arabs ascribe to the salubrious effects of tea, which is now drunk by all persons crossing the desert.¹²²

The implication here is that drinking sugared tea increased caravanners' endurance and therefore efficiency. As such, therefore, this beverage can be thought of as an innovation in the organization of caravanning. It goes without saying that the earliest to adopt tea, the Wād Nūn traders, would have had a comparative advantage in such caravan productivity.

Guns and Powder

The nineteenth century witnessed the rapid proliferation in Africa of firearms, begun in earnest in the previous century. Rifles and gunpowder, together with sulfur and saltpeter to manufacture it, became prized items of trade. While rifles could not be obtained easily in Moroccan-controlled ports, French merchants in Saint-Louis made a swift business of selling mainly imported flintlock muzzle-loading muskets and double-barreled

¹²¹ Ibid., 73–4. This massive importation had the effect of supplanting the agricultural production of sugarcane in southern Morocco.

¹²² Drummond Hay, "Report to the Foreign Office by Her Majesty's Consul at Mogador, September 7, 1875," Appendix I in Mackenzie, *Flooding the Sahara*, 255–6. See also Mathews, "Northwest Africa and Timbuctoo," 213.

muskets. Because of their access to European markets on the Atlantic coast, trans-Saharan traders from Wād Nūn were active arms-dealers. In the late 1860s, the Spanish traveler Joaquín Gatell, who spent four years in the region, remarked, perhaps with some exaggeration:

One hardly meets one inhabitant of the Ouad Noun or a Tikna who is not armed with his double-barreled musket. These rifles are French, from what I was told, and they come from Saint-Louis of Senegal. They are sold quite dearly in the Ouad Noun.¹²³

It is somewhat of an irony that Saharans, and western Africans generally, were acquiring many of their firearms through French sources. The Bordeaux trading company Maurel et Prom, one of the oldest and the largest established in Saint-Louis, held a fare share of the regional trade in rifles.¹²⁴ In the late 1880s, the French traveler Camille Douls reported that most Saharan nomads he met were bearing rifles “coming from Senegal.”¹²⁵

The Tikna, but especially the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ, acquired a reputation as arms-dealers while being much admired for their marksmanship.¹²⁶ Their successes in wars were usually attributed to the fact that they were armed with the latest models. In the second half of the nineteenth century, one of the most popular firearms was the 1874 long-barreled musket, known locally as the *warwar*. In this respect, the illustration in Faidherbe’s colonial history of Senegal of the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ Muḥammad Sālim b. ʿUmār bearing such a rifle is emblematic.¹²⁷ Later, and until this day, the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ became associated in the imagination of Mauritians as the bearers of the 1886 fast-firing breech-loader rifle, or *fusil à tir-rapide* (locally called *rumbiyā*).

Saharans developed a veritable gun-bearing culture in the course of the nineteenth century. An Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ trader named Sidi Hamet reported in the 1810s that those on board a caravan traveling from Guelmīm to Timbuktu were armed with muskets.¹²⁸ A contemporaneous source perhaps exaggerated somewhat when claiming that in the market of Timbuktu gunpowder was “more valuable than gold, of which double

¹²³ Gatell, “L’Ouad-noun,” 274, and *Viajes*, 178.

¹²⁴ Barrows, “General Faïdberbe,” 116. Barrows does not make any further remarks on what seems to have been a significant share of this company’s trade.

¹²⁵ Douls, “Cinq mois,” 211; see also Mathews, “Northwest Africa,” 206.

¹²⁶ For contemporary accounts about this reputation, see Cooks, *Narrative*; Cochelet, *Naufrage*; Riley, *Sufferings*; Gatell, “L’Ouad-Noun.”

¹²⁷ Faïdherbe, *Sénégal*, 41.

¹²⁸ Riley, *Sufferings*. I return to Sidi Hamet’s report in Chapter 5.

the weight is given in barter.”¹²⁹ In the 1850s, the most redoubtable of Saharan pirates, the Awlād Dīm nomads, were said to “eat gunpowder.”¹³⁰ By the end of century, the ceremonial *barūdiya* (from *barūd*, meaning gunpowder), or gunpowder party, a horse race combined with gun firing, was an established ritual in the Wād Nūn and in the Ādrār Emirate farther south. The comment of one of De La Chapelle’s Tikna informants is telling in this regard: “We consider it a dishonor not to purchase a firearm when one is able.”¹³¹ This conversation took place in the 1920s by which time rifles had been in circulation in the western Sahara for well over a century.

As a result of the trans-Saharan firearms trade, western Africa underwent what some have described as a “revolution in warfare.”¹³² But what Joseph Smaldone argued for eastern caravan routes, namely, that the trade in rifles became significant only from the 1880s, clearly does not apply to western routes.¹³³ Although in previous centuries, Ottoman muskets were imported with regularity into the Kingdom of Kanem-Bornu, the Ottoman administration prohibited in the mid-nineteenth century the sale of rifles outside of Tripoli. But some firearms found their way into Kano in the 1880s and 1890s despite the ban.¹³⁴ Arguably, this explains why very large caravans of a thousand camels or more remained current between Libya and the central Sudan, for undoubtedly there was a progressive correlation between caravan size and rifle use. As a result, in the course of the nineteenth century caravans traveling between western and northern Africa became smaller and more numerous, with many if not most caravaners bearing rifles to defend their property. Yet it is important to distinguish between rifles and muskets, because basic flint-lock muskets, prevailing in central Africa for much of the nineteenth century, lacked the precision and range of fast-firing rifles that became available from the late 1870s onward on the western African coast. Eventually, the gun-bearing culture would spread to interregional

¹²⁹ Cooks, *Narrative*, 39.

¹³⁰ Moroccan caravaner interviewed by Faidherbe, “Renseignements,” 1024.

¹³¹ De La Chapelle, “Teknas,” 794.

¹³² Smaldone, “Firearms Trade in Central Sudan.” See also Fischer and Rowland, “Firearms in the Central Sudan”; Saied, “Commerce,” 293–312.

¹³³ Smaldone, “Firearms,” 160. Although Smaldone argues that most of these arms traveled along the Cyrenaica-Wadai route of north-central West Africa, he recognizes that munitions were also imported from Morocco where Europeans had little control (*ibid.*, 158).

¹³⁴ Johnson, “Calico,” 100–1. With the spread of firearms in the central Sudan, Johnson admits, “pillaging and strife [characterized] the last years of the century.” See also Newbury, “North African,” 237.

caravans that could now afford to organize in smaller convoys because of the defense allowed by better performing rifles. But this applied less to the salt caravans from Tawdenni or Ijil or those leaving markets such as Tīshīt. These tended to remain large (one thousand camels or more) throughout the century doubtless because salt bars were not targeted by caravan raiders. Overall, caravans would travel with higher frequency and greater mobility, but concomitantly more firearms generated more insecurity on trans-Saharan trails.¹³⁵

That western Saharans had direct access to breech-loader rifles and ammunition by the end of the nineteenth century explains, in part, why they were so successful in resisting colonization for so long (not until 1934 did the French succeed in occupying Guelmīm in the Wād Nūn). In the late nineteenth century, as the French prepared their conquest of Mauritania, trans-Saharan traders began acquiring newer models from other Europeans on the northern coast of the Atlantic. The Spanish had geopolitical reasons for arming Saharans to better fight the French, as they themselves carved out their Saharan colony from the Rio de Oro. German financiers and arms-dealers often collaborated with Spanish merchants stationed in the Canary Islands and Al-Ṣawīra. In fact, there is clear evidence that the Germans, who led the rifle industry at the end of the nineteenth century, were the main suppliers of Mā' al-ʿAynayn, the jihad leader mentioned above.¹³⁶

But French merchants also continued to supply guns and powder to Saharans beyond the purview of the colonial administration in Senegal. As noted, the Awlād Bū al-Sibā' became experts in the rifle trade. The most famous was named Muḥammad Sālīm b. ʿAbdarraḥmān b. Bu'āngar, a remarkable trader who in the late nineteenth century played the field with the French colonial administration all the while smuggling guns out of Ndar.¹³⁷ Apparently, he would hide weapons in the anal orifices of camels, and then sell them in Trārza and beyond to outfit Saharans fighting the French conquest.¹³⁸ His reputation as the greatest arms-dealer of what became colonial Mauritania still lives on in oral traditions, and several poems were penned in his honor.

¹³⁵ Mathews, "Northwest Africa," 213.

¹³⁶ See the numerous French reports on German activity on the Atlantic coast in ANRIM E1/5, E1/11, E1/27; Dunn, *Resistance in the Desert*.

¹³⁷ Letter from French Commandant in Aṭār concerning Bu'āngar's latest request to go to Ndar where he had not returned since 1900, Commandant de Cercle de l'Adrar au Commissaire du Gouvernement-Général en Mauritanie, 19 August 1916 (ANRIM E1/33/1/3).

¹³⁸ Interview in Nouakchott with Kity Mint al-Shaygar (06/18/98).

Boom in the Ostrich Feather Trade

Ostrich feathers, prized by African royalty for centuries, had been imported into Europe since at least the sixteenth century.¹³⁹ Later, golden-age merchants and the Dutch gentry were depicted in seventeenth-century paintings decked with chapeaux adorned with extravagant plumes. According to the late-eighteenth-century report of Jean-Michel Venture de Paradis, ostrich feathers were a regular export item out of Algiers from the 1760s onward.¹⁴⁰ But this trade began in earnest in the course of the nineteenth century when European and North American demand for this high fashion accessory soared.

Large, graceful white, black, and gray feathers had long been used for plumes or ink pens, and headdress ornamentation. But from the early nineteenth century, women's fashion emanating from Paris and London became fixated on ostrich feathers for boas, fans, and for decorating fanciful hats and dresses. They were used to embellish theater costumes and ceremonial horses, such as in funeral processions. Moreover, the British favored them to adorn the coifs of the Royal Horse Guards. Consequently, there was a huge demand for this product. As Sarah Stein's work shows, a sophisticated global network of Jewish merchants dominated the international feather trade from the 1850s until the 1920s.¹⁴¹ Ashkenazi, Sephardic, and Maghribi Jews located in Al-Sawīra, Tripoli, Cairo, Cape Town, Livorno, Paris, Marseille, and London held a virtual monopoly. From the 1850s century onward, Paris and later London replaced Livorno as home to the international "feather bourse."¹⁴² But in order to access the supply of western African ostrich feathers, Jews in North Africa depended entirely on the services of Muslim agents and their caravaners. Ostriches roamed the entire western African and Saharan zone from northern Senegal to the Trārza, along the northern Atlantic coast to the Sāqiya al-Ḥamrā', and over to Tagānit, Ḥawḍ, Kaarta, Sokolo, and the Azawād regions, while the market of Timbuktu supplied both western and eastern caravans (Map 5).

Johnson studied the evolution in European fashion before the 1860s and the subsequent growth in the feather trade from the western and central Sudan.¹⁴³ While the trade from Tripoli grew only after the 1870s, peaking

¹³⁹ L'Africain, *Description*, II, 98.

¹⁴⁰ Venture de Paradis, *Tunis et Alger au XVIIe siècle*, 136.

¹⁴¹ Stein, "Mediterranean Jewries and Global Commerce."

¹⁴² Johnson, "Tijārat rīsh al-na'ām," ١٣٤ and "Calico," 106.

¹⁴³ Johnson, "Tijārat"; Newbury, "North African."

in 1884 and 1898, exports out of Al-Ṣawīra climaxed earlier, between 1863 and 1871, according to Miège.¹⁴⁴ Then, he estimated that ostrich feathers accounted for half the value of all the camel-loads coming from western Africa.¹⁴⁵ Both the Tikna and the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ, with their international connections and Jewish associates, specialized in this lucrative business. They transported feathers to Guelmīm, or further north to Marrakech, placing them in the hands of Jewish merchants, who sold them to Europeans in Al-Ṣawīra. On occasion, as did Mḥaymad Wuld ʿAbāba (mentioned in Chapter 1), some Wād Nūn traders sold ostrich feathers directly to merchants on the Senegalese coast. A prominent Jewish family business named Ange Dar-Arbib, based primarily out of Tripoli but with interests in Paris and Cairo, reportedly placed an agent in Ndar in the 1870s.¹⁴⁶ By the 1890s, the French had set up ostrich farms in Algeria and soon would do the same near Timbuktu. South African farm-raised ostrich feathers flooded the international market after wild ostriches, bearing the most valuable feathers, had begun to be decimated throughout western Africa. Then legal scholars discussed the fraudulent commercial practice of mixing ostrich feathers with those of other birds for illicit gain (Chapter 6).

The high demand caused a drastic increase in ostrich hunting. It tended to take place seasonally during the late spring and summer months just before the birds changed their plumage. Then, due to heat exhaustion, ostriches were outrun more easily by a galloping camel or horse. They typically were stricken in the legs with large clubs made of wood from the acacia tree, but increasingly firearms were also used. Active in this business were the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ and their tributaries, especially the Awlād Tidrārīn and the Imrāgin on the Atlantic coast, once home to a sizeable ostrich community. In the hot months, ostriches congregated closer to the cooler seashore where they became easy targets. Hunters rounded them up and drove them to the water, often drowning the birds in the process.¹⁴⁷ Ostriches also were hunted for their meat, lard, leather, eggs, and shells used to make beads and adorn the minarets of mosques.

There was a great variety in types and quality of feathers, and according to Ahmed Saied, each bird carried up to forty marketable

¹⁴⁴ Miège, “Commerce,” 100; III–12. For trends in the Tripoli feather trade, see Johnson, “Tijārat,” ۱۳۰; Lovejoy, “Commercial Sectors,” 108.

¹⁴⁵ Miège, “Commerce,” 102.

¹⁴⁶ Saied, “Commerce,” 247.

¹⁴⁷ Vincent, “Voyage,” 58, 63. See Baier, *Economic History*, 40–2, for a discussion of ostrich hunting in late-nineteenth-century Niger.

plumes.¹⁴⁸ Information on ostrich feathers (*rīsh al-na ‘ām*) is contained in Saharan trade records of the type cited at the beginning of the chapter. This letter, dating from the late 1870s or early 1880s and exchanged between a Tikna in Walāta and his brother in Shinqīti, informs of an outbound shipment, dispatched through an intermediary, of white feathers of both good and medium quality and common black feathers. In another letter the same trader mentions purchasing a total of “77 *ratl* [approx. 38.5 kilos] of *zalīm* (best quality male ostrich feathers) and 17 *ratl* [approx. 8.5 kilos] of *tajkajkāt* (top quality female feathers).”¹⁴⁹ These two types were reportedly the most sought after and expensive feathers on the market.

Other African Trade Goods

Many more western African exports were destined for European markets. Ivory (*‘āj*) in the form of elephant tusks (*nāb al-fīl*) was regularly transported on northern caravans in the nineteenth century. It was used, among other things, for piano keyboards and furniture surfacing in Europe and North America. However, exports from Senegal or Morocco were never as substantial as those from Tripoli.¹⁵⁰ Tanned and dyed goatskins from Sokoto and Kano, “the original Morocco leather of commerce,” remained, as in former times, the subject of extensive exchanges with Morocco, via Timbuktu.¹⁵¹ Tanned leather was also manufactured elsewhere in western Africa, including among the Saharan blacksmith class and the Tūāreg who were renowned for their tanning skills. This unique tanned leather was in high demand in Paris, London, and New York where, especially from the 1800s, collectors took to binding books with the finest skins. Not until the 1880s, with the development of the American chrome tanning process, were Western industries capable of producing durable and firm skins of comparable quality.¹⁵² By this time tanned leather was exported in large quantities out of Tripoli but mainly destined for “ladies’ boots not bookbinding,” as Johnson notes.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁸ Saied, “Commerce,” 240.

¹⁴⁹ Letter 2 from Muḥammad b. Sālim (Walāta) to Ibrāhīm (Shinqīti), circa 1880. Buhay Family Records (Shinqīti). Harmann (“Dead Ostrich,” 23, n. 84) noted similar terminology in trade records from Ghadāmis (despite its rather odd title, the ostrich feather trade is not the focus of this study).

¹⁵⁰ Miège, “Commerce,” 102, 113.

¹⁵¹ Lugard, “Northern Nigeria,” 18.

¹⁵² Seymour-Jones, “Provenance, Characteristics and Values.”

¹⁵³ Johnson, “Calico,” 108. See also Miège, *Maroc*, III, 375–459; Lovejoy, “Commercial Sector,” for data on tanned leather exports out of Tripoli.

The gold trade across the Sahara continued in the nineteenth century although perhaps in lesser quantities as compared with previous centuries. This period coincided with a drop in gold mining in Buré and Bambuhu, while the Akan gold fields near Kumasi in present-day Ghana, exploited since the fifteenth century, were now the primary source of West African gold. But gold-stock in the form of jewelry seized in the course of warfare now became more frequent in transactions alongside gold dust. Little is known about the nineteenth-century gold trade, which apparently shifted westward, away from Jenne and Timbuktu, during the Masina Caliphate.¹⁵⁴ Saharan commercial and legal records, including inheritances, reveal that gold circulated sometimes in quite large quantities until the 1890s.¹⁵⁵ The two “Moroccan” merchants interviewed in 1882 by Colin were in the market for gold obtained in the region of Buré and further south.¹⁵⁶

At the same time the gold mithqāl prevailed as a unit of account and means of exchange until the end of the nineteenth century (see Chapter 5). But the silver mithqāl, used predominantly in northern Saharan and Moroccan economies, became increasingly current in western Africa. In fact the trade in silver coins from Spain, Morocco, and France, as well as in the famed Maria Theresa Thaler coin, increased in frequency in the course of the nineteenth century. By the 1890s, regular caravans of clinking silver coins purchased on Moroccan markets filtered into western Africa. Soon foreign silver coins replaced the gold mithqāl as a monetary unit in markets such as Timbuktu. As with ostrich feathers, Maghribi Jews with their Muslim partners continued to handle a share of the gold trade reaching North Africa. But clearly this is an area that merits further investigation. For their part, Saharans, unlike most western Africans, consumed less gold because of their general preference for silver.¹⁵⁷

Cotton cloth (generically called *khunt*) of all shapes, colors, and origins became the subject of intense trade in the nineteenth century. Sturdy strips of cotton cloth (called *jif* in Hasaniya and *iradoora* in Soninké) in the

¹⁵⁴ Caillié, *Journal*, 153–4.

¹⁵⁵ In 1853, a wealthy man of slave origin left no less than 1,600 gold mithqāls, or just under two kilograms, as part of his inheritance in Guelmīm. Inheritance of Bāba Wuld Bilāl, 1270/1853 (DB 8A), Family Archives of ‘Aly Sālam b. Dahmān b. ‘Abidin b. Bayrūk (Guelmīm). See also the Wād Nūn inheritance case discussed in Chapter 7.

¹⁵⁶ Colin, “Commerce,” 161–3.

¹⁵⁷ According to Du Puigaudéau (“Arts et coutumes maures,” 29), gold was considered cursed by Saharans, who did not start wearing it until the 1950s.

regions of Futa Toro, Bundu, Kaarta, Sokolo, and around Gumbu were extensively sold, including to Saharans. Aside from camel hair (which also found its way into European markets), nomadic pastoralists and semi-nomadic oasis dwellers took to making their tents or main residences out of this hand-woven cotton.¹⁵⁸ Black cotton cloth (*akhāl*) manufactured in South Asia was part of the regular caravan cargo across the region. Higher quality cloths dyed in indigo, sometimes embossed and conditioned with gum arabic, other times embroidered (such as the *mjaybāt* or the *farāwil*), were especially appreciated by Saharan nomads and southern Moroccans for ceremonial outfits and turbans.¹⁵⁹ At the same time, markets became flooded with industrial cloth imported by French and British merchants from Europe and South Asian enclaves such as Pondicherry. But the local cotton industry survived the imperial threat, as Roberts has shown.¹⁶⁰

Beads of all kinds, from as far away as Venice and as near as the neighbor's home, were the commercial domain of women. Local beads were manufactured from ambergris and coral, stones such as cornaline and amazonite, and smashed glass debris (in aggrey style), ivory, ostrich eggshells, as well as woods like ebony. Some beads were so valuable as to reportedly fetch "ten young camels, ten cows and one hundred sheep!"¹⁶¹ Other goods in regional demand included different oils, such as ostrich lard and shea butter, and other vegetable, mineral, and animal products. Some of these were used for medicinal purposes, including indigo (said to protect the skin from the sun and the wind), or for magical potions (leopard fangs, crocodile skins, monkey fur, and bark).¹⁶² Foodstuffs included honey, dates, nuts, dried beans and peas, a variety of seeds – from pumpkin (*sirkāsh* and *fundi*) to Baobab tree (*tajmaght*) – and a range of spices and peppers. Senegalese peanuts, increasingly transported on caravans, soon became a Saharan staple. Moreover, Saharan demand for assorted wood used for tent poles and utensils, such as

¹⁵⁸ Meillassoux, "Commerce pré-colonial," 185; Curtin, *Economic Change*, 211–15.

¹⁵⁹ Interviews in Āsrir with 'Abdāti b. Ḥamdī (03/31/99) and in Liksābi with Ibrāhīm b. 'Alī (08/01/99). See also Abitbol, "Maroc," 14, n. 61.

¹⁶⁰ Webb, "Cotton Currency"; Roberts, "Guinée Cloth" and *Two Worlds of Cotton*.

¹⁶¹ Du Puigauveau, "Arts," 35.

¹⁶² One kind of medicinal mineral traded in the early twentieth century, and probably in earlier times, was a yellow-brown-colored earth known in Hasaniya as *liwinkil*, used to cure upset stomachs. It was collected one day north of Tīshīt and brought to Malian markets. Interview in Tīshīt with Muḥammad al-Amīn Wuld Muīsa "al-Mashbūh" (04/16/97).

bowls, beads, and pipes – remained high.¹⁶³ Salt bars purchased in Saharan quarries continued to feature as the single most common exchange good on the desert edge, despite European efforts to replace it with imported salt.

MOROCCAN COMMERCE

When considering trans-Saharan trade from the Moroccan vantage point, three factors serve to explain its growth in the course of the nineteenth century. First, the renewed demand in Morocco for tanned leather, gum arabic, enslaved laborers, spices, and western African cloth; second, the western African demand for horses, firearms, writing paper, manuscripts and printed books (from the 1870s), Islamic merchandise, and Moroccan crafts; and third, the influx of new merchandise, imported by European agency and through the cross-cultural brokerage of local merchants, especially the Maghribi Jews of Al-Şawīra, such as tea, sugar, and industrial cotton. At the same time, the trade in cowry shells, imported into Al-Şawīra, continued until the second half of the nineteenth century.

In the course of the nineteenth century, with Islamic conversions and associated changes in local dress on the rise, Moroccan crafts and clothes gained popularity in western Africa. Islamic supplies such as copies of the Qurʾān, chaplets, and prayer rugs were in high demand. Moreover, Muslim notables of Ndar and elsewhere typically wore Moroccan embroidered hooded cloaks, long shirts, red “Fez” caps and other knitted bonnets, as well as yellow-dyed leather slippers. Moroccan imports of fine cloth and clothing included women’s woolen cloaks (*haik*), white silk capes (*sulḥam*), silk and wool textiles, woolen blankets, and rugs. Trade in North African henna, incense, and tobacco prevailed as did that in spices (nutmeg, saffron, cloves, and ginger), nuts (especially almonds), and dried fruit (raisins, figs, and dates). Large quantities of dates, some seventy varieties, the object of extensive exchange between oases, continued to circulate across and within the Sahara.

Other goods included metalware such as hand-rinsing basins, bowls, kettles, teapots, bronze and copper platters, oil lanterns, Moroccan and Spanish silver coins (*dirham* and *real*), jewelry, amber, coral, and imported beads. Also common were handheld weapons such as daggers

¹⁶³ West African wood traveled all the way to the Wād Nūn region where a black wood known as *sangou* was especially favored for pipe making (Gatell, “L’Ouad-noun,” 274, 269).

and sabers as well as handmade firearms with leather satchels and pouches for gunpowder. In addition, medicinal products, such as tar used to treat the skin diseases of camels and horses, were imported in notable quantities.¹⁶⁴ Along with firearms, strategic imports from northwestern markets included sulfur and saltpeter, used to manufacture gunpowder, as already noted. Wād Nūn traders partook in this type of commerce, but it was the business of Moroccans as well.

Merchants of Fez

Given the intellectual prominence of the great Moroccan city of Fez, it is only natural that it would have had regular exchanges, since at least the sixteenth century, with Timbuktu, western Africa's most celebrated center of Muslim scholarship.¹⁶⁵ In the late eighteenth century, merchants occasionally organized caravans from Fez to join in the *akābārs*, or large trans-Saharan caravans, that congregated in the Tafilālt and in the Wād Nūn before heading to Timbuktu (Map 5).¹⁶⁶ In those days, a chronicler of Timbuktu reported an altercation there between Maghribi traders including Moroccans from Fez.¹⁶⁷

By the mid-nineteenth century, merchants of Fez formed a small network of communities throughout the region. In Ndar, the earliest business record of a Fez merchant dates to the 1840s.¹⁶⁸ This "old Moor from Fez" experienced several commercial fiascos in his hometown before deciding to try his luck in caravaning. But his cargo was pillaged en route to the Ādrār region, and so eventually he arrived in Ndar where he settled circa 1847. By the end of the nineteenth century there were reportedly ten families from Fez residing there.¹⁶⁹ The Wolof would label them *Nāru Fās* ("Moors from Fez") in contrast to the *Nāru Ganār*, or Saharan and northern Senegalese "Moors." Then, and since the 1880s, Lebanese and Syrian merchants (collectively called *Nāru Beirut*) had started to form a

¹⁶⁴ The French entered this market by importing tar into Senegal in the late nineteenth century. Interviews in Nouakchott with Muḥammad al-Maḥdi b. Muḥammad al-Amīn b. A'waīsi (07/08/98), Dāddah Wuld Idda in Tishīt (04/97), and Abdoul Hadir Aīdara and Madike Wade (10/31/97) in Ndar.

¹⁶⁵ Hunwick, *Timbuktu*, 30.

¹⁶⁶ Venture de Paradis, "Itinéraires de l'Afrique Septentrionale," 226. This date is earlier than those proposed by Abou El Farah et al., *Présence Marocaine en Afrique de l'Ouest*.

¹⁶⁷ Abitbol, *Tomboucton*, 36.

¹⁶⁸ Panet, *Première exploration*, 36.

¹⁶⁹ Interview in Rosso (Mauritania) with Kenza Bughālib and 'Abdalsalām Bughālib (07/31/97) and in Ndar with Uthman Hammoudi (10/23/97).

growing community in Senegal where they came to assume a key role as commercial agents for French companies.

Aside from traders from Fez and the occasional Maghribi Jew, Moroccans from Tafilālt and “Algerians” from Tuwāt frequented western African markets from an early period. The Tikna and the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ also resided in Ndar and other posts along the Senegal River, including Kayes, colonial Mali’s first colonial capital, but they had had a long history of commerce and residency in Mali, Mauritania, and Senegal, as seen in the [next chapter](#). Europeans sometimes identified these Wād Nūn traders as “Moroccans” when most thought of themselves as quintessentially western Saharan.¹⁷⁰

Trade in Al-Ṣawīra

The royal port of Al-Ṣawīra (Mogador), discussed in the previous chapter, was located on the Atlantic coast opposite Marrakech, Morocco’s southern capital and its archetypal market. In the first half of the nineteenth century British merchants had the largest commercial stake in this port.¹⁷¹ Other countries such as France, the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, the United States, Germany, and Austria, as well as those with long-standing experience in trading with North Africa, especially Genoa and Livorno, but also Sicily, Sardinia, Venice, and Malta, were also represented. Most of these countries depended on the brokerage of Maghribi Jewish merchants for access to local trade. Based on nineteenth-century consular records, Miège shows that the key European imports transported into western Africa by camelback via Al-Ṣawīra were, in order of importance, cotton cloth, firearms, sugar, and tea.¹⁷² Other merchandise included paper, beads, fine fabrics, flints, gunpowder, and tea sets. These were exchanged for tanned leather and raw hides, wool, gum arabic, cereals (wheat and barley), almonds, dates, wax, some gold dust and ivory, and of course, ostrich feathers.¹⁷³ Trade was prosperous there throughout the century except during the French bombardment of 1844 and the Spanish–Moroccan wars that raged from 1859 to 1863, events that undoubtedly disrupted the related desert-side economies.

¹⁷⁰ Martin, “Tribu Marocaine en Mauritanie,” 22.

¹⁷¹ Schroeter, *Merchants and Sultan’s Jew*.

¹⁷² Miège, “Commerce transsaharien au XIXe siècle,” 100.

¹⁷³ AMAE, Mémoires et Documents, no. 9, Maroc (1690–1847). See also Miège, *Maroc*, 123–189.

Jewish Cross-Cultural Brokers

In the first half of the nineteenth century, Moroccan Jews flourished as partners, financiers, correspondents, and, above all, cross-cultural brokers between European and Saharan merchants. Jacques Taieb estimates that the Jewish population in mid-nineteenth-century Morocco, by far the largest in North Africa and about twice the size of that of Algeria, was around 80,000 with one-third living in the southern desert edge.¹⁷⁴ As noted in Chapter 2, these communities had an early and heavy hand in financing trans-Saharan trade. This has been rarely appreciated by scholars of African history, although the literature on North African Jews is quite substantial. The works of Schroeter, Abitbol, and Miège document how Maghribi Jews were involved in both the trans-Saharan trade and the expansion of international commerce that took place during the nineteenth century.¹⁷⁵ Moreover, Diadié Haïdara compiled informative documentation on the Jewish presence in his native Timbuktu during this century.¹⁷⁶

Maghribi Jews took advantage of their literacy skills and faith-based institutions to engage in complex trade. While they were physically banned from several western African markets and only rarely ventured there since the late fifteenth century, Jews pursued their long-term involvement in caravanning in association with Muslims. What Caillié explained about the Jews of Tafilālt in the 1820s was also true of most northern African Jewish merchants, namely, that “they loan their money to [Muslim] merchants who do commerce in the Sudan and never go there themselves.”¹⁷⁷ Schroeter submits that “cordial market relations between Jews and Muslims prevailed” even during the political turmoil in the latter part of the century.¹⁷⁸ But evidence presented below shows that this was not always the case, especially in western Africa.

The second half of the nineteenth century was a period of renewed prosperity for Maghribi Jews. Ostensibly there was a marked improvement in the economic circumstances of the Jewish community of Guelmīm, when comparing the accounts of Davidson (1836) with those of Panet (1850) and later Gatell, who sojourned there in the 1860s. In contrast to past persecutions, nineteenth-century Jews experienced what

¹⁷⁴ Taieb, “Juifs du Maghreb,” 86–7.

¹⁷⁵ Schroeter, *Merchants*; Miège, *Maroc* and “Les juifs”; Abitbol, “Juifs.”

¹⁷⁶ Diadié Haïdara, *Juifs*.

¹⁷⁷ Caillié, *Journal*, 88–9.

¹⁷⁸ Schroeter, “Trade,” 132.

Abitbol called a “proto-emancipation.”¹⁷⁹ Their positions changed for the better after the creation of the port of Al-Ṣawīra and particularly in the reigns of Sultan Mūlāy ‘Abdarrahmān (1238–76/1822–59) and his son Sīdī Muḥammad (1276–90/1859–73). Then a handful of Jews, joining a select group of Muslims, acceded to the royal position of the sultan’s merchants (*tujjār al-sultān*).¹⁸⁰ One such merchant was originally attached to the Bayrūk family in Guelmīm, as discussed in Chapter 4. They were set up in houses sponsored by the *makhzan*, or Moroccan administration, given interest-free royal loans to engage in international commerce, and made to pay royal customs duties while acting as agents ensuring Morocco’s trade protectionism.

In the mid-nineteenth century Jewish caravaners became increasingly daring in venturing on trans-Saharan trails. In 1849–50 Panet traveled from Senegal to Morocco on a small commercial caravan led by a Jewish trader from Guelmīm. He was described as a dwarf named “Yaouda.” While the name resembles the Arabic for Jew (*yahūd*), he was probably from the Yahouda family of Maghribi Jews. The above-mentioned merchant of Fez had introduced Panet to this Jewish caravaner in Ndar. In 1860, during his visit to the Ādrār, Vincent met another Jewish trader there.¹⁸¹ It was precisely in those years that two courageous men dared to go to Timbuktu where Jews had been barred since 1492.¹⁸²

Aby Serour and the Jews of Timbuktu

Rabbi Mardochée (Mordechai) Aby Serour, from Aqqa in the Moroccan oasis of Tafilālt (northeast of Wād Nūn), blazed a trail with his brother Isaac on a historic trans-Saharan crossing.¹⁸³ They were in the market for ostrich feathers, but their caravan was held up in Arawān for an entire year before proceeding to Timbuktu in 1275/1859. Predictably, the reception was hostile. Fellow Maghribis in particular did not take well to competition from Jewish merchants coming directly to the source, and several local merchants conspired to kill them. After corresponding with Aḥmad Lobbo III, the last caliph of Masina, Aby Serour obtained permission for Jews to trade in Timbuktu in exchange for a yearly camel-load

¹⁷⁹ Abitbol, *Commerçants du Roi*, 13.

¹⁸⁰ Schroeter, *Merchants*, 21–60; Abitbol, *Commerçants*, 6.

¹⁸¹ Vincent, “Voyage.”

¹⁸² Oliel, *De Jérusalem à Tombouctou*; Diadié Haïdara, *Juifs*.

¹⁸³ Aby Serour, “Premier établissement” (see Chapter 1).

of sulfur (then valued at 165 gold mithqāls), a key ingredient for gunpowder as noted above.¹⁸⁴

But locals nevertheless decided to place Aby Serour in irons. He managed to escape and head to Ḥamdullahi accompanied by the son of the Kunta scholar Shaykh Sīdī Muḥammad. The Kunta clearly understood the religious implication and economic benefit of tolerating Jewish commerce. But they also had an ulterior motive for supporting new northern merchants while undermining others. The decisive encounter settled the matter, but most of Aby Serour's commercial ventures would prove disastrous.

In 1863, after the Umarians overran Masina, Aby Serour had recouped sufficiently to leave for Aqqa, returning later that year with four Jewish relatives. But his load of ostrich feathers, ivory, and other western African goods was sacked on the northern crossing. The following year Aby Serour set off again, traveling as far as Genoa and Venice to purchase twenty-eight loads of glassware (beads?) and luxuries in partnership with a Jew from Al-Ṣawīra. But his caravan, which included five other Jewish traders, mainly relatives, was pillaged once again by an armed group of Rgaybāt and Tikna (of the Aīt Laḥsān and Yaggūt clans). He then borrowed gold in Timbuktu in order to amass about 60 kilograms of top-quality ostrich feathers to reimburse his Jewish associate, which subsequently was plundered by another group of Rgaybāt. The loot was then purchased by Awlād Bū al-Sibā' traders. So Aby Serour called on Sīdī al-Bakkāy, the qāḍī of Timbuktu and the son of Shaykh Sīdī Muḥammad al-Kuntī, who took drastic action by imprisoning several Awlād Bū al-Sibā' to put pressure on their clan members, a procedure akin to the "community responsibility" function described by Greif.¹⁸⁵ But they escaped. The Kunta proceeded to write to the Sultan of Morocco to complain about the actions of his "subjects" the Awlād Bū al-Sibā'. Repeating an argument that his father had made in a fatwa, he wrote that "those who purchase pillaged goods knowingly are as guilty as the pillagers themselves."¹⁸⁶

As for the Jewish community in Timbuktu, now numbering ten, it would be short-lived. Aby Serour never recovered from his losses and in 1868 returned to Morocco with several relatives. Soon his two brothers and brother-in-law passed away, probably from cholera, at which point

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 355.

¹⁸⁵ Greif, *Institutions*, 309–12.

¹⁸⁶ Letter reproduced in Diadié Haïdara, *Juifs*, no. 6, 81. The subject of purchasing stolen merchandise was highly debated by Saharan jurists, as discussed in Chapter 6.

the local Ṭuāreg ruler seized the property of the remaining Jewish traders. Aby Serour returned at least once more but never succeeded in recovering his family's wealth. While the presence of Jews in the famed Saharan city was not recalled by locals interviewed in the 1920s, folios in Hebrew script, probably dating from Aby Serour's sojourn, are preserved in Timbuktu's main archive.¹⁸⁷

In the 1870s and later in the 1880s, several other Jewish traders came to reside in Timbuktu. One man from Illigh in the Tāzerwālt region, named Eliahu b. al-Hazzan Ya'qūb, lived there for twenty years.¹⁸⁸ Not surprisingly, in 1315/1897 this merchant entered into conflict with Wād Nūn traders, this time with the Tikna of the competing northern Saharan terminus. A protracted dispute between him and a Tikna trader, named Maḥmūd Bulḥayt, over the remittance of a debt contract of ostrich feathers and ivory, involved several Muslim judges and the entire Tikna community of Timbuktu. The treatment of this Jewish merchant, who was chained by Tikna traders at one juncture, was not unlike Aby Serour's experience four decades prior.

THE RISE AND FALL OF MARKETS

The nineteenth century witnessed the foundation of several new markets, while others waned. Wādān, previously the largest oasis in the western Sahara, experienced irreversible decline in the early part of the century triggered by civil strife and desertification. It continued to be visited by trans-Saharan caravans as a dwindling market and a relay station, but it never regained its former prominence. To the west, the oasis of Shinqīti had replaced it as the economic center of the Ādrār region. By midcentury, this town had a population of less than three thousand living in approximately 500 stone houses.¹⁸⁹ In Aṭār, southwest of Shinqīti, and its vicinity, there were about 400 houses and between one and two thousand residents. The oasis of Awujift, south of Aṭār, also had a sizeable population of several hundred inhabitants (see Table 3.1). The main produce of the Ādrār

¹⁸⁷ Sémach, "Rabbin Voyageur Marocain." I came upon these folios at the CEDRAB. See also Diadié Haïdara, *Juifs*, who has translated fifty Jewish trade records from nineteenth-century Timbuktu.

¹⁸⁸ Diadié Haïdara, *Juifs*, 33–8. I have not consulted CEDRAB no. 8061 documenting the following case.

¹⁸⁹ Vincent, "Voyage," 62.

TABLE 3.1. *Main Saharan markets and rough population estimates in the 1850s*^a

Town	Mosques	Houses	Estimated Population
Arawān	1	75	500
Aṭār and vicinity	3	400	1,500
Guelmīm	2 (and 1 synagogue)	800	7,000 (including 100 Jews)
Nioro	1	120	1,800
Shinqīti	1	500	2,500
Tawdenni	1	30	200
Tindūf	1	100	1,000
Timbuktu	6	1,200	10,000 to 25,000
Tīshīt	1	600	3,000
Wādān	2	700	1,600
Walāta	1	170	1,000

^a These estimates are for inhabited and abandoned stone houses. They do not reflect the number of huts or tents taken into account in the population estimates. In view of the itinerant lifestyles and caravaning activities of many of these oasis-dwelling people, these figures do not account for seasonal variations.

consisted of dates, some wheat, barley, finger millet, melons, and of course salt, its primary export.

By the first half of the nineteenth century, the city of Tīshīt had emerged as one of the most active Saharan markets outside Timbuktu where northern and southern traders met.¹⁹⁰ According to one source, the town “counted 450 stone houses and not a single one was in ruins” in the 1830s or 1840s when the above-mentioned Awlād Bū al-Sibā‘ caravaner Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm Khalīl first came to Tīshīt.¹⁹¹ But Tīshīt’s size was probably larger. A 1935 French survey estimated there were “457 houses in good or partly good condition and five to six hundred completely destroyed houses.”¹⁹² In the 1850s, when Barth was collecting his information, the town was reported to number about 3,000 people.¹⁹³ In any event, it was considered “one of the largest markets in the western Sahara” up until the late nineteenth century.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁰ For an architectural study of the town and its stone houses, see Jacques-Meunié, *Cités*.

¹⁹¹ Interview in Tīshīt with Dāddah Wuld Idda (04/97).

¹⁹² Lt. Larroque cited in Oßwald, *Handelsstädte*, 356.

¹⁹³ Barth, *Travels*, III, 704.

¹⁹⁴ Jacques-Meunié, *Cités*, 59.

Timbuktu's commercial activity remained important, but by the 1820s, in the aftermath of the Masina jihad, business was significantly curtailed. I suspect that for a period of about thirty years, from the 1830s to the 1860s, Tishīt competed with Timbuktu for a significant portion of the trade emanating from the northwestern desert edge. On the other hand, caravan trade between Tripoli and Timbuktu via Ghadāmis and Murzuk received a boost. In the 1860s "trade from Timbuktu may have accounted for as much as one quarter of the Tripoli totals, but this trade disappeared before 1880, having been diverted either to Mogador or to river and ocean routes pivoting on Saint-Louis and the lower Senegal," according to Baier's reckoning.¹⁹⁵

New Town of 'Aghrayjīt

In the 1780s, the Awlād Billa clan settled in Tishīt to compete in inter-regional caravan trade with the local Māsna and the Shurfa.¹⁹⁶ Little is known about the origins of this group that, beginning in the 1830s and culminating in 1266/1849–50, entered into a series of violent clashes with the Māsna, Tishīt's original inhabitants. The following year all the Awlād Billa, with the exception of the Ahl Tayya family who sided with the Māsna, were driven out of town. The Awlād Billa then moved to found the new town of 'Aghrayjīt, at a distance of six hours by camel, or about twenty kilometers. Prior to the final onslaught, the Awlād Billa began construction of a fortified wall to the northwest side of the newly settled oasis, which they founded in 1267/1850–1.¹⁹⁷

Sociologist Ould Cheikh suspects a possible link between the Awlād Billa and the Tikna of the Wād Nūn region, but oral interviews were inconclusive.¹⁹⁸ Their name certainly bears a resemblance to that of the second branch of the Tikna confederation known as the Aīt Billa (discussed in Chapter 4). To be sure, the unusual presence of an underground canal system connected to 'Aghrayjīt's central well suggests a northern influence.¹⁹⁹ Another connection is the borrowing of a legend, common in

¹⁹⁵ Baier, *Economic History*, 39.

¹⁹⁶ Chronicle of Tishīt (*Ḥawliyyāt Tishīt*).

¹⁹⁷ Marty, "Chroniques," 364

¹⁹⁸ Personal communication, Nouakchott (06/97). I interviewed five members of the Awlād Billa, including two in 'Aghrayjīt. A Wād Nūn connection was denied, but at least one interviewee, whose mother was the granddaughter of the founder of 'Aghrayjīt, al-Hājj 'Aly, asserted that the Awlād Billa were traders with strong links to Morocco. Interview in Tishīt with Sharif b. Muḥammad al-Sharīf (05/03/97).

¹⁹⁹ Known as *sāqiya*, this subterranean canal system is found throughout the northern desert-edge regions including the Wād Nūn. Interview in Tishīt with al-Sharīf b. Mbāke (05/02/97).

Guelmīm, that describes how ‘Aghrayjīt’s location was chosen after a jackal discovered water by pawing at the sand.²⁰⁰ ‘Aghrayjīt remained relatively small and never became an important market. At least several Tikna, of the Arwīlī family, resided there in the late nineteenth century. Whatever prosperity it yielded declined together with Tīshīt.

New Caravan Hub of Tindūf

In 1268/1852, shortly after ‘Aghrayjīt, the Saharan city of Tindūf was established by the Tajakānit. Located just twenty camel-days to the northwest of Timbuktu on the site of an ancient well, Tindūf quickly emerged as a major caravan hub.²⁰¹ A Saharan zwāyā clan, the Tajakānit nomadized in the Ādrār and Hawḍ regions and once held the now-abandoned oasis of Tinīgi.²⁰² Their new settlement was strategically located north of the salt pan of Tawdenni, which supplied Timbuktu, and twenty or so camel-days from the Wād Nūn, Tazerwālt, Tafilālt, and the oasis of Tuwāt. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Tajakānit took the regional lead as the Kunta clan’s power subsided. They performed as caravaners, couriers, and desert transporters for hire on the Tindūf–Timbuktu route.

Tindūf soon became the northern caravan crossroads. When Aby Serour first halted there, on his way to Timbuktu in 1274/1858, he reported that there were already about one hundred newly built houses.²⁰³ Thirty years later, it had grown significantly, judging from the eyewitness account of three pilgrims from Shinqīṭi collected by French geographer A. Coyne in Algiers.

Trade between Tindouf and the Sudan is considerable. Caravans leave this town for Timbuktu or for Arawan carrying cotton cloth, cloth sheets, gunpowder, weapons manufactured in Europe, glassware, sugar, paper, lead, tar, etc., etc. They complete their loads at the *sabkha* (salt pan) of Taoudenni, with rock salt, the value of which . . . is high in the Sudan. They bring back slaves, cotton cloth of the region, Negroes [*sic*], ostrich feathers, gold, either in bars or in dust, ivory, rice, etc.²⁰⁴

²⁰⁰ Jacques-Meunié, *Cités*, 69. The jackal is the mascot of the Aīt Mūsa Wa ‘Aly Tikna (see Chapter 4).

²⁰¹ Maazouzi, *Tindouf et les Frontières Méridionales*, 43. Tindūf, in present-day Algeria, is the capital of the Polisario-run government-in-exile of the western Sahara.

²⁰² Interview in Timbuktu with Muḥammad Wuld Khaṭra (04/22/98).

²⁰³ Aby Serour, “Premier établissement,” 356.

²⁰⁴ Coyne, *Étude*, 25–8.

With Tindūf, the Tajakānit became so successful as to divert trade from the Wād Nūn and otherwise dominate the salt trade. This explains in part why the Tikna of Guelmīm strengthened their alliances and partnerships with them. By the late 1850s they were actively trading with the Tajakānit, as revealed in a Bayrūk *kunnāsh*.²⁰⁵ Indeed, there came a time when the “Tikna could not cross the Sahara without the Tajakānit,” according to Muḥammad Wuld Khaṭra, a retired caravaner whose family once traded between Tindūf and Timbuktu.²⁰⁶

Until the end of the century, Tindūf was a flourishing trans-Saharan commercial center for wholesale goods transiting from northern and western African markets. But just months after the French conquest of Timbuktu in 1312/1894–5, and following an eleven-day siege, the Rgaybāt nomads ransacked Tindūf in what was the final episode of their protracted war against the Tajakānit. The occupation of Tindūf, as Mahmadou Ahmadou Ba acknowledged, marks a decisive moment in western Saharan history.²⁰⁷ By that time, other new Saharan towns had emerged, including Smāra, home to Shaykh Mā’ al-‘Aynayn in the Sāqiya al-Ḥamrā’ region, Tamshakett in the western Ḥawḍ where several Tiknas settled to trade, and Nioro, which attracted a sizeable share of Saharan traffic. But Tinduf’s demise coincided with the great regional instability at the turn of the century that ultimately curtailed regular traffic on trans-Saharan trails for the long run.

From Jīga to Nyamina

In Shaykh ‘Umar’s time, a marketplace known as Jīga or Djaygī became a common destination for interregional salt caravans from Tishīt and Walāta. This town, known in Bamana as Guigne, has not been located.²⁰⁸ In 1286/1869–70 it was burned down after a major raid, and five years later Shaykh Aḥmadu al-Kabīr seized an inbound salt caravan belonging to the people of Tishīt (Appendix 2). Then, in 1297/1879–80, in the course of a war between the Bamana Kingdom of Segou and Shaykh Aḥmadu’s forces, Jīga

²⁰⁵ Bayrūk, Nineteenth-century Kunnāsh.

²⁰⁶ Interview in Timbuktu with Muḥammad Wuld Khaṭra (04/22/98).

²⁰⁷ Ba, “Contribution à l’histoire des Regueibat.”

²⁰⁸ Chronicle of Tishīt (*Ḥawliyat Tishīt*). This meeting place was located somewhere near present-day Kobenni, north of Nioro, which in the late 1990s was a makeshift market for Malian and Mauritanian contraband. This must be the Guigne mentioned in a letter to Shaykh Aḥmadu al-Kabīr, translated, but not located, in Hanson and Robinson, *After the Jihad*, 174, see n. 37.

was then completely destroyed and abandoned for the central town of Nioro, and the outlying markets of Nara, Sansanding, and later Banamba.²⁰⁹

Contemporaneous with Jīga was the market of Nyamina, south of Segou, on the Niger River's northern bank. By at least the beginning of the century Nyamina was a significant point of contact for Saharan traders, local Soninké and Bamana merchants, and Julas of various origins driving their caravans from as far south as Kankan (present-day Guinea). A fatwa dating from the 1840s concerning a commercial agency contract, discussed in Chapter 6, reveals that Nyamina was considered the farthest south-eastern destination for caravans originating from Tīshīt. When the French explorer Eugène Mage passed through in the 1860s, he reported being "assailed" upon entering the depressed market by a handful of traders from Tīshīt, Walāta, and one from Tuwāt.²¹⁰ These desperate caravaners seemed more intent on nagging this early Christian intruder than soliciting his business. But like Jīga, Nyamina would never recover after the reckless occupation of the Umarian army, and Tīshīt traffic soon diverted to Nioro.

CONCLUSION

In the course of the nineteenth century, the movement of caravans within and across the Sahara Desert was inextricably linked to trends in regional politics and global commerce. European commerce brought new goods that, carried into the interior, would transform consumption patterns and demand. Traders from the Wād Nūn region, namely, the Tikna, Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ, and Maghribi Jews discussed in the [next chapter](#), were actively involved in distributing new merchandise, which included industrial cloth, tea, sugar, and firearms. They also transported more horses and other goods in response to, among other factors, wars of resistance and jihads. The rising ranks of western African Muslim converts also led to an increased demand for industrial cloth, Moroccan clothing, teapots, and rugs, as well as Islamic supplies, namely, books, paper, prayer rugs, and chaplets. Caravaners returned to northwestern markets with enslaved

²⁰⁹ Chronicle of Tīshīt (*Hawliyyāt Tīshīt*) entry of 1291/1874–5. After this date Jīga is no longer mentioned in the chronicle. A letter dated 1874 from Shaykh Muḥammad Maḥmūd of Futa Toro to Aḥmad al-Kabīr mentions the Umarian leader having recently occupied Guigne (Hanson and Robinson, *After the Jihad*, 174, n. 37).

²¹⁰ Mage, *Voyage d'exploration au Soudan Occidental*, 182. On the Umarian occupation of Nyamina, see Robinson, *Holy War*, 278.

Africans, gold dust, West African textiles, and export goods such as ivory, ostrich feathers, gum arabic, and tanned leather.

Trans-Saharan trade was stimulated not stymied by competition with the sea route, as previously believed, for maritime traffic replaced the ship of the desert only in the twentieth century. The first decades of the long nineteenth century witnessed a revival of the western routes, from the Wād Nūn to the Ādrār, and over to Senegal, linked to the activity in the ports of Al-Ṣawīra and Ndar. Then, in the 1850s, the creation of Tindūf added impetus to traffic radiating from Timbuktu, previously rendered perilous in the decades of the Masina jihad. But while caravan traffic grew in the nineteenth century there was a progressive reduction in the size of both interregional and trans-Saharan caravans. The organization of long-distance trade in this vast region also changed at this time. The proliferation of firearms occurred much earlier on western than on eastern trans-Saharan routes and, while regionally destabilizing, allowed for more traffic of smaller caravans. Information on caravan sizes, however, can be gleaned only from the random foreign observers who thought to record sightings or estimates of caravan traffic. Caravan organizing is the subject of Chapter 5, but for now, some concluding remarks on the general trends in caravan sizes are in order.

It is clear that caravans composed of tens of thousands of camels were a pre-nineteenth-century phenomenon. More common in the first decades of the nineteenth century were caravans of several thousand camels and several hundred men as described by Adams and Sidi Hamet (the Awlād Bū al-Sibā' informant of Riley). Twenty years later, Davidson described caravans of one or two thousand camels leaving for Timbuktu from Guelmīm. But by the mid-nineteenth century trans-Saharan caravans were markedly smaller. Then, between four and six caravans, varying in size from 500 to 1,000 camels, circulated annually between Wād Nūn and western Africa, according to Faidherbe's informants.²¹¹ Other indices for regional caravans show similar trends, with the exception of salt caravans which remained large until the end of the century. By this time, no longer was the yearly pilgrimage caravan organized, as individuals with more travel options secured passage between African market towns before embarking on ships leaving for Egypt from North African ports.

Caravan sizes varied in accordance with real and perceived levels of insecurity. To be sure, the most violent decades, from the 1840s to 1870s,

²¹¹ Faidherbe, "Renseignements," 1024.

witnessed an intensification of raids and pillaging rendered more devastating by the use of firearms. At the same time, caravaners could now afford to organize smaller, more mobile, and therefore faster convoys. With the spread of the Saharan gun-bearing culture, most became skilled marksmen to protect their lives and property in transit, when previously the defense of large convoys was the task of special armed forces. What Braudel wrote about seventeenth-century merchant ships was now true for nineteenth-century Saharan traffic, namely, that “there was hardly any difference between war- and merchant-ships: they were all armed.”²¹² Tea drinking also enhanced the performance of caravaners. But the spread of Arabic literacy, combined with the availability of writing paper, further improved the efficiency and frequency of trans-Saharan trade in the nineteenth century.

²¹² Braudel, *Structures*, 385–6.

Guelmīm and the Wād Nūn Traders

Khaymat Bayrūk fī Wād Nūn, mulūk ‘alā rijāla, wa al-mulk a-thānī mā yakūn dūn mulk al-jalālā. (The Bayrūk family of Wād Nūn owns men, and there is no other kind of possession except that of kings.)

Beginning of a praise poem by Tikna Griot Shaykh Ndiarto

Hathā shay’ a-llā al-Tikna wa ‘abīdhā. (This is something only the Tikna and their slaves are capable of.)

Tikna saying

In 1252/1836, during his three-month sojourn in the Wād Nūn town of Guelmīm, John Davidson, the British traveler, wrote diary entries that repeatedly announced the impending arrival of the large caravan or *akābār* returning from Timbuktu.¹ He conveys the suspense lingering in the air as the people awaited with great anticipation the inbound camel train. But that year, the caravan never made it to port, or at least not in one piece, as it was raided by Saharan brigands who pillaged most of its loads before it reached the *sūq*, or market, of Guelmīm. A recent outbreak of smallpox also had kept people from going to market, and so that year the annual fair of Sīdī al-Ghāzī was a fiasco, much to the annoyance of Shaykh Bayrūk, the Tikna chief of Guelmīm.²

In the nineteenth century, Guelmīm was the largest town in the region. It was a crossroads of Saharan and Atlantic exchange, operating as a terminus for caravan traffic coming from various Saharan oases and the southern desert-edge markets of western Africa. It was under the authority of Shaykh Bayrūk and his succeeding sons that Guelmīm assumed a prominent commercial position. Shaykh Bayrūk was a remarkable

¹ Davidson, *Notes*, 91, 98, 100, 102, 104, 105, 108.

² Ibid., 105. Davidson (ibid., 91) indicates that smallpox appeared shortly before his arrival.

political leader and commercial entrepreneur who commanded regional respect and managed many people. The beginning of a long praise poem typically sung by Tikna griots, cited above, explains that “the Bayrūk family of Wād Nūn owns men,” and it likens its power to that of kings. It was during Shaykh Bayrūk’s reign that the Wād Nūn trade network flourished, orchestrated by the Tikna in collaboration with their partners, the Awlād Bū al-Sibā’ and the Jews of Guelmīm.

The Wād Nūn region on the northwestern edges of the Sahara Desert, located to the south of the Moroccan Kingdom, was the homeland of the Tikna. Like many groups in the area, the Tikna, invariably referred to as “Arabs,” “Berbers,” or even “Arabo-Berbers,” defy attempts at ethnic labeling. The identity of the Tikna, a large confederation of clans, was a product of many interactions marked in no small way by years of participation in cross-cultural exchange. Their exposure to diverse cultures, religions, and nationalities bestowed upon the Tikna a certain cosmopolitanism that allowed them to maneuver with great social ease across diverse spaces. Their cultural identity therefore was shaped by local and translocal determinants linked to the movement of caravans, the main conduits of communication and cultural flows in the wider region. Guelmīm itself housed a multicultural population that included Muslims, Jews, “Berbers,” and Africans from various parts of the continent.

Several scholars have made important contributions to our understanding of the history of the traders of the Wād Nūn, and the Tikna in particular. Mustapha Naïmi’s anthropological work on the western Sahara, is unique in pointing to the importance of the Wād Nūn as a historic crossroads.³ He also was the first to publish on the role of Shaykh Bayrūk in brokering Atlantic and Saharan exchange in the nineteenth century.⁴ In her dissertation on Morocco’s relations with West Africa, Zahra Tamouh-Akhchichine documents the involvement of the Tikna based essentially on European sources.⁵ Rita Aouad wrote an important article focused on the Barka family, which traded between Guelmīm and Timbuktu.⁶ More recently, McDougall discusses the commercial environment in which the Bayrūk family operated, based in part on a review of their commercial registers.⁷ Aside from these works,

³ Naïmi, *Al-Sahṛā’ min khlāl bilād taknab*, “Wādī Nūn,” and *Dynamique*.

⁴ Naïmi, “La politique des chefs de la confédération des Tekna face à l’expansionnisme commercial européen” and “Evolution of the Tekna Confederation.”

⁵ Tamouh-Akhchichine, “Le Maroc et le Soudan.”

⁶ Aouad, “Réseaux marocains en Afrique sub-saharienne.”

⁷ McDougall, “Conceptualising the Sahara.”

Bonte acknowledges the commercial dominance of the Tikna and the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ traders in his monumental history of the Mauritanian Ādrār.⁸ Although his focus is on the history of Awlād Dīm nomads during the colonization of the Sahara, Alberto López Bardagos refers to the Tikna in his valuable study.⁹ Since the 1860 conclusion of the war between Spain and Morocco, the sons of Shaykh Bayrūk had numerous and significant interactions with Spaniards on the coast. But the Spanish archives remain to be mined for information on this history.

In this chapter I provide a general discussion of the history of Guelmīm and the Wād Nūn, pointing to the long-established position of this region as a crossroads of maritime and trans-Saharan trade. Then, I examine the history of the Tikna clan, from a variety of angles and sources, before turning to brief histories of their partners, the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ and the Jews of Guelmīm. Here, I present a picture of the world of Wād Nūn traders based in part on local sources that convey aspects of their quintessentially Saharan culture. In Chapter 7, I examine the trade network from an institutional and economic perspective, but here I focus on cultural aspects of the network's history.

THE MARKET OF GUELMĪM

The Wād, or valley of Nūn with its numerous burgs, including Āsrīr, Liksābī, and the largest, Guelmīm, historically was an intermediary zone between western Africa and Morocco (Map 5). Sitting at the foot of the Anti-Atlas Mountains, it was located about fifty kilometers from the Atlantic coast opposite the small enclave of Tarfāya. From the Tashilhīt or the local “Berber” language for “lakebed,” Guelmīm (Ajilmīm, Glaymīm, Goulimine) was positioned on the northern edge of the desert, which is why it was nicknamed “the Door of the Sahara” (Bāb al-Ṣaḥrāʾ).¹⁰

The Wād Nūn region's trans-Saharan history can be traced back to the eleventh-century Almoravid period, discussed in Chapter 2. At that time, the *Tarīq al-Lamtūna* started off from the Wād Nūn markets of Nūl Lamṭa and Taghawust, and led the way to ancient Ghana via the oasis of Azūgi in the Ādrār (Map 3). With the rise of Guelmīm before the turn of the nineteenth century, the region emerged once again as a terminus for

⁸ Bonte, “L’émirat,” 1457–66, and see also his “Fortunes Commerciales à Shingiti.”

⁹ López Bardagos, *Arenas coloniales: los Awlad Dalim*.

¹⁰ Incidentally, several Saharan oasis towns also go by this sobriquet, including Douz (Tunisia), Gourara (Algeria), Sebha (Libya), and several other towns on the Maghribi desert edge.

caravans coming from and going to western Africa. But rather than heading to Awdaghust, as in former times, most nineteenth-century caravans now traveled to and from the relay towns of Shinqīṭi and Tīshīt and the Senegalese market of Ndar to the southwest, and Timbuktu to the southeast. The journey from Guelmīm to Timbuktu or Tīshīt was about 45 camel-days, while it took about 10 days by donkey for Wād Nūn traders to reach the port of Al-Ṣawīra in Morocco.

Several interpretations exist of the origin of the term “Nūn.” Some sources claim that the name derives from “Nūl” or “Nūl Lamṭa,” the ruins of which are on the outskirts of present-day Liksābī. Ten kilometers from Guelmīm is the town of Āsrīr, where once stood Taghawust, the other historic Almoravid center. Other sources contend that Nūn stems from the Tashilhīt for fish or a type of eel called *ennun*. According to yet another popular interpretation, it was named after a Portuguese princess named Nuna who married a powerful Muslim notable from the area. Nuna, apparently a ruler herself, was highly venerated, and lived a long life, which is why the region might have been named after her.¹¹

Relations with Morocco

The Wād Nūn was located to the southwest of what was known as the “farthest Morocco” (*al-maghrib al-aqṣā*). It was a region written off by the kingdom as “the land of dissidence or unruliness” (*bilād al-sā’iba*), in contrast to the area governed by Morocco, “the administered or conquered land” (*bilād al-maghzan*).¹² In the past, Moroccan kings had called upon men of the Wād Nūn to fill the ranks of their southern military campaigns, such as during the invasion of Songhay, missions to the Sahara, or expeditions to assist the emir of Trārza (Chapter 2). But the Wād Nūn, like the regions of Tazerwālt and the Sūs, for the most part remained outside Morocco’s jurisdiction.

Since the rebuilding of the port of Al-Ṣawīra in the 1760s, long-distance commerce was revitalized. Leaders of Guelmīm took to using their economic and political leverage to avoid paying royal duties on both imports from and exports to Morocco. A compromise was reached between Shaykh Bayrūk and Morocco in the 1840s when the king agreed to

¹¹ Davidson, *Notes*, 84; similar theories were collected in the 1930s by Méric, “Circonscription,” 29. De La Chapelle (*Teknas*, 636) provides yet other theories not corroborated by other sources; interviews in Nouakchott with ‘Abd al-Wahāb b. al-Shaygar (09/12/97); in Guelmīm and Āsrīr.

¹² Burke, *Prelude to the Protectorate in Morocco*.

provide him with a house in Al-Ṣawīra and advantageous duties in all Wād Nūn commerce.¹³ But until the late nineteenth century, the Wād Nūn maintained its independence from Morocco, while its leaders played a careful diplomatic balancing act by negotiating directly with European merchants and nations. In 1303/1886, King Ḥasān conquered the region of Sūs and then traveled to the Wād Nūn, entering Guelmīm with his royal army. There he made Shaykh Bayrūk's son, Daḥmān, a royal chief (*qā'id*) for the purpose of maintaining the rule of law and collecting taxes, and subsequent Tikna chiefs would follow suit. But still the Wād Nūn remained largely autonomous from Morocco, Spain, and France, which all vied for regional control from the mid-nineteenth century onward until the French finally burst open the "Door of the Sahara" in 1934, thereby incorporating the region into their Moroccan Protectorate.

Commercial Capital

Although the other Wād Nūn markets of Liksābī and Āsrīr were also commercially important, Guelmīm became the principal market by the early nineteenth century. Its economy rested on long-distance trade, animal husbandry, and farming. Because of its specialization in caravan trade, and since caravans were the lifelines of the western African interior, it is no coincidence that Guelmīm became the largest camel market in northwestern Africa. Aside from camels, the main domestic animals reared in the region were sheep and horses, all of which were the objects of intense commercial transactions. The Wād Nūn was once a fertile alluvial basin where fields were irrigated by elaborate canal systems (*sāqiya* or *foggara*). As in all Saharan settings, access to water, a precious resource, was highly controlled, so much so that farmers exchanged "watering turns" for their fields.¹⁴ Barley and tobacco were the main crops consumed locally and exported to distant markets.

The town of Guelmīm was surrounded by a walled rampart with five principal gates. In the mid-nineteenth century, they enclosed some 800 houses, including several fortified castles (*burj*), primarily built with adobe and palm tree timber. Perhaps as many as three times this number of huts and tents surrounded the town, for a total mid-nineteenth-century population nearing seven thousand. Guelmīm was predominantly

¹³ Abitbol, *Commerçants*, 90, n. 116; Schroeter, *Merchants*, 48.

¹⁴ "Watering turns" constituted key property, inherited, traded, and periodically renegotiated between parties. The oldest record consulted was a water turn between Tiknas 1142/1729, Arwīlī Family Records, Archives of Shaykh Ḥamunni (Shinqīṭi).

inhabited by the large Tikna confederation, discussed in the next section, which owned numerous slaves of western African origin. Groups of *Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ* resided in *Guelmīm*, but also in neighboring *Liksābi* where their ancestors were buried. Other “Berber” groups, also *Tashilhīt*-speakers like most Tikna, included the *Arīb*, who sometimes performed as caravan workers.¹⁵ Major Saharan allies periodically resided in *Guelmīm*, such as the *Rgaybāt*, the *Tajakānit*, the *Arūsīyīn*, the *Awlād al-Lab*, and the *Awlād Dīm*. Moreover, “Berber” Jews were once among the wealthiest merchants of *Guelmīm*. They formed a sizeable community that lived in a Jewish quarter, as discussed below. The market was a regular stopover for Muslim pilgrims en route to Mecca until the late century, and it was otherwise frequented by western Africans. At any one time, there also were several European or American temporary residents, mainly awaiting ransom.

In its heyday, in the mid-nineteenth century, *Guelmīm* was described as a “veritable bazaar where one can find everything.”¹⁶ Léopold Panet provided one of the best descriptions of *Guelmīm* at this time:

It is to the progress of commerce, nothing but commerce, that are due the beautiful houses of the town. . . . Located between Morocco and Soueïra [al-*Ṣawīra*] where they go for supplies of European merchandise, the traders of Noun buy in return gum arabic, goat skins, camel and sheep wool, ostrich feathers from the *Sagia al-Hamra* and other locations along the coast from the nomadic tribes there. Moreover, they expedite caravans to Timbuktu that return with large quantities of gold, two to three thousand camels loaded with gum, ivory, wax and slaves. . . . They also collect their share of the gold mines of the Sudan through their relations with the oasis of Adrar and direct expeditions to Tichit or by foreign caravans.¹⁷

The town’s nineteenth-century development is often attributed, and with reason, to the role played by its Tikna leader Shaykh Bayrūk b. ‘Abaydallah b. *Sālam* of the small yet prosperous *Aīt Mūsā Wa ‘Alī* lineage. But according to local traditions, the secret of *Guelmīm*’s commercial success was also attributable to Jewish traders who reportedly would have “taught the people how to trade.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Aside from a handful of brief references in the written record, nothing is known about this Saharan group.

¹⁶ Panet, *Première exploration*, 161–2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 155–6. Like many before him, Panet obviously was seduced by Bayrūk’s charisma.

¹⁸ Numerous interviews with the Tikna community in Mauritania and Morocco, including in *Guelmīm* with Bashīr b. Bakār b. Muḥammad b. Bayrūk al-Ghazāwī (07/26/99) and Aḥmad Sālāk b. Daḥmān b. ‘Abidīn b. Bayrūk (07/22/99).

Bayrūk's Diplomacy and Dealings in "White Slaves"

The Wād Nūn region gained international notoriety in the nineteenth century for three reasons: first, Wād Nūn's role as a crossroads of western and northern African trade; second, the far-reaching leadership of Shaykh Bayrūk; and third, the fact that its inhabitants engaged in ransoming shipwrecked sailors.

One of Shaykh Bayrūk's most infamous dealings was the ransoming of European captives through the intermediation of his Jewish associates and consular connections. In this he followed a Wād Nūn tradition. While many Saharan nomads, including the Awlād Bū al-Sibā', were involved in this business, Guelmīm became a holding station for European "white slaves." After assuming leadership in 1230–1/1815, Bayrūk acted as a regional wholesale broker purchasing from their nomadic captors the crews of merchant ships capsized on the Atlantic coast. Like his father before him, he sent caravans to scavenge shipwrecks for treasures, cargoes, and wood. Then, by way of the Jews of Guelmīm, he would contact the appropriate consuls in Al-Ṣawīra to negotiate a ransom for their release. Such was the case of the Americans Robert Adams (1813) and James Riley (1815), as well as the Frenchman Charles Cochelet (1819) and countless others who were shipwrecked, enslaved, ransomed, and later wrote about their ordeals (Chapter 1). British consul James Grey Jackson, who published an account of Morocco in 1809, reported: "Of the vessels whose loss has been learned by accident (such as the sailors falling into the hands of Wedinoon Jews or Moors) between 1790–1806: English 17 and French 5 American 5 and Dutch, Danish, Swedish etc. 3."¹⁹ Some ten years later, Cochelet counted over fifty graves of Christians buried in Guelmīm.²⁰

In the 1880s, American Consul Mathews, who served in Tangiers since the 1860s, elaborated on the commercial role of Guelmīm, or the town of Wād Nūn as it was known to foreigners:

Wadnoon is the halfway house for Morocco traders, who flock there during the seasons of the fairs for the purpose of meeting the "acabahrs" or caravans which come from the Soudan district and Timbuctoo, all of which go no further than Wadnoon, where they do their bartering on a large scale.²¹

But this better describes the four decades of Guelmīm's greatest prosperity, the 1810s to the 1850s, than the late nineteenth century. Even

¹⁹ Grey Jackson, *Account of the Empire of Morocco*, 234.

²⁰ Cochelet, *Naufraige*, 322.

²¹ Mathews, "Northwest Africa," 198.

Mathews remarked that “trade with Wadnoon . . . has been crippled,” taking down with it the commerce of Al-Ṣawīra, which by then had lost its *raison d’être*.²²

During his dynamic leadership of *Guelmīm* (1815–59), Shaykh Bayrūk developed far-flung relations with various European merchants, consuls, and nations.²³ Aside from ransoming “white slaves,” most of his diplomacy focused on devising ways to promote his commercial activities. He achieved this by sending emissaries not only all over western Africa, but also as far away as England and France. At least one of his agents traveled to Manchester and another to Marseille. Bayrūk’s plan was to establish an independent port on the Atlantic coast near the Wād Nūn.²⁴ To this end he sent Bughazza, identified as a Wād Nūn “minister,” to Governor Bouët of Senegal in Ndar, who responded enthusiastically by launching a seafaring expedition in 1259/1844 to the Saharan coast. However the French ship, with Bayrūk’s minister on board, turned back after failing to anchor on the sandy shoreline.²⁵

Archival information from the French Foreign Ministry reveals that later in 1844 Bughazza traveled to Marseille and then Paris, accompanied by an unnamed merchant of Ndar, to discuss Bayrūk’s plan with the proper French authorities. Reckoning that their annual trade could fill 15 to 20 merchant ships, Bughazza sought to negotiate a treaty “that would give France the monopoly of exchanges and ensure the protection and repurchase of its shipwrecked nationals.”²⁶ But nothing came of these proceedings because of the impracticability of developing a port on the treacherous shores of the Saharan coast. Besides, the French were concerned about alienating Morocco.²⁷ Later that year, however, in August of 1844, the French bombed the ports of Mogador (Al-Ṣawīra) and Tangiers to retaliate against the Moroccan Kingdom’s sheltering of ‘Abd al-Qādar, the resistance leader who led a jihad against the French in the Algerian Atlas.²⁸

²² Ibid., 200.

²³ Nāimi, “Politique des chefs,” 35–6, 166–73, and “Évolution,” 213–38.

²⁴ Interviews in *Guelmīm* with Bashīr b. Bashīr b. Bakār b. Muḥammad b. Bayrūk al-Ghazāwī and Aḥmad Sālak b. Bayrūk and in Nouakchott with Muḥammad al-Amīn b. Bayrūk and Shaykhu b. Bayrūk.

²⁵ AMAE, *Mémoires et Documents*, no. 14, Maroc (1844), “Affaire du Scheikh de Wadnoun,” 66–9.

²⁶ De La Chapelle, *Teknas*, 64.

²⁷ AMAE, *Mémoires et Documents*, no. 14, Registre 4, Maroc (1844) Lettre of Sid Bouezza to M. Delaportes (1844), “Affaire du Scheikh de Wadnoun,” 75.

²⁸ Ibid.; Miège, *Maroc*, 196–224, for a sense of the Franco-British competition in Moroccan politics.

Perhaps it was not coincidental that these bombings took place while Bayrūk's minister was on a diplomatic mission in Paris. The French may have sought to harm the commercial interests of their competitors, the British, in preparation for the more significant role they were about to play in the region. Bayrūk, for his part, would have seen such drastic action with an eye to replacing Al-Ṣawīra by establishing his very own port. At any rate, within weeks of these events the Moroccan Sultan struck a deal with Shaykh Bayrūk.²⁹ He was given a house in Al-Ṣawīra to trade in and the right to two-thirds of the export duties on goods arriving from Guelmīm, in exchange for the promise not to engage in further negotiations with foreigners. But neither Bayrūk nor his sons after his passing ever fully abided by these terms, nor did they abandon hopes of building their port. The French also continued to toy with the idea of establishing an outpost on the coast facing the Wād Nūn in the late 1850s, and then again in the 1870s.³⁰

Spanish and Scottish Ports of Trade

Shortly after Bayrūk's passing in 1275–6/1859, Spain and Morocco entered into war. In a peace treaty drafted the following year, Morocco conceded to Spain the enclave of Sīdī Ifnī to the northwest of Wād Nūn, despite the fact that the Sultan's sovereignty admittedly did not extend that far south. Sīdī Ifnī was on or near the site of an abandoned fifteenth-century Spanish post named Santa Cruz de Mar Pequeña. But it would be another quarter-century before Spain began carving out its Saharan colony from its base in Río de Oro, a region secured through negotiations with the Emir of Ādrār. In 1884, Emilio Bonelli of the Sociedad Española de Africanistas y Colonistas created the first Spanish fort on the African coast in over three hundred years at Villa Cisneros, present-day Dakhla (Map 5).³¹ For the most part, Spain's colonial presence remained a coastal affair until pressured in the 1930s by the French conquest of the Sūs and Wād Nūn regions.

²⁹ De La Chapelle, *Teknas*, 64.

³⁰ In 1859, Governor Faidherbe of Senegal wrote ("Renseignements," 1024): "It is clear that it is France's absolute interest to build outposts on these two points: Oued Noun and Arguin. So ruinous and useless for France would be the conquest of Morocco, so it would be advantageous to establish oneself on several maritime points where France could absorb all the commerce of the area."

³¹ López Bardagos, *Arenas coloniales*; Salas, *El Protectorado de España*.

Meanwhile, in an attempt to realize his father's lifelong dream, Laḥbīb Wuld Bayrūk traveled to the Canary Islands in 1281–2/1865. There he proposed on behalf of Muḥammad Wuld Bayrūk, who had succeeded his father as family chief, that Spain open a port of trade in Ṭarfāya. Known to Europeans as Cape Juby, this was a coastal inlet south of Sīdī Ifnī and directly facing the Wād Nūn. When, several years later, three Spanish businessmen showed up in Guelmīm to hammer out the deal, they were apparently kidnapped and ransomed for 40,000 gold mithqāls (or the equivalent of 170 kg). There they remained for no less than eight years before being released. This case generated much correspondence with the Corcos Jewish family of Al-Ṣawīra and other merchants working in Morocco.³² In the end, the relationship between the Bayrūks and Spain appears to have remained tangential, amounting only to a series of negotiations and offshore transactions, but, as noted earlier, the Spanish archives remain to be consulted on the subject.

The French and the Spanish were not the only ones consulting with the Bayrūks about their port project. The case of Donald Mackenzie, the Scotsman who met with Shaykh Bayrūk's sons in the 1870s, is an interesting episode in Saharan colonial history. After consulting in Guelmīm, where he apparently obtained the rights over a strip of desert in and around Ṭarfāya, Mackenzie returned to Britain to marshal a plan to “flood the Sahara” with British merchandise.³³ For years he would lobby unsuccessfully the British parliament to colonize the area. While expounding on the “civilizing” effect of such a mission, he estimated that the yearly volume of the trans-Saharan trade from western Africa to Morocco amounted to no less than four million pounds sterling.³⁴ Mackenzie then formed the North-West Africa Company and returned in 1297/1880 to build his trading post, which he christened Port Victoria. At the same time, he opened company stores in the Canary Islands at Las Palmas and Gran Canaria. But the Moroccan king, seeking to sabotage this commercial venture, ordered it to be set on fire. To conspire against Muḥammad Wuld Bayrūk, he also enlisted the services of Ḥusayn b. Ḥāshim of Illigh,

³² Ennaji and Pascon, *Makhzen et le Sous al-Aqsa*, Letters 106 and 107, 172–4; Miège, *Maroc*, 320–5; Schroeter, *Merchants*.

³³ Mackenzie, *Flooding of the Sahara*; Parsons, “North-West African Company.”

³⁴ Adu Boahen, *Britain*, 131. According to the lower calculations of the French consul in Mogador, “in 1874 or 1875, the total value of products from the Sudan exported to the northern ports amounted to nearly 13 million francs (£511, 980), two-thirds of which still went through the markets of Tunis and Morocco” (quoted in Newbury, “North African,” 240, n. 28).

discussed next. Mackenzie's outpost folded shortly thereafter and so the flooding of the Sahara with British goods never occurred.

The House of Illigh

Besides the Wād Nūn, there were other trade centers south of Morocco competing for trans-Saharan trade, including the oasis of Tazerwālt in the Sūs region. The town of Illigh, Guelmīm's strongest competitor, dominated the oasis. It was controlled by Ḥāshim b. 'Aly Bū Damī'a, a commanding leader and commercial entrepreneur whose family claimed Sharifian descent and, like the Bayrūks, worked in close association with a Jewish trading minority.³⁵ As mentioned in Chapter 2, Morocco destroyed Illigh in 1670 in order to curb its commercial affairs with European traders on the coast who were undercutting business in Morocco's own southern port of Agādīr, just a few miles to the north. But by the 1740s, the Illigh market was reestablished and the Tazerwālt reemerged as a destination for the religious veneration of the sixteenth-century Saint Sīd Aḥmad b. Mūsa. By then, Jews had returned to Illigh, now under the protection of the Sharīf 'Aly Bū Damī'a family.³⁶

Pascon published an excellent study of the *kunnāsh*, or account book, dating from 1850 to 1875 of this leader's grandson, Ḥusayn b. Ḥāshim. Based on this source, he argues that "Illigh . . . became by 1850 the principal commercial center for the exchange of products from the Sahara, the Sūs and from Europe [imported] at the Port of Essaouira [Al-Ṣawīra]." ³⁷ Illigh certainly attracted a sizeable portion of nineteenth-century trans-Saharan traffic, but I suspect this was especially true from the 1850s onward. Noteworthy is the name of this family's principal caravan agent in this period, the Wād Nūn merchant Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl of the Awlād Bū al-Sibā' clan residing in Tīshīt, mentioned in the previous chapter. Alone, his business represented no less than 8 percent of all the caravan trade contracted by Ḥusayn b. Ḥāshim between 1850 and 1875, for a total of about twenty transactions.³⁸ These caravans primarily imported industrial cloth and exported ostrich feathers and ivory. Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm's commercial position at the crossroads of trade with Illigh and Guelmīm was a delicate matter that may have factored into an 1850s legal dispute. These events, discussed in Chapter 7, announced the end of an era

³⁵ Pascon, "Commerce de la Maison d'Illigh."

³⁶ Ibid., 105.

³⁷ Ibid., 69.

³⁸ Ibid., 70, 83.

for Guelmīm's trade with Tīshīt, and conversely they serve to explain the rise of Illīgh after this period. Nevertheless, Pascon's claim remains to be tested for an earlier period against a comparative study of the Bayrūk archives and those of other Wād Nūn traders. Any gain over Guelmīm by the Illīgh trading house would have occurred after Bayrūk's passing when the Tazerwālt became connected to the new caravan hub of Tindūf.

THE TIKNA: DISTANT RELATIVES OF THE ALMORAVIDS

While it was also the ancestral home of their allies the Awlād Bū al-Sibā' and several Jewish families, the Wād Nūn was the quintessential land of the Tikna. In reference to the indigo-dyed cotton clothes that were the Tiknas' vestimentary trademark, the Wād Nūn region often was described by outsiders as the land of "the blue men." They were vocationally quite diverse. As noted above, their nineteenth-century occupations were primarily in farming, animal husbandry, and commerce. They herded great numbers of sheep for wool, meat, and leather. They reared fine horses for local use in military campaigns and ceremonial horse races or fantasias, as well as for export to western Africa. As already noted, Guelmīm was the largest camel market in the region. For above all occupations, the Tikna were renowned for their extensive long-distance commercial activities. The Tikna "are traders in the soul and . . . one finds the Tikna on all the crossroads of Mauritania, Senegal, and the Sahelian regions of the [French] Sudan," writes Marty describing the early twentieth century.³⁹

Discussing the Tikna clan, Capitain Méric, a French colonial administrator who served in Guelmīm in the 1930s and 1940s, explains:

The word evokes a unity in race, language, at least an entente. One must not imagine anything of the sort. Nothing is more varied than the confederation of the Teknas.⁴⁰ . . . And yet there is in this diversity, in this richness of exchange and contacts, a unity. Unity due to history as much as geography, unity of customs, unity of resources especially, involving a certain lifestyle.⁴¹

³⁹ Marty, "Tribus de la Haute Mauritanie," 88.

⁴⁰ Most French sources tend to spell "Tikna" as "Tekna." Naïmi vacillates between this spelling and "Takna." Given the pronunciation of the name, and its Arabic rendering, which is either Tikna (تكن) or Tikhna (تكنه; with the added "h" for form), I have chosen to transcribe it as Tikna.

⁴¹ Méric, "Circonscription," 11.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, the French and the Spanish took a keen interest in the Tikna. This interest dated back to the nineteenth-century charismatic leader Shaykh Bayrūk, whose bold diplomacy, discussed above, brought him and his people in direct contact with many European nations. Aside from those who resided in Guelmīm, several French colonial ethnographers studied the Tikna, namely, De La Chapelle, Le Châtelier, Monteil, Marty, and Martin. Spanish explorers and colonial officers wrote several works about the Tikna. The most notable of these writers is Don Joaquín Gatell, the Catalán who traveled to the Wād Nūn and the Sūs regions in 1860s. As already noted, some scholars have drawn attention to the Tikna, but there is no definitive study to date of this large group and their diasporic presence in western Africa.

“Africans,” “Arabs,” “Berbers,” and the Almoravid Connection

The Tikna formed a large confederation of over a dozen clans (*qabā'il*) composed of indigenous “Berbers” (*Amazigh*) intermixed with various western Africans and “Arabs.” The Arabs came in waves starting with the Banū Hilāl in the eleventh century. Western Africans of various origins, including large numbers of Bamana, usually were forcefully migrated as victims of the trans-Saharan slave trade of which Wād Nūn was a prime destination. The Tikna are Tashilhīt speakers and are sometimes referred to pejoratively by northerners as “chleuha” (*Shluḥā*). Many were also speakers of Hasaniya, the Saharan lingua franca. In fact, due to trans-Saharan trade, the Wād Nūn is the northernmost limit of the Hasaniya language zone. Caravaners and residents of the diaspora tended to learn local African languages, and some could also communicate in the Moroccan Arabic dialect.

Because of their mixed ancestry, the Tikna defy categorization as either “Berbers” or “Arabs.” They therefore did not fit easily into the ethnographic templates devised by the French, who took to stereotypical representations of North African societies. Nor could the Tikna be classified in the social stratification grid of Saharan clans discussed in Chapter 1. They were neither “people of the sword” (*ḥasānī*, or ‘*arab*’) nor were they clerics, “people of the book” (*zwāyā*). Yet they tended to be identified as ‘*arab*’, perhaps because of their skills in horsemanship and marksmanship or because they clearly were not *zwāyā*, and this despite their “Berber” ethnicity and connections to the Almoravids.⁴² Several *zwāyā*,

⁴² Marty, “Tribus de la Haute Mauritanie,” 85.

however, lived among the Tikna or were assimilated to them. Some were scholars who provided their legal and clerical services, as was the case of the Lamṭa, Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ, Tajakānit, and Rgaybāt clans, for instance.⁴³ In mid-nineteenth-century Guelmīm, a Muslim judge and author of a fatwa examined in Chapter 7 was a Lamṭa. Moreover, a handful of Shurfa, or Sharifian families claiming genealogical ties to Prophet Muḥammad, similarly were attached to the Tikna, either through marriage or political alliances, and became known as the Shurfa Tikna. A prime example is the nineteenth-century family of Mūlāy ʿAly who first moved to Shinqīṭi before settling in Walāta.⁴⁴

Many sources claim that the Tikna descend from the Almoravids, the motley crew of “Berbers” who engaged in Islamic reform and the spread of Mālikī law in eleventh-century Africa and Spain (Chapter 2). One colonial ethnologist stated quite matter-of-factly: “The Teknas of today are the Almoravids.... The companions of Youssef ben Tashfin [Almoravid leader], the Lemtouna with their veiled faces, coming from the depths of the Sahara . . .”⁴⁵ For his part, De La Chapelle claimed that the Almoravids were ancestors to both the Tikna and the Lamṭa clans of Wād Nūn.⁴⁶ Moreover, the Spanish Colonel J. Asensio similarly argued that the Tikna were descended from the Gazūla who filled the Almoravids’ ranks.⁴⁷ But while the ethnogenesis of the Tikna is difficult to pinpoint in time, it is clear that they are among the earliest inhabitants of the Wād Nūn. That the Almoravids once congregated in the region that later became known as the Wād Nūn is indisputable. Some Tikna lineages clearly were related to the Almoravids, and therefore their presence in western Africa would date back almost one thousand years. Oral traditions collected in both the Wād Nūn and the Tikna diaspora point to the ruins of the ancient Almoravid towns of Nūl Lamṭa and Taghawust as their ancestral homes. Others refer to the names carved on tombstones in Awdaghust, the central market of the Ghana Empire occupied by the Almoravids, the ruins of which lay to the north of Tamshakett in present-day Mauritania.⁴⁸

⁴³ On the alliance between the Rgaybāt and the Tikna, see Carattini, *Reguibat*, vol. 1, 53, and vol. 2, 15; Brissaud, “Moeurs et coutumes des Reguibat,” 20–2.

⁴⁴ Discussed in Chapter 1; see Chapter 6, Table 6.4, detailing his son’s salt leases.

⁴⁵ Doutté, *En Tribu: Missions au Maroc*, 344.

⁴⁶ De La Chapelle, “Esquisse,” 74. ⁴⁷ Asensio, “Note présentée au congrès.”

⁴⁸ Interviews in Āsrīr, Guelmīm, and Nouakchott. De La Chapelle (“Teknas,” 636) dates the history of Wād Nūn to the Roman period, but with no supporting evidence.

The Lamṭa, the Gazūla, and the Lamtūna represented the dominant Almoravid clans. They split up as distinct groups sometime after the twelfth century.⁴⁹ There is some consensus that the Gazūlas, to which belonged the Mālikī scholar and Almoravid leader ‘Abdallah Ibn Yāsīn, were the forefathers of the Tikna. Based on linguistic evidence and Arabic documentation, Harold Norris proposes that the Gazūla/Jazūla mentioned in al-Bakrī’s account “must refer to desert folk, distant ancestors of those people whom we now call Tiknah, although they were not known by this name in the eleventh century.”⁵⁰ To be sure, the name Gazūla (*iguzuln*) survived to designate the two *leffs*, or main branches of the Tikna confederation, discussed next.

A Nation Divided by God and by the Camel

Because the Tikna had a territory, a cultural identity, and a political system, some speak of this group in terms of a nation. As one informant insisted, the “Tikna is not a tribe, it’s a nation.”⁵¹ Indeed, many informants explained that the Tikna formed a national entity rather than a “tribal” or even ethnic one. But obviously this was a nation divided across *leffs* and lineages.

Although some Tikna claim they all descended from one man, oral sources failed to identify this supposed common ancestor.⁵² One colonial source discusses a certain Sīdī ‘Athmān, father of al-Ghāzī, Billa, and Laḥsan, as the first ancestor of the Tikna.⁵³ Norris also makes mention of ‘Atman b. Menda, the common ancestor of the Aīt ‘Athmān (or Aīt Jmal) *leff*, who apparently was an officer of the Almoravid leader Ibn Yāsīn.⁵⁴ But as Méric submits, the links between these men and the diverse backgrounds of the subgroups that composed the Tikna are unclear.⁵⁵

Oral sources maintain that Tikna is a Tashilhīt word meaning “co-wife,” as in a polygynous situation.⁵⁶ It is tempting to identify the symbol of the two wives with the two *leffs* of the Tikna confederation: the “People of the

⁴⁹ De La Chapelle, “Esquisse,” 4, 7.

⁵⁰ Norris, *Arab Conquest*, 142; Asensio, “Note,” 17 (on al-Bakrī, see Chapter 2).

⁵¹ Interviews in Nouakchott with Muḥammad al-Amīn Wuld ‘Abdallah Wuld Bayrūk (05/30/98) and ‘Abdallah Wuld Muḥammad Sidiyya (10/16/97).

⁵² Mukhtār Wuld Ḥamidūn (“Tiknah,” Private Papers, IMRS).

⁵³ Monteil, *Note sur les Tekna*.

⁵⁴ Norris, *Arab Conquest*, 142; De La Ruelle, “Tekna Berberophones,” 2.

⁵⁵ Méric, “Circonscription,” 45–6.

⁵⁶ De La Ruelle, “Tekna,” 10.

Camel” (*Aīt al-Jmal*), also known as the Aīt ‘Athmān or Aīt Iguzuln, and “People with God” (*Aīt Billa*), or Aīt Tahuggat. The leff system was a classic binary political arrangement prevalent among “Berber” groups dividing peoples of one area into two symmetrically opposed alliances that together maintained a reciprocal equilibrium.⁵⁷ The two Tikna branches often were in opposition to one another, and this could cause regional havoc, as was the case in the late nineteenth century. While the two leffs kept each other in check, they bonded to form a united federation when faced with external threats or to collaborate in certain large-scale activities.

The identity boundaries of the Tikna nation were more or less fluid as groups migrated in and out of its protection, sometimes becoming Tikna by association. Monteil explained that the Tikna themselves differentiated among three kinds of Tiknas. The first were the “pure Tikna,” or the “Tikna by blood” (such as the Aīt Mūsā Wa ‘Aly (Bayrūk’s clan), the Aīt Laḥsān, and the Azwāfiṭ). The second were the “Tikna by name,” who long became assimilated to the Tikna but were not originally Tikna (such as the Izargiyīn). Finally, there were *de facto* Tikna, or strangers who, through contractual agreements or relationships of patronage, became assimilated to the Tikna (such as the Jews of Guelmīm).⁵⁸ As is typical in matters of identity, the identity markers of the Tikna tended to shift considerably in relationship to their spatial distance from the homeland. So, the farther away from Wād Nūn a trader moved, the more he saw himself as Tikna as opposed to identifying with either his leff or sub-clan of origin. The Tikna and others used to refer to the Wād Nūn as “the land of the Tikna” (*bilād Tikna*). As early as the 1840s, the French recognized *le pays des Tekna* as an independent “nation.” Whether by birth or by assimilation, the Tikna’s sense of belonging was especially pronounced outside the homeland, as demonstrated by their signatures on letters and contracts sometimes followed by the expression “the Tikna citizen” (*al-Tiknī al-muwāṭin*).

Each Tikna clan or lineage was ruled by a chief, or *shaykh*, who either represented several clans or spoke only for his own. Oral traditions discuss the “forty families” (*aīt al-arbaʿīn*) who joined together to confront the enemy or to decide on market rules.⁵⁹ But it is unclear who the forty

⁵⁷ Naïmi, *Dynamique*, 54, 115–19; Gellner, “Introduction,” 18; De La Chapelle, *Teknas*, 34; Justinard, “Note sur l’histoire du Sous,” 359–60, and “Sidi Ahmed ou Moussa, III, Les Guezzoula,” 59.

⁵⁸ Monteil, *Notes*, 10–13.

⁵⁹ Interviews in Guelmīm, Liksābī, Shinqīti, and Nouakchott. On market rules, see Chapter 5.

families were or how they were organized politically. Besides, the concept of “forty families” is a common trope in western Saharan oral traditions. About the Tikna, Mauritanian historian Mukhtār Wuld Ḥamidūn (1897–1987) wrote that “when they fought they would become like one hand to whomever fought against them.”⁶⁰ These so-called forty families from both Tikna leffs presented a united front to an external threat. A version of this political institution probably prevailed at some juncture, judging from its prominent place in Tikna oral tradition. According to a historical custodian of Likṣābī, the forty families met periodically to select a governing council.⁶¹ It decided on the rules and regulations of the Wād Nūn towns and markets, such as during the regional fairs. Judging from evidence presented in the next chapter on the market rules of Guelmīm, however, it seems more likely that each town had a separate governing council (*jamāʿa*). From the mid-eighteenth century, Guelmīm’s *jamāʿa* was headed by Tiknas of the Aīt Mūsā Wa ʿAly lineage. Presumably, the Azwāfiṭ Tikna in Āsrīr and the Aīt Laḥsan Tikna in Likṣābī, the ruling lineages of the two other major Wād Nūn towns, respectively, made their own rules.

Legends of the Tikna

Despite the lack of consensus about a common ancestry, several Tikna lineages keep the memory of their direct ancestors. Among the Aīt al-Jmal, the Aīt Mūsā Wa ʿAly played a prominent role in the nineteenth century. They controlled Guelmīm and by extension a good portion of the nineteenth-century caravan traffic entering the region. The Aīt Mūsā Wa ʿAly were traders and were most represented in the markets and towns of western Africa. The Aīt Ūshin, a sublineage of the Aīt Mūsā Wa ʿAly to which the Bayrūk family belonged, was especially active in the Wād Nūn trade network.

Oral traditions of the Aīt Ūshin describe their early history as follows. A group of mounted men, sometimes referred to as an Almoravid contingent, suddenly ran out of water and began suffering from thirst as they entered the Wād Nūn region. The ancestor of the Aīt Ūshin (Shaykh Muḥammad b. Masʿūd?) then wandered from the group a ways to sit under a tree.⁶² As he was resting, his horse discovered a source of water

⁶⁰ Wuld Ḥamidūn, “Tiknah,” Personal Papers, IMRS.

⁶¹ Interview in Likṣābī with Muḥammad b. al-Nājim b. Muḥammad b. al-Nājim (08/01/99).

⁶² Ibid. See Tikna genealogy in Lydon, “On Trans-Saharan Trails.” If Muḥammad b. Masʿūd is indeed the first Aīt Ūshin ancestor, then this event would date to the seventeenth century.

after pawing at the sand.⁶³ So the ancestor quenched his thirst, saved the group, and subsequently was made chief. Later, the location became known as *bîr al-fars*, “the well of the horse.” This well would have been located south of the Wād Nūn, and according to the nomadic historian ‘Abdallah Wuld Muḥammad Sidiyya, it is there that the *Ṭarīq al-Lamtūna* split, one branch heading west and the other toward the Niger River bend.⁶⁴ The ancestor settled in the area, and because his horse had discovered water in the manner of a jackal, his family was nicknamed Aīt Ūshin, meaning “the people of the jackal” in Tashilhīt. The expression was translated into the Arabic *al-dhī’bī* (“of the jackal”), which is how several Tikna traders signed their names.⁶⁵

The Azwāfiṭ were the most prominent Tikna clan of the Aīt Billa leff. Wuld Ḥamidūn recorded the following legend about their name:

Their ancestor had a first-rate horse from among the finest of horses. When he went to a meeting, one of the Tikna meetings, they would say “there is the owner of the bucking horse” (*ṣāḥib al-fars al-safāt*) meaning the horse that bucks people and horses.⁶⁶

To own a well-trained horse that fought with its hindlegs was apparently a major distinction, and the clan henceforth became known as “the buckers,” or Azwāfiṭ (singular *zafāt*). Members of the Tikna Azwāfiṭ clan rarely participated in the Wād Nūn trade network until the early twentieth century when they started in earnest to follow in the footsteps of earlier Tiknas involved in caravan trade.

Early Evidence of the Tikna Diaspora

Tikna presence in western Africa could extend as far back as the eleventh-century Almoravids, as previously suggested. While Tikna legends cannot be properly dated, to my knowledge the earliest written source making mention of the Tikna and the Wād Nūn was in 988/1580 when Aḥmad al-Manṣūr, the King of Morocco, passed through the region during a Saharan mission. A royal tax registry lists a group numbering 125,000 that

⁶³ Group interview in Shinqīti with Muḥammad Sa‘īd Wuld Buhay, Khadijatu Mint ‘Abdallah Wuld ‘Aly, and Fāṭima Mint ‘Abdarrahmān Wuld Buhay (09/30/97); interview in Nouakchott with Khadijatu Mint Khatārī Wuld ‘Abāba (05/29/98).

⁶⁴ Interview in Nouakchott with ‘Abdallah Wuld Muḥammad Sidiyya (10/16/98). This may be the same location named Wanzāmīn, described by al-Bakri (Chapter 2).

⁶⁵ De La Chapelle, “Esquisse,” 56. As discussed in Chapter 2, this same legend is a trope assigned to several Saharan heroes, starting with the Muslim conqueror ‘Uqba b. al-Nāfi’.

⁶⁶ Ibid. Somewhere along the etymological line, the “s” of *safāt* must have changed to a “z.”

accompanied the king on his official tour (*ḥarka*) to the Awukār region (near Tishīt and Walāta). It included 30,000 men of the “Aīt Ba’Amrān, Tikna and all the Arabs up to the limit of the Wād Nūn.”⁶⁷

The next tangible record of Tikna migration to western Africa dates to 1100–1/1689. That year, King Mūlāy Ismā‘il led a Moroccan expedition to the regions of Ādrār and Tagānit. He reportedly met with the Awlād Bū al-Sibā‘ and the Tikna, some of whom accompanied him on his visit to Shinqīti, and possibly to Tishīt, where he sought to facilitate relations between western Saharans and his kingdom.⁶⁸ As seen in Chapter 2, an alliance was formed in the eighteenth century between the Tikna and the Trārza Emirate. During his reign, the Trārza Emir ‘Aly Shandhūra (c. 1114–39/1703–27) sought Morocco’s assistance to vanquish the neighboring Brākna Emirate. He received a military contingent of men mounted on camel and horseback (some speak of 300 men, others of 500).⁶⁹ Oral traditions describe this northern army composed of a number of Tikna men mostly of the Izargiyīn clan.⁷⁰ The King of Morocco, according to Shaykh Sidiyya Bāba, a prominent zwāyā leader of the late nineteenth century:

simply gave the order to the Ahel Sidi Youssef [ancestor of Shaykh Bayrūk],⁷¹ Shaykh of the Tikna of Wād Nūn, to help the emir to establish order in the Sahara. It is therefore the shaykhs of the Tikna who furnished the chleuh [Tashilhīt-speakers] soldiers to Ali Chandora, and he, in return, promised in his name and in the name of his successors to pay an annual tribute [to the Tikna]. This tribute was paid regularly during the two centuries that followed. The grand distance and the state of instability in the regions separating Glimim from the Trarza region occasionally would suspend its payment; but it was still paid in 1904 by the Emir Ahmad Saloum II. It consisted of a beautiful camel that Tikna delegates collected annually, and occasioned celebrations and exchanges of gifts.⁷²

While Tikna migrations to western Africa may predate this period, the tributary alliance between the Trārza and the Wād Nūn encouraged

⁶⁷ Justinard, “Sidi Ahmed,” 185.

⁶⁸ Al-Zayyānī, *Al-Turjīmān al-Mu‘arrib*, 152. ⁶⁹ Marty, *L’émirat*, 69–70.

⁷⁰ Interviews in Nouakchott with the Emir of Trārza family (06/98); several interviews with Tiknas; interviews in Guelmīm with Ibrāhīm b. ‘Aly b. al-Ṭālib in Liksābī (08/01/99); Yaḥdhih b. ‘Abdallah b. Bayrūk with Khadaīja Mint Muḥammad b. Laḥbīb b. Bayrūk (07/31/99).

⁷¹ See the genealogy by Wuld Hamidūn, “Tiknah” IMRS; Lydon, “On Trans-Saharan Trails,” Appendix 3.

⁷² Marty, *L’émirat*, 70–1. This is confirmed by interviews in Guelmīm with Yaḥdhih b. ‘Abdallah b. Bayrūk and with Khadaīja Mint Muḥammad b. Laḥbīb b. Bayrūk (07/31/99).

subsequent Tikna migrations to the Senegal River.⁷³ The earliest mention of the Tikna that I encountered in western African sources is in a lengthy poem penned by the jurist Sīdī ‘Abdallah ibn al-Ḥājj Ibrāhīm (d. 1232/1816), discussed in Chapter 6. In it he explains:

I shall make a few remarks about the Tiknah and the Wād Nūn, which lies outside the borders of Shinqīt. The term Tiknah is applied to clans who are warlike, and who have a strong tribal feeling of loyalty. They occupy the area from Wād Nūn to the town of Asā, to the east, and the Sāqiyah al-Hamrā’ to the south, this latter forming the northern border of Shinqīt, and, to the westward, the Atlantic. The Wād Nūn is their northern border. They hold in regard three noble qualities: generosity to the guest, the protection of the stranger and manly courage. They are subdivided into two groups: Ait al-Jmal and Ait Billa. The Ait Mūsā are among the chief clans of the Ait al-Jmal, together with the ‘Ali, the Ait al-Hasan and the Zarkiyiyyīn. Among the principal lineages of the Ait Billa are the Azwāfiṭ and the Aytūs. There are sub-clans and clans and chieftainships subordinate to all the clans of Wād Nūn and Shinqīt which I have mentioned.⁷⁴

By the first decades of the nineteenth century, Tikna traders formed diasporic communities in various western African markets, including Walāta, Shinqīṭi, Timbuktu, and Tīshīt (Map 5). Soon a small number of Tikna traders also resided in the French-controlled Senegalese port of Ndar. But it is not until the 1840s that the Tikna reemerge in the historical record with the arrival there of Shaykh Bayrūk’s “minister” named Bughāzza, discussed above. It was under Bayrūk’s watch that the Wād Nūn trade network began to thrive. The earliest written records produced by Wād Nūn traders in western Africa date from the 1820s, and the earliest evidence of a land purchase there dates from 1271/1855. Then, the Tikna Būjum’a b. Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm (see Chapter 7) “purchased land enclosing eight palm trees” from an Idaw ‘Aly in Shinqīṭi.⁷⁵

THE BAYRŪK FAMILY

Starting in the first half of the eighteenth century, the ancestors of the Bayrūk family came to play a decisive role in the political and economic history of the Wād Nūn. From the town of Guelmīm, Bayrūk’s grandfather ‘Abaydallah b. Sālam’s authority extended over the entire Tikna clans of

⁷³ Interview in Nouakchott with Sīd Aḥmad Fāl, “Dah” (07/28/95); interview in Guelmīm with Yaḥdhiḥ b. ‘Abdallah b. Bayrūk and with Khadaīja Mint Muḥammad b. Laḥbīb b. Bayrūk (07/31/99), who explained that the relationship played itself out as late as the 1940s in an incident in Rosso when the Emir of Trārza interfered on behalf of the Tikna.

⁷⁴ Quoted in Norris, *Saharan Myth*, 22–3.

⁷⁵ Land Purchase 1271/1855. Family Archives of Mūlāy al-Mahdī (Shinqīṭi).

the Aīt al-Jmal leff.⁷⁶ But his son Bayrūk (a diminutive of the name Mbārak, meaning the blessed or fortunate one) would place the Wād Nūn on the world map. Bayrūk's sons and successors, namely, Muḥammad, ʿAbidīn, and later Daḥmān, carried the torch. The establishment of Tindūf by the Tajakānit clan in the 1850s, and then a destructive civil war between both Tikna leffs erupting in the 1890s, together with colonial conquests, however, marked turning points in Guelmīm's commercial reign.

The political authority and commercial power of the rulers of Guelmīm, most notably Shaykh Bayrūk, explains why it was their Tikna clan, the Aīt Mūsā Wa ʿAly, and particularly their immediate lineage, the Aīt Ūshin, that predominated among the Tiknas of the Wād Nūn trade network. The Frenchman Cochelet, who awaited ransom in Guelmīm in the late 1810s, provided one of the rare physical descriptions of the dark-skinned chief decked in western African indigo-dyed cotton cloth and surrounded by western African slaves and musicians.⁷⁷ Several decades later, the Senegalese traveler Panet reportedly heard Shaykh Bayrūk explain the secret of his success as follows:

One does not wait at home for fortune. One must go find it by taking products of one's country to exchange for products in a foreign country. In his infinite wisdom, God has designed it so that what can be found in one people is lacking in another people, therefore forcing people to engage in exchanges and, by uniting them in a common interest, this drives away the spirit of war in them forever. . . . This is what I do by applying the revenue generated by my position to send my caravans everywhere. Wherever I succeed, my subjects follow; wherever I do not succeed, they are warned in time and are spared from fruitless business.⁷⁸

Bayrūk thereby described himself as a major investor who contracted caravans with members of his network, dispatching his agents to trade in western Africa.

At least during Bayrūk's lifetime, being a Tikna or under clan protection was, in the words of one informant, "like having a passport to cross the Sahara."⁷⁹ The charisma and political vision of Bayrūk, and to some extent his succeeding sons Muḥammad and later Daḥmān, were remarkable. His relationships with western Africans and Europeans, his patronage of Jews, his strong cavalry, and commercial genius made him a

⁷⁶ For the genealogies of the Tikna and the Bayrūk family, see Lydon, "On Trans-Saharan Trails," 456–61.

⁷⁷ Cochelet, vol. I, 239–40, 336.

⁷⁸ Panet, *Première*, 155–6.

⁷⁹ Interview in Nouakchott with Sīd Aḥmad Fāl, "Dah" (07/28/95); interview in Guelmīm with Aḥmad Sālak Wuld ʿAbidīn Wuld Bayrūk (07/22/99).

significant authority promoting and controlling trans-Saharan trade in and around his Guelmīm fief. During his thirty-four-year rule, Bayrūk excelled in international diplomacy to the point that, as De La Chapelle declared with some exaggeration, “all the nomadic clans came to make sacrifices [i.e., pay allegiance] to him.”⁸⁰

Clans of the Tikna confederation negotiated their own alliances with non-Tikna groups, and these rights of respect and obligation were transferable to the larger Tikna confederation. This was the case of the Jews of Guelmīm, who came under the Bayrūk family’s protection. In his time, Shaykh Bayrūk negotiated numerous clan agreements executed through ritual slaughtering (*dhabīḥa*) to keep groups in check.⁸¹ Of course agreements could be broken, but most nomads, camel herders, and distant traders had a vested interest in maintaining good relations with Guelmīm where they obtained supplies. Key Saharan groups, such as the Tajakānit (who sometimes performed as Bayrūk’s scribes), the Rgaybāt (especially the Fuqra, Awlād Dawūd, Swu’ād, and Awlād al-Shaykh branches, who provided religious, commercial, and other services), the Ahl Barikallah, and Awlād Dīm of the western Saharan coast, all maintained alliances with the Tikna nation, via the Bayrūk family.

Apart from their partnerships with Saharan nomads, and their privileged position with the Trārza Emirate, which controlled access to the Senegal River trade, the Bayrūk family also forged alliances, sometimes in the form of arranged marriages, with the emirs of the Ādrār, Brākna, and Tagānit regions. The fact that his name and that of his succeeding sons were mentioned in Saharan chronicles is an indication of the regional prominence of the Tikna. Shaykh Bayrūk’s relations extended to the Futa Toro and Kaarta regions where, in the mid- to late nineteenth century, Wād Nūn traders entertained commercial relations with the jihadist Shaykh ‘Umar Tāl (Chapter 3).⁸²

Like many African chiefs, Shaykh Bayrūk, his sons, and clan members practiced serial polygyny. Shaykh Bayrūk reportedly owned forty slaves, including many concubines.⁸³ He rotated his wives through serial divorces

⁸⁰ De La Chapelle, *Teknas*, 635.

⁸¹ This gesture might have been related to the fact that the Ait Laḥsan were developing strong relationships with the Sīdī al-Ḥāshim trade group of Tāzerwālt/Illigh. For this last insight, see interview with Ibrāhīm b. al-Tālib ‘Aly in Liksābī (08/01/99). See Chapter 5 for a discussion of the *dhabīḥa*.

⁸² Panet, *Première*; interviews in Tīshīt, Shinqīti, and Nouakchott.

⁸³ Interviews in Guelmīm with al-Ghalīya Mint Bayrūk (07/24/99), Yaḥdhīh b. ‘Abdallah b. Bayrūk, and Khadaīja Mint Muḥammad b. Laḥbīb b. Bayrūk (07/31/99).

so as to always keep within the four “official” wives prescribed by Islam. Usually these included at least one woman from among the Aīt Mūsā Wa ‘Aly, and others strategically chosen from political allies, including the Awlād Bū al-Sibā’. The polygynous culture of the Tikna was a trait they had in common with other African groups, but not with the great majority of Saharans, who practiced monogamy. In addition, the Bayrūks held countless concubines from among western African women and girls sold into slavery. The embeddedness of slavery in Tikna culture is obvious. A Tikna saying, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, which boasts the achievements of the clan, explains that “this is something that only the Tikna and their slaves are capable of.” Slaves, a major subject of importation to Guelmīm, were central to Tikna culture, society, and economy. Shaykh Bayrūk’s own mother was of western African origin, as were the many mothers of his children who were his concubines.

Shaykh Bayrūk played no small part in the development of the Wād Nūn trade network. He promoted the settlement of the Tikna in various western African ports and markets while negotiating agreements with locals to ensure their safe passage. Whoever double-crossed an Aīt Mūsā Wa ‘Aly or attacked a Tikna caravan was simply denied access to the Guelmīm market, and thereby to camels and other trade goods under his control. Such a ban could extend to the cheating trader’s entire clan. By the first half of the nineteenth century, Wād Nūn traders had representatives specializing in trans-Saharan trade in key western African markets. The four largest Saharan communities were in Walāta, Tīshīt, Shinqīti, and Timbuktu. In the region of Senegambia, Tiknas and Awlād Bū al-Sibā’ had established residency in Ndar and in trading posts along the Senegal River. The Wād Nūn trade network, promoted by the Tikna clan in alliance with Awlād Bū al-Sibā’ and Jews, would endure into the twentieth century.

THE JEWS OF GUELMĪM

In previous chapters, I touched on the history of North African Jews, noting their participation in trans-Saharan trade. As Michel Abitbol claims, and Naïmi confirms, the Wād Nūn housed “one of the oldest Jewish communities of the region, dating from at least the beginning of the Christian era . . . Jews were living in Taghawust and in Goulimine [Guelmīm].”⁸⁴ To my knowledge, Guelmīm was the only town in the region of Wād Nūn to

⁸⁴ Abitbol, “Juifs,” 231–2; Naïmi, “Wādī Nūn.”

house a Jewish community. Although this group remains understudied, the research of Schroeter and Abitbol on the merchants of Al-Ṣawīra, some of whom migrated there from Guelmīm, provides important historical data.⁸⁵ This short section is therefore based on admittedly scant sources. First, I gathered general information from interviews and a conversation with the last Jewish family, servile descendants of the Shalūm, or Solomon, family of Guelmīm. Second, I extrapolated details about the Jewish members of the Wād Nūn network based on primary sources, namely, the nineteenth-century legal report featured in Chapter 7.

The Jews in Guelmīm were “Berbers” who lived under the protection of the local Muslim authority represented in this case by the Bayrūk family. In the mid-nineteenth century, Guelmīm housed about twelve Jewish families representing close to one hundred individuals, including one goldsmith and five or six cobblers.⁸⁶ These Jews were “de facto Tikna” in the sense that, by virtue of their protection contract with the Bayrūk family, they were incorporated into the Tikna nation in spite of their distinct religious identity. Like the Tikna, they were Tashilhīt speakers but they also would have been familiar with the Arabic language and possessed some knowledge of Hebrew. The community worshiped in one of two synagogues and was housed in a separate Jewish quarter (*mallāḥ*), located in the town center (*al-qṣār*) on a street with a door kept locked at night.⁸⁷

The nature of the relationship between the people of Wād Nūn and the Jewish community was typical by North African standards. The local ruler protected the families relegated to the status of *dhimmī* in exchange for the payment of a tax (*jizya*), as discussed in Chapter 2. This tax was periodically renegotiated, especially after leadership succession. A copy of one of these agreements dated 1291/1874 was fortuitously preserved by a descendent of Bayrūk. It contains the following declaration:

The sons of Bayrūk compel the Jews of their mallāḥ (Jewish quarter) to pay the *jizya* of 150 (gold or silver?) mithqāls [approx. 650 grams] and 60 *aqmīm* (unit?) of silk, and 16 *rtal* (8 kgs) of *hind* (?), and one [silver] *riyāl* for every *rtal* (500 grams) of ostrich feathers (*rīsh al-naʿām*) and 15 *ūqiya* (1/6 *riyāl*) for each load of leather, wool, gum arabic or other good exported from Guelmīm.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Schroeter, *Merchants; Sultan's Jews*.

⁸⁶ Gatell, “L'Ouad-Noun,” 275. He counted 100 Jews, closer to Davidson's estimate of twelve Jewish families reported in 1836. Twenty years prior, Panet (*Première exploration*, 147) claimed that 100 Jewish families resided in Guelmīm.

⁸⁷ Gatell, “L'Ouad-Noun,” 265; Davidson, *Notes*, 88, 94, 140.

⁸⁸ *Jizya* for the sons of Shaykh Bayrūk (1 Rabiʿ al-Thānī, 1291/May 17, 1874), Family Archives of Bashīr b. Bakār b. Muḥammad b. Bayrūk al-Ghazāwī (Guelmīm). According to Graberg di

The tax revenue was to be divided between Bayrūk's two eldest sons, Muḥammad and Laḥbīb, who had "taken over the responsibility of the Jewish quarter," with the first receiving two-thirds of the total. From other information contained in this document it appears that the Jewish quarter had recently been raided, for the two brothers guaranteed "reimbursement of the losses" the Jews had sustained. But nowhere is there mention of the individual names of Jewish families covered by this agreement. While little is known about the history of the Jews of Guelmīm, it is likely that their situation became precarious in the midst of the town's gradual economic decline after the passing of Shaykh Bayrūk.⁸⁹

Like most North African Jewish merchants, Jews invested in but rarely embarked on caravans, due no doubt to the discrimination against them in western African markets. Nevertheless, there are sufficient nineteenth-century instances to suggest that Jews did occasionally join trans-Saharan caravans. In the mid- to late nineteenth century a certain Bedjūkh traveled with Tikna and Awlād Bū al-Sibā' traders on a caravan reportedly marking the first substantial importation of green tea into the region of present-day Mauritania, as noted in previous chapters. When the events concerning Baghlīl and the Wād Nūn traders, including three Jewish partners, were unfolding in Tīshīt (Chapter 7), Panet was making his crossing from Ndar accompanied by a Jew from Guelmīm named Yaouda. Several years later, as seen in the previous chapter, Aby Serour started with his brother on a caravan headed to Timbuktu, where he and other Maghrebi Jews endeavored to trade for several years.

In 1252/1836, during several months spent in Guelmīm, Davidson frequently visited the Jewish quarter, including the prominent Solomon family with whom he took meals and drank brandy.⁹⁰ On at least one occasion Shaykh Bayrūk accompanied him. Solomon is undoubtedly the family of the man named "Shalūm," one of the creditors of the Wād Nūn traders discussed in Chapter 7. The Solomon family was the most opulent and highly

Hemsö (*Specchio geografico*, 163) one gold mithqāl was worth ten *ūqiya* (ounce), of which 13½ were equal to a Spanish real or piaster in circulation in nineteenth-century Morocco and even parts of the Sahara. Yet it is uncertain whether the mithqāls referred to here were in gold or silver since the latter were current in the region, while gold remained a specialized trade of Jewish merchants. See Chapter 6 on measures and currencies.

⁸⁹ Most Moroccan Jews left in 1948. When I first visited Guelmīm in 1999 there was only one Jewish family remaining. Méric ("Circonscription," 59), notes that the Jewish quarter had been raided prior to the French conquest in 1934 and several Jews were captured by the Tikna Ait Laḥsān and later ransomed by Shalūm. He estimated that the Jews numbered 50 in 1941.

⁹⁰ Davidson, *Notes*, 88, 94, 140.

regarded of Jewish families in town, and in 1941 still headed the community (as *nagid* or chief), according to one source.⁹¹ Information derived from the legal report examined in Chapter 7 gives a sense of the size of Jewish caravan investments in the 1850s. Shalūm entrusted six and a half salt bars and extended credit amounting to 100 gold mithqāls to Baghlīl. In addition, he loaned 137 mithqāls to another Wād Nūn trader named ‘Aly b. Hammād (see Table 7.1). Jews were the largest financiers in these operations, which is an indication of their level of participation in trade.

Another notable Jew in Guelmīm was the Rabbi Naftali Afriat, who settled there in the early nineteenth century from the northern city of Ifrane, near Fez. His eldest son Joseph became Shaykh Bayrūk’s principal cross-cultural broker in Al-Ṣawīra, residing in the house provided by the Moroccan sultan, mentioned above.⁹² Later, Joseph’s brother Abraham, born in Guelmīm in 1820, relocated to Al-Ṣawīra to join the ranks of the “sultan’s merchants” (*tujjār al-sultān*). This family, aptly described by Schroeter as “first capitalists,” would have transformed itself “from traders of Sheikh Bayrūk in Goulimine to merchant-bankers of Al-Ṣawīra, Marseille, and London” during the course of a single generation.⁹³ A third brother named Mas‘ūd Naftali also invested in caravan trade. In the above-mentioned legal report, he is described as the warehouseman (*al-khazzān*), a term that may indicate his position as a wholesaler of goods imported from Al-Ṣawīra. Mas‘ūd had invested 97 mithqāls with the Tikna Baghlīl. As seen in Chapter 7, some of these loans were reimbursed via an Awlād Bū al-Sibā’ commercial agent stationed in the Wād Nūn.

As noted in the preceding chapter, the relationship between the Tiknas and other Maghrebi Jews who were not from Guelmīm was entirely different. After the Jewish merchant Aby Serour had negotiated the right for Jews to trade in Timbuktu in the early 1860s, several Wād Nūn traders, including members of the Awlād Bū al-Sibā’, proceeded to vandalize his merchandise after they chained him up. Similarly in 1880s, the Tikna placed the Jew Eliahu in irons in violation of the judgment of a qāḍī of Timbuktu. While they depended on their membership in the Wād Nūn trade network, the Jews of Guelmīm were also connected to the larger Moroccan Jewish diaspora. Since even members of a single Jewish family in Guelmīm participated in separate but complementary trade networks, as was the case of Abraham Naftali, who joined the corporate group of

⁹¹ Méric, “Circonscription,” 58.

⁹² Schroeter, *Merchants*, 48; Abitbol, *Commerçants*, 90, n. 116.

⁹³ Schroeter, *Merchants*, 47, 46–50.

Jews working as the Moroccan King's merchants, it could be argued that these Jews were associated with, but not members of, the Wād Nūn network. But given the fact that the Jews of Guelmīm were considered "the Jews of the Tikna," working under the auspices of the Bayrūk family, they were integral to the commercial institution.

THE AWLĀD BŪ AL-SIBĀʿ

Like the Tikna and the Jews of Guelmīm, the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ (also known as *Abnāʾ Abī al-Sibāʿ*) have not been the subject of extensive research. Primary historical sources include local genealogies, private papers, and several colonial reports.⁹⁴ Like the Tikna, they were neither ḥasanī nor zwāyā.⁹⁵ In fact, throughout the ages, the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ developed an extremely ambiguous identity as notable scholars and urban dwellers, on the one hand, and grand nomads and fierce warriors, on the other. From the 1900s onward, large waves of Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ migrants entering Mauritania prompted several colonial reports, one of which labeled them incongruously as "scholar-warriors" (*marabouts-guerriers*).⁹⁶

The history of the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ and their various lineages is one of many migrations, some prompted by wars, others by commercial gain or scholarly pursuits, and still others due to nomadic lifestyles. Unlike the Tikna, they never had a well-defined or permanent "homeland," although

⁹⁴ Local sources: S. A. b. "Abd al-Maʿṭī, *Al-Difāʿ wa qīṭaʿ al-nazāʿ al-shurfaʿ Abnāʾ Abī al-Sibāʿ*"; M. A. b. Mūlay al-Māmūn al-Sibāʿī, *Al-Ābdāʿ wa al-Ātbāʿ*. Wuld Ḥamidūn (Private Paper, IMRS); Muḥammad Wālid b. Khūna, *Kitāb al-Ansāb*, entry on the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ. This book on the origin of clans written by a nineteenth-century Mauritanian scholar was translated and published by Hamet (*Chroniques*) but three clans were missing from this publication, namely, the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ, Idayshillī, and Smāsīd. This exclusion is odd given that in the original, the section on the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ is the lengthiest of all the entries, which in itself is equally odd (I thank Yahya Ould El-Bara for alerting me to this fact and sharing a copy of the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ genealogy, which he obtained from Muḥammad Mawlūd Wuld Daddah, who got it in 1947 from Mukhtār Wuld Ḥamidun). For colonial sources: Faidherbe, *Sénégal*, 41; Marty, *L'émirat*, 204–16; Chef de Bataillon Claudel, "Notes sur les Grands Nomades du Nord" Atar, March 31, 1910 in ANRIM E2/17, dossier 4 "Oulad Bou Sba, 1924–1930" (misfiled document); Bonafos, "Tribu marocaine en Mauritanie: Les Oulad Bousba"; Martin, "Les tribus du Sahel mauritanien et du Rio de Oro"; and Martin's notes in ANRIM E2/17 file "Notes de Martin." The two most important files in the Mauritanian archives on the Awlād Bū Sibāʿ dealing exclusively with the twentieth century are ANRIM E2/17 and E2/80.

⁹⁵ Interview in Nouakchott with ʿAbdallah Wuld Muḥammad Sidiyya (06/02/98).

⁹⁶ Martin, "Tribus."

many *Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ* identified with and resided in *Guelmīm* and neighboring *Liksābī*. The late ʿAbd al-Wahāb Wuld al-Shaygar, a custodian of *Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ* history, recounted how their ancestor, Aʿmar al-Ḥāmal, moved to Algeria’s Tlemcen in the sixteenth century after being chased from Morocco (Map 3). He later returned to settle in the region between Marrakech and Wād Nūn as a herder, legal scholar, and teacher of Arabic.

He (Aʿmar al-Ḥāmal) had two sons ʿĀmar and ʿAmrān. These two sons later left to [Wād] Nūn to fight the Portuguese who landed already in the fifteenth century on the coast. . . . They [both] died in the Nūn next to *Guelmīm* in the town called *Liksābī*. Their two tombs are well known and they are venerated there to this day.⁹⁷

The *Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ* ancestor ʿAmrān became an established saint commemorated at the yearly fair of *Liksābī*. Consequently, the *Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ* and the *Tikna* became close allies, and the former typically held the position of imam in *Guelmīm*’s main mosque.

The name *Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ* literally means “sons of the father of the lions.” The most common oral tradition about the origin of their name maintains that the *Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ*’s first ancestor, Aʿmar al-Ḥāmal, was sitting atop a mountain with his sheep when raiders attacked and demanded his herd. In one version, he was herding seven sheep accompanied by his seven daughters.⁹⁸ After a while, the ancestor called upon a group of lions to scare the raiders away, and they reportedly cried out, “Peace, peace oh! Father of the lions.”⁹⁹ From that moment onward, he was nicknamed the father of the lions and praised for this miraculous action.¹⁰⁰ According to ʿAbdallah Wuld ʿAbd al-Maʿṭī’s account, which is confirmed by oral sources, the *Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ* were early allies of the *Berābīsh*, a nomadic group whose regions of transhumance included the *Tiris*, the eastern *Ādrār*, and especially the *Azawād* north of

⁹⁷ Interviews in Nouakchott with ʿAbd al-Wahāb b. al-Shaygar (09/16/97) and Aḥmad Sālam b. ʿAbd al-Waddūd (06/28/98).

⁹⁸ Ibn Khūna, *Kitāb al-Ansāb*, entry on the *Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ*.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Interviews in Nouakchott with Aḥmad Sālam Wuld ʿAbd al-Wadūd (06/28/98) and Sīdī Wuld Dahī (06/12/98). Other interpretations of the name include variations of the *Sibāʿ* word “seven” (*sabaʿa*), and so *Awlād Bū Sibāʿ* would mean the father of the seven and would be linked to a battle seven *Awlād Bū Sibāʿ* led against the Portuguese (see below). Yet another play on words includes the word “to sell” (*bāʿa*) and so the name would be derived from an *Awlād Bū Sibāʿ* found selling. Marty, *L’émirat*, 212; also Martin, “Tribus,” 9.

Timbuktu.¹⁰¹ The mother of ‘Āmar, ‘Amrān, and their three sisters, Ruqaiya, ‘Ā’isha, and Mas’ūda, reportedly was a Berābīsh.¹⁰²

Sharifian Claims

The Awlād Bū al-Sibā’ claim Sharifian descent by linking their genealogies to Prophet Muḥammad’s daughter Fāṭima al-Zahra. They even brand their camels with the word “Mecca.” This claim was defended in a fatwa written in the 1910s by Shaykh Sa‘ad Būh, the Muslim notable who served the French in their effort to colonize Mauritania.¹⁰³ Some Saharans, however, deny these assertions, arguing instead that the Awlād Bū al-Sibā’ are warriors, not Sharifs. In fact, the brother of Shaykh Sa‘ad Būh, the late-nineteenth-century jihad leader Shaykh Mā’ al-‘Aynayn (Chapter 3), opined that these claims were unfounded.¹⁰⁴ At some point in time the scholars of Fez, solicited by the Sultan of Morocco, also joined the debate, arguing that the Awlād Bū al-Sibā’ were of mixed “Berber” origins. Shaykh Mā’ al-‘Aynayn’s son, Ṭālib al-Khyār, explained in an interview with a French colonial officer named Henri Martin, who wrote a report on the group:

The Sultan decreed that the name Bousba [Awlād Bū al-Sibā’] should be given to the group of the Sanhaja, the Berbers and the converted Jews commanded by the deceased [leader]. His two sons and daughters then reproduced this mixed group which constituted, by order of the Sultan, the Bousba tribe.¹⁰⁵

To be sure, this version of their history is strongly contested by the Awlād Bū al-Sibā’ and is easily dismissed on account of partisanship, for the

¹⁰¹ ‘Abdallah Wuld ‘Abd al-Ma’ṭī, *Al-Difā’*, 16–17; interviews in Nouakchott with Mohamed Saïd Ould Hamody (06/24/98), ‘Abd al-Wahāb Wuld al-Shaygar (07/18/97), and others.

¹⁰² Interview in Nouakchott with Aḥmad Sālam Wuld ‘Abd al-Wadūd (06/28/98).

¹⁰³ Interviews in Nouakchott with Kity Mint Shaygar (06/18/98) and Aḥmad Sālam Wuld ‘Abd al-Wadūd (06/26/98); IMRS, no. 2762, copy shared by Aḥmad Sālam Wuld ‘Abd al-Wadūd; partially reproduced in Mūlāy al-Māmūn al-Sbā’ī, *Al-Ābdā’*, 129–30. According to Mohamed Saïd Hamody (interview in Nouakchott (06/26/98)), the reason Shaykh Sa‘ad Buh embraced the cause of the Awlād Bū Sibā’ at the time was simply to support them in their fight against the Ahl Sidiyya family and Shaykh Sidiyya Bāba, in particular, who was favored above him by the French. See Boubrik, “Sainteté et espace en Mauritanie”; Stewart, *Islam*; and Robinson, *Paths*.

¹⁰⁴ Martin, “Tribus,” 6–10, was convinced by his informants, namely, the son of Mā’ al-‘Aynayn, that the Awlād Bū al-Sibā’ were not descendants of the Prophet. He argues that the Awlād Bū al-Sibā’ used their “supposed claim” as an excuse so as to avoid providing men to feed the colonial army.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 7–8.

Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ made numerous enemies in the last decades of the nineteenth century. But it is ironic that two scholarly brothers held such divergent opinions about their origin.¹⁰⁶ According to Martin's informant, when Mā' al-ʿAynayn read the treatise written by his brother Saʿad Būh, he exclaimed: "Everything he says is wrong. . . . Even if the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ are really descendants of the Prophet, to give them the title of "Shurfa" would be a heresy for they have not followed God's way."¹⁰⁷ On another note, the informant's association of the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ with converted Jews is interesting in light of their Wād Nūn trade connections.¹⁰⁸

The Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ clan has numerous branches stemming from the ancestors ʿĀmar and ʿAmrān. The sons of ʿĀmar tended to nomadize in the Tīris, while ʿAmrān's descendants headed toward the region of Marrakech. Although many specialized in trade, they also opened numerous reputable *madrasas* or schools of Islamic learning.¹⁰⁹ To be sure, the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ distinguished themselves by their scholarly activities and several became renowned muftīs. At the same time, other Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ developed reputations as unwieldy troublemakers.

After the sixteenth century, many Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ migrated to the region of Hawz Marrakech. But in the year 1197/1782–3 they were driven out by order of the Moroccan king on account of their infamous habit of plundering the market. In his *Kitāb al-istiṣāʿ*, the royal chronicler Aḥmad al-Nāṣirī reports:

A revolt took place in Morocco. . . . Among [the troublemakers] were the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ in the region of Marrakech. For a long time these people committed the most despicable crimes. Always revolting, they attacked their neighbors and came to pillage their land and even their homes. And so in the year 1197 [1783–4] the Sultan sent an expedition against them. They were combated and when a number of them had been killed, and their goods had been pillaged, they were pushed out towards the Sūs. The Sultan arrested a great number of their notables, and threw them in prison in Meknes where they remained until their deaths. He ordered the inhabitants of the Sūs to chase the last survivors of this group towards the southern regions, *their native lands*.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Boubrik, "Sainteté."

¹⁰⁷ Martin, "Tribus," 5.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 9–10. There might be a link to the Karidanna family among the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ (Norris, *Saharan Myth*, 108–10).

¹⁰⁹ Interviews in Nouakchott with Aḥmad Sālam b. ʿAbd al-Wadūd (07/03/99); and ʿAbd al-Wahāb Wuld al-Shaygar (09/16/97).

¹¹⁰ Quoted in Martin, "Tribus," 612–13 (emphasis added).

It is said that after this event, chains were suspended across the top of the entrance gates of the city of Marrakech, forcing camel and horse riders to dismount before exiting town to deter them from stealing.¹¹¹ The expulsion of the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ from Marrakech caused many to return to the Wād Nūn or to migrate further into the western Sahara.

Early West African Settlers

The Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ claim territorial rights on the western Saharan coast. One oral tradition holds that they own the stretch of land from Imrigli, south of the Sāqiya al-Ḥamraʿ, to a place just north of Ndar in Senegal known as *nakhāʿīla jīwuā* (the small palm trees of Jiwa), at, or near the caravan passageway of Ndiago (Map 6). The Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ assert they received the right to the Atlantic coast in a truce between them and the local Awlād Tidrārīn. It is said that the deal was sealed by a *zwāya* of the Idaw al-Ḥājj in the year 1004/1596.¹¹² This property would include the small island of Tidra thought to be a perfect retreat because it was accessible only at low tide and had a source of freshwater.¹¹³ But it must be noted that there are several clans with similar territorial claims, including the Tandgha, the Ahl Barikalla, and other groups from the Trārza region. Traders, with their loaded caravans, sometimes halted near Tidra where a permanent settlement of Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ tributaries resided.¹¹⁴ In the nineteenth century, the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ sometimes used Tidra as a staging point when driving caravans of horses from the Wād Nūn to Ndar.

Subsequently, probably after their expulsion from Morocco in the late eighteenth century, a handful of Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ took up residence on

¹¹¹ Ibid.; and interview in Nouakchott with ʿAbd al-Wahāb Wuld al-Shaygar (09/16/97).

¹¹² Interview in Nouakchott with Ahmad Sālam Wuld ʿAbd al-Wadūd (06/26/99). The Awlād Tidrārīn had killed an Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ, and as a result, the latter swore to exterminate the former. This is well established in the oral traditions of the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ and some claim to have a copy of the fatwa written by the said jurist, reportedly named al-Tuwayr al-Janna (who may be the ancestor of a well-known nineteenth-century jurist Al-Ṭālib Aḥmad b. Ṭuwayr al-Janna), but I never saw a copy myself. According to several Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ, Governor Faïdherbe was shown a copy of this contract in the mid-nineteenth century (Marty, *L'émirat*, 205–6).

¹¹³ Ould Cheikh, personal communication; interview in Nouakchott with Mohamed Saïd Ould Hamody (07/06/98), who explained, “the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ consider that Tidra is their roots, Tidra is the place of the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ where they [used to] spend their winters.”

¹¹⁴ Ould Cheikh, personal communication (03/97).

the coast to the north of Senegal.¹¹⁵ Two *Awlād Bū al-Sibā'* families, the *Ahl Mīnāḥna* (of the *Ahl 'Abaydāt* lineage) and the *Ahl Buddah* (of the *Demuysāt* lineage) settled opposite the island of *Tidra* around the well of *Iwīk*. Through means that remain unclear, they came to dominate the coastal people called the *Imrāgin*. Most likely they bought the tributary rights over them from the emir of *Trārza* at some point in time.¹¹⁶ The *Imrāgin* were professional fisher people who had the unusual skill of domesticating dolphins to round up schools of fish in order to drive them to the shore where they could easily be caught.¹¹⁷ Eventually, an *Awlād Bū al-Sibā'* family of the *Ahl Mīnāḥna* began residing in the village of *Ndiago*, the caravan passageway just fifteen kilometers to the north of *Ndar*.

Official Cross-Cultural Brokers

Because of their settlements just north of Senegal, these groups were most probably among the first *Awlād Bū al-Sibā'* to enter into contact with the French.¹¹⁸ What is certain is that in the course of time, the *Awlād Bū al-Sibā'* played an important role in the regions of *Trārza* and the Senegal River, as Governor *Faidherbe* was the first to recognize in the mid-nineteenth century.¹¹⁹

These early *Awlād Bū al-Sibā'* settlers enjoyed close ties with Saharans of the *Trārza* region, namely, with the emirs. By at least the late eighteenth century, the *Trārza* Emir named an *Awlād Bū al-Sibā'* as his “prime

¹¹⁵ Historian and geographer 'Abdallahi b. Muḥammad Sidiyya (interview in Nouakchott (06/25/98)) argued that these first *Awlād Bū al-Sibā'* settlements in *Trarza* region date from the 1780s when the Sultan Muḥammad 111 ordered that the *Awlād Bū al-Sibā'* be sacked. Also interviews in Nouakchott with the *Ahl Mīnāḥna*: Mukhtār Wuld 'Abd al-Wahāb (06/13/98), and the chief of *Ahl Buddah* of *Iwīk*, Aḥmadu Bamba Wuld Buddah (07/04/98). According to historian Aḥmad Sālam Wuld 'Abd al-Wadūd (interview in Nouakchott, 06/26/98) the first *Awlād Bū al-Sibā'* to be buried in Senegal was a man called Bū Bakr. If historian Wuld al-Sa'ad's hunch that the Emir 'Aly Shandhūra (1703–27) first appointed a certain Bū'aly b. Bū Bakr is correct, then he could be the son of the above-mentioned *Awlād Bū al-Sibā'* (see his *Imārat Trārza*). This would date these first arrivals to earlier times.

¹¹⁶ Mercier and Balandier, “Émancipation par rachat des pêcheurs Imragen,” 22.

¹¹⁷ Interviews in Nouakchott with 'Adballah Wuld Muḥammad Sidiyya (06/25/98) and Aḥmadu Bamba Wuld Buddah (07/04/98).

¹¹⁸ According to 'Adballah Wuld Muḥammad Sidiyya (interview in Nouakchott 06/25/98), the *Awlād Bū al-Sibā'* were also key intermediaries between the German Bradenburgers, who were trading in Arguin and the local population in the seventeenth century (Chapter 2).

¹¹⁹ Faidherbe, *Sénégal*; Marty, *L'émirat*, 205–6.

minister" (*wazīr*) to mediate with foreigners, especially with Europeans in Ndar and along the Atlantic coast.¹²⁰ At least by the reign of Emir 'Alī al-Kūrī (d. 1200–1/1786), the emir's minister was an Awlād Bū al-Sibā' named 'Abd al-Wahāb al-Sibā'ī. Later, in the days of Emir 'Amār al-Mukhtār (d. 1234–5/1819), the minister's grandson, Mukhtār b. Sīdī b. 'Abd al-Wahāb, held this post. This tradition continued into the twentieth century when the minister Akhayrhum, who worked closely with the French, was embroiled in several schemes with merchants of Ndar. Akhayrhum brokered the Trārza Emir's negotiations, treaties, and truces with the French, including the 1321/1903 treaty drafted by Coppolani, who led the conquest of Mauritania.¹²¹ He practically resided in Ndar where he developed the reputation of being a bold and unsavory opportunist. It is undoubtedly because of this fact that Akhayrhum was the last Awlād Bū al-Sibā' to serve as minister to the Trārza.

In the early 1850s, the emir of Trārza, Muḥammad al-Ḥabīb, appointed the chief of the Ahl Mīnāḥna, Muḥammad b. 'Umar, as representative of the Awlād Bū al-Sibā' living in the Trārza region.¹²² By then, there were several communities of Awlād Bū al-Sibā' traders in Butilimīt, Medherdhra, Ndiago, and ports of trade along the river. Muḥammad al-Ḥabīb was the emir who married the Senegalese princess Jimbut of the Waalo Kingdom and fought the French military to defend the borders of the Trārza south of the Senegal River.¹²³ Besides being in charge of the Awlād Bū al-Sibā' in the region, Muḥammad b. 'Umar was also responsible for ensuring that survivors of shipwrecks on the Atlantic coast were brought to the emir for ransoming, similar to the activities of the Bayrūk family.¹²⁴ The *entente* between the Awlād Bū al-Sibā' and Trārza emirate was so strong that Muḥammad al-Ḥabīb is said to have declared that "any person of the Awlād Bū al-Sibā' who came to Trārza was entitled to a *girba* (water skin) and a *khzāma* (a camel noise ring); that is to say a camel for transportation if he needed it."¹²⁵ Years later, during further migrations to Mauritania and Senegal in the 1930s, the Awlād Bū al-Sibā' continued to benefit from this policy.¹²⁶ As noted above, the Tikna

¹²⁰ Wuld al-Sa'ad, *Imārat Trārza*.

¹²¹ Marty, *L'émirat*, 466–7.

¹²² Faïdherbe, *Moniteur du Sénégal*, quoted in Marty, *L'émirat*, 205. Interview in Nouakchott with Mukhtār Wuld 'Abd al-Wahāb of the Ahl Mīnāḥna (06/13/98). This appointment may have been hereditary and perhaps dates to an earlier period.

¹²³ Barry, *Royaume*, 256–61.

¹²⁴ Interview in Nouakchott with Mukhtār Wuld 'Abd al-Wahāb (06/13/98).

¹²⁵ Interview in Nouakchott with Aḥmad Sālam Wuld 'Abd al-Wadūd (07/03/99).

¹²⁶ Lydon, "On Trans-Saharan Trails," Chaps. 6–8.

similarly maintained an alliance with the Trārza emirate, one that was necessary for caravans headed to Ndar to traverse its territory.

However, in 1267–8/1851 Muḥammad b. ʿUmar made the mistake of bypassing the emir’s authority by taking shipwreck survivors directly to the French in Ndar. For that he was assassinated by another *Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ* (quite possibly of the *Ahl Buddah*). Consequently, Muḥammad b. ʿUmar’s son, named Muḥammad Sālam, avenged his father and fled to Ndar. It is perhaps at this moment that many *Ahl Mīnāḥna* left Iwik to settle in Ndiago and in Guet Ndar (the sandbank west of Ndar). The French gave refuge to Muḥammad Sālam, enrolling him in the missionary school in Ndar, while his elder brother returned to the Trārza region after a long sojourn in England, where he traveled probably during the British occupation of Ndar in the 1810s.¹²⁷ Unfortunately, nothing more is known about these early *Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ* settlers in the region that would become southern Mauritania and northwestern Senegal.

Mūlāy Aḥmad al-Shaygar and the Kunta War

Subsequent recorded migrations of *Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ* groups into western Africa date to the beginning of the nineteenth century. Then Mūlāy Aḥmad al-Shaygar, of the *Awlād al-Baggār* lineage, settled in the oasis of Wādān. As his great-great-grandson explains, he led caravans between the Wād Nūn and Timbuktu, while studying with the learned Sharīf Mūlāy Ibrāhīm b. Mūlāy al-Bukhāry in Wādān.¹²⁸ He married his daughter Dummāha, but soon had a theological dispute with his teacher, causing him to leave for Timbuktu. There he married into the Berābīsh clan with ʿAīshatu Mint al-Tālib Mūsā. With this union, this Berābīsh family apparently “transferred” their alliance to the *Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ* and away from the Kunta.

After refining his theological thesis with supporting material gathered in Timbuktu, Mūlāy Aḥmad al-Shaygar returned to Wādān with his second wife. When he presented his argument, his father-in-law admitted to having been outwitted and told his daughter, Dummāha, Mūlāy Aḥmad’s first

¹²⁷ Faïdherbe, *Moniteur du Sénégal*, quoted in Marty, *L’émirat*, 205. See Muḥammad Sālim’s portrait in Faïdherbe, *Sénégal*, 41.

¹²⁸ Interview in Nouakchott with ʿAbd al-Wahāb Wuld al-Shaygar (09/12/97). The rest of the story of Mūlāy Aḥmad is based on this interview, also some information was confirmed in an interview in Nouakchott with Muḥammad al-Maḥdi b. Muḥammad al-Amin b. Aʿwaysī (07/08/98).

wife, to “rejoin her tent.”¹²⁹ Several years later, in the 1850s, Mūlāy Aḥmad al-Shaygar returned to Morocco where he took an active part in the Spanish-Moroccan war.¹³⁰ Then Mūlāy Aḥmad turned around to lead the famous war of the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ against the Kunta (1281–3/1860–2).

As explained in the preceding chapter, the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ caused a great deal of regional havoc in the second half of the nineteenth century. I have discussed the case of Aby Serour, whose caravan cargoes were seized by Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ raiders, which was a regular occurrence. One of the most notable wars of this time was fought between the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ and the Kunta clan. The protracted war, which raged for several years in the regions of Tīris and Zemmūr, was decided at the battle of Turīn. During this famous battle, the son and grandson of the Kunta jurist Shaykh Sīdī Muḥammad b. Shaykh Sīdī al-Mukhtār would perish at the hands of the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ leader Mūlāy Aḥmad al-Shaygar.¹³¹

Because of his military exploits, Mūlāy Aḥmad al-Shaygar was subsequently named chief of the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ clan by the Moroccan king ʿAbdarrahmān. But he renounced this position to return to Wād Nūn where he settled in Liksābī. There he purchased real estate and married again, this time with a Tikna woman from the Aīt Laḥsān clan.¹³² The case of Mūlāy Aḥmad is well remembered, for his military valor and his scholarly credentials as much as for his commercial entrepreneurship.

The causes of the war, which ushered in a forty-year period of violent conflict between the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ and the Kunta, and embroiling others such as the Rgaybāt, the Tajakānit, and the Tikna, are unclear. It is said that during this period, “the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ abandoned all studies and religious learning; they engaged in war; they started with the Kunta and attacked most groups in the Sahara.”¹³³ As al-Shinqītī explained, after the battle of Turīn,

the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ started to raid everyone (*ṣāra al-Awlād abī al-sibāʿ yughazzū ʿala jamīʿ al-nās*). It made no difference whether they were their enemies or not. They would kill whoever did not hand over their possessions.¹³⁴

¹²⁹ Interview with ʿAbd al-Wahāb Wuld al-Shaygar in Nouakchott (09/12/97).

¹³⁰ Ibid.; Miège, *Maroc*, 4.

¹³¹ Interviews in Nouakchott with ʿAbd al-Wahāb Wuld al-Shaygar (07/22/97), Aḥmad Sālam Wuld ʿAbd al-Wadūd (07/03/98), and others. See also Marty, *Lʿémirat*, 206; Al-Shinqītī, *Wasīt*, 509–10.

¹³² Interview in Nouakchott with ʿAbd al-Wahāb Wuld al-Shaygar (09/12/97). The Shaygar family still owns houses in and around Guelmīm today.

¹³³ Interview in Nouakchott with Aḥmad Sālam Wuld ʿAbd al-Waddūd (07/03/98).

¹³⁴ Al-Shinqītī, *Wasīt*, 509.

Commercial competition was certainly part of the conflict, while the fact that many *Awlād Bū al-Sibā'* tended to follow the competing Tijāniya Sufi order probably added fuel to the fire. In any event, it marked the end of the Kunta domination in the area on the heels of the disruptive jihads of Masina and Shaykh 'Umar.

From the 1860s, the *Awlād Bū al-Sibā'* would engage many western Africans in wars that they tended to win on account of their wiles, as much as their handling of the latest rifle models.¹³⁵ It was probably to this time that a famous proverb dates: "If you see an *Awlād Bū al-Sibā'* and a viper, kill the *Awlād Bū al-Sibā'* and leave the viper" (*Idha ra'īta al-Sibā'ī wa al-afa'ī, aqta al-Sibā'ī wa khallī al-afa'ī*).¹³⁶ The pillaging activities of the *Awlād Bū al-Sibā'*, aided by their possession of advanced weaponry, would continue until the conquest of Mauritania at which point most resumed their former commercial occupations.

There are countless examples of distinguished Muslim scholars from the *Awlād Bū al-Sibā'* who, in the first half of the nineteenth century, settled independently in markets often doubling as centers of Islamic learning, such as Wādān, Timbuktu, Walāta, Tīshīt, and Shinqīti. In this last town, an *Awlād Bū al-Sibā'* played a part in reconstructing the main mosque.¹³⁷ Ibrāhīm b. al-Khalīfa organized the laborious transportation by camelback of the mosque's stones quarried at the Jadīda mountain, forty kilometers northwest of Shinqīti.¹³⁸ Another example is the aforementioned Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl, who took up residence

¹³⁵ The only battles they did not win were against the Rgaybāt ("the day of Lumdun" 1321/1900 and "the day of Fūshīt" 1324/1902) and the reasons they lost, according to *Awlād Bū al-Sibā'* history custodian Aḥmad Sālam Wuld 'Abd al-Waddūd (interview in Nouakchott, 07/03/98), were due to physical factors: in Lumdun the mountain got in the way, and in Fūshīt, the well was dry. On the *Awlād Bū al-Sibā'* and their use of rifles see Chapter 3.

¹³⁶ It is very interesting to note that in the late nineteenth century, Governor Faïdherbe recorded a slightly different version of this proverb in his history of Senegal. Yet rather than targeting the *Awlād Bū al-Sibā'*, his version of the proverb discusses another clan rhyming with *al-Sibā'ī* (the Ouled Far'ī). Perhaps he was misinformed by an *Awlād Bū al-Sibā'*, who did not care for the poem. But it is altogether strange that the portrait of the *Awlād Bū al-Sibā'* Muḥammad Sālūm carrying his gun is located on the page just opposite the proverb (see Chapter 3, p. 138). What is also noteworthy is that this portrait seems to be placed there and not commented on in the text, as if Faïdherbe was conveying the real subjects of the proverb by association.

¹³⁷ Interview in Nouakchott with Fātimatu Mint Sidī Muḥammad with Salka Mint Bābatah (06/25/98).

¹³⁸ Interview in Shinqīti with 'Abdarrahmān Wuld Muḥammad al-Hanshī (09/29/97), he states this happened in the year 1150/1738; interview in Nouakchott with Aḥmad Sālam Wuld 'Abd al-Waddūd (07/03/98).

in Tīshīt in the first decades of the nineteenth century, where he outfitted trans-Saharan caravans as a member of the Wād Nūn trade network.

THE WĀD NŪN NETWORK

The Tikna, the Jews of Guelmīm, and the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ formed distinct groups that collaborated in business in the nineteenth century. By the first decade of the twentieth century, the Wād Nūn trade network was an expansive operation with agents in key western African markets from Shinqīṭi, Tīshīt, and Timbuktu to Ndar, Rosso, Louga, Dakar, Banjul, Conakry, and Abidjan. Written and oral sources point to their collaboration in trade which is representative of a trade network system. Because of their shared history, Wād Nūn origin, cultural affinity, common languages (Tashihīt and Hasaniya), use of literacy in commerce, and political alliances, these groups formed what I have identified as the Wād Nūn trade network.

The Tikna and their associates bonded through a shared territorial identity that cut across religions and clan lines. They also shared a commercial culture framed in Mālikī law and a common merchants' code (*'urf al-tujjār*). While network members identified with one another because they came from the same region, they also maintained formal alliances based on clan solidarity (*'asābiya*), protection contracts (*dhimma*), and intermarriage (between Muslims only).¹³⁹ As stranger-traders in western Africa they tended to collaborate as kin (*ansāb*). This is why I argue that they formed a trade network based not so much on a shared "ethnicity" but on a shared "tradition" linked to a territorial bond to the Wād Nūn. Despite their proximity and collaboration in trade, however, the Tikna and their associates maintained separate identities, had divergent historical trajectories, and developed different sets of network alliances. In other words, they did not form a homogenous group in the same way that Abner Cohen described the Hausa trade network, but one more akin to the case of the Shikarpuri and Hyderabadī merchants studied by Claude Markovits.¹⁴⁰ Nevertheless, they behaved as a group with a common attachment to the Wād Nūn. Those living in the diaspora tended to reside

¹³⁹ There are countless examples of intermarriage. Shaykh Bayrūk had several Awlād Bū Sibāʿ wives in the course of an active family life. The Mūlāy ʿAlī family of the Shurfa Tikna were married into the Awlād Baggār of the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ. These intermarriages would continue into the twentieth century.

¹⁴⁰ See Chapter 7 for a discussion of these works.

in the same town quarters, intermarry, and otherwise fraternize with one another. Moreover, the Tikna and the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ acted in union in the face of adversity. In Mauritania today, while both the Tikna and the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ are held as distinct clans, they used to be identified as a common group that was “the first to bring *tijāra*” (or “international trade”) to the area. What is more, they often are lumped together by western Africans. In Timbuktu, for example, Wād Nūn traders were labeled the “Wād Nūn Koī” or the “Gulmīm Koī,” from the word for “owner” in Songhay.¹⁴¹

One of the characteristics of the Wād Nūn trade network was its specialization in the trans-Saharan trade in particular commodities. Like other commercial networks that tended to hold monopolies in certain goods, nineteenth-century Wād Nūn traders were primarily engaged in international exports, namely, ostrich feathers, tanned leather, gum arabic, and ivory, as well as gold dust and slaves. In exchange they sold cotton cloth, firearms, sugar, and green tea imported from Al-Ṣawīra. They also specialized in Moroccan goods, paper, and Arabic literature, which made them quite popular in western African markets.

Importers of Green Tea

The Wād Nūn trade network was responsible for spreading the habit of drinking green tea to the western Sahara and beyond. While these groups still wrangle over this claim to fame, it seems certain that the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ were the first to bring tea, but the Tikna also were responsible for disseminating the daily tea-drinking ritual. However both groups would have imported tea for personal consumption before it became popular.¹⁴² As noted above, Jewish caravaners also had a hand in importing green tea into western Africa. As seen in Chapter 3, a Wād Nūn caravan, led by several Tikna, three Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ, and one Jewish trader imported tea to the western Sahara in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. In his travelogue, Panet first mentions drinking tea with the Jewish trader of Guelmīm whom he joined on caravan.¹⁴³ On his stopover in Shinqīti, he enjoyed a cup of tea with an Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ trader named ʿAbd

¹⁴¹ Interview in Bamako with al-Ghāly b. ʿAbd al-Wahāb (05/06/98).

¹⁴² Interview in Shinqīti with ʿAbdarrahmān Wuld Muḥammad al-Hanshī (02/28/97); Bonte, “L’émirat,” 1419–20.

¹⁴³ Panet, *Première exploration*, 45.

al-Salām [Wuld Khalifa?]. He remarked on all of the imported wares in his household, including:

a wooden coffer, a silver platter upon which there were teacups and mismatched saucers. One could notice other objects, including some with labels, such as a balm jar of perfume and a pot of ointment from the druggist. In the middle was a shiny silver teapot.¹⁴⁴

While the oral traditions of the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ are unclear about the identity of ʿAbd al-Salām, they do record the names of two other traders, Salih Wuld Jilālī and the above-mentioned Mūlāy Aḥmad al-Shaygar, thought to be the first to bring tea to the Ādrār region, although no further details are given.¹⁴⁵

Other oral sources claim that the Tikna were the first to serve tea to the emir of Ādrār Aḥmad Wuld Lemḥammed (1289–1307/1872–90). Khnātha Mint Aḥmayda explains that

when the Tikna came, they brought sugar and tea. In those days the people did not know it. . . . One day the emir of Ādrār, Aḥmad Wuld Lemḥammad Wuld Aḥmad ʿAida, came to Shinqīṭi. He greeted [the Tiknas] and they served him tea. He enjoyed it like nothing else. The following day, he sent over a slave carrying a wooden bowl gedḥa to collect some more tea saying “Fill this gedḥa with the medicine that you served yesterday.” Since the emir’s entourage were so ignorant, [the Tikna] sent a metal platter (*tābla*), glasses (*kisān*), a teapot (*barāda*) and someone to show them how to make the tea. They told him that he could not make tea in a wooden bowl!¹⁴⁶

The emir of Ādrār’s first taste of tea, an event that took place sometime in the 1870s or 1880s, was a significant milestone in the history of what would become Mauritania. But it would take several decades before drinking shot-glasses of sweet mint tea in the Sahara would become a favorite pastime enjoyed by a majority of Africans from the shores of Tripoli to Saint-Louis.

An elder recalls that when he was a child in 1920s Shinqīṭi, drinking tea was a luxury that could be afforded only by a handful of households.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 67.

¹⁴⁵ Interview in Nouakchott with ʿAbd al-Wahāb Wuld al-Shaygar (06/30/98) and in Marrakech with al-Bāqir b. Mūlāy Aly (02/08/98).

¹⁴⁶ Interview in Atār with Khnātha Mint Amayda and her two daughters Fāṭimatu and Mariam, daughter of Muḥammad al-Farha (10/05/97), and in Nouakchott with Mūlāy ʿUmar Wuld Mūlāy Aḥmad and ʿĀʾishatu Mint Mūlāy ʿAly (07/30/97), who adds that the Tikna told the emir that “you don’t drink tea in the *gedhan* [plural of *gedha*] like milk!” Interview in Shinqīṭi with ʿAbdarrahmān Wuld Muḥammad al-Hanshī (02/28/97), who claims that Mḥaymad Wuld ʿAbāba was involved in the emir of Ādrār’s first taste of tea. See also Chapter 3.

In those days a select group of prominent traders and scholars took turns preparing a special evening teatime known as “the golden one” (*al-dhababī*).¹⁴⁷ In times of scarcity, those who could afford tea would endeavor to be as quiet as possible when breaking the sugar cone into usable pieces so as not to attract attention. They had a special name for those who would show up for tea upon hearing the sound of a sugar-hammer. These freeloaders were called *sakāk*, which may stem from a word meaning “to break sugar.” As tea became part of daily consumption in western Africa, many poets and scholars devoted verses and fatwas to its medicinal and other attributes.¹⁴⁸ Saharan jurists expended much paper debating whether drinking tea was a lawful activity from the Islamic point of view.

Parallel Itineraries

When reflecting upon the history of the Tikna and the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ, a number of striking parallels emerge. First, both clans shared an ancient historical connection to the Wād Nūn region. These two groups converged in this region in interesting ways. The Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ ancestors are buried in Liksābī, less than ten kilometers northwest of Guelmīm, where one of them is worshiped as a patron saint. They also formed a sizeable community in Guelmīm, where they functioned as imams. The Tikna-Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ alliance is also confirmed by the fact that never in history did they raise arms against one another. This is especially significant when considering that the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ entered into conflict with a great number of Saharan clans.

Second, for various reasons, some that can be explained politically, others that are individually determined, the Tikna and the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ started a tradition of southern migration into the markets and centers of learning of western Africa. The beginnings of their diasporic presence took place in the eighteenth century. For the Tikna, it was marked by the arrival of an armed contingent of Tiknas of the Izargiyīn sub-clan sent to assist the emir of Trārza. For the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ, it is their role as foreign ministers in this same emirate and their increasing migrations to the region after their expulsion from Marrakech in the 1780s. Migrations of individual traders into the Sahara and to its southern

¹⁴⁷ Interview in Shinqīti with ʿAbdarrahmān Wuld Muḥammad al-Ḥanshī (02/28/97).

¹⁴⁸ The famous scholar of Shinqīti, Sīdī Muḥammad Wuld Habbut, wrote a work called the book of tea (*Kitāb al-Shāy*) containing instructions on how to prepare and drink the beverage.

edges would accelerate in the nineteenth century in tune with the expansion of trans-Saharan trade at that time. It was determined by political or economic interests (the Aīt Mūsa Wa ‘Aly Tikna sent as caravanners and trade agents connected to the Bayrūk family) or simply motivated by personal reasons (the case of Awlād Bū al-Sibā‘ Mūlāy Aḥmad al-Shaygar who sought learning and traded in Wādān and Timbuktu). Wād Nūn traders were represented in all the important markets of trans-Saharan commerce by the early nineteenth century. The efficient organization of their trade network was facilitated by the patronage of the Tikna leaders of Guelmīm.

Unlike most Tiknas, the Awlād Bū al-Sibā‘ were more nomadic and scattered. Only the descendents of the ancestor ‘Amrān, the saint of Liksābī, shared a manifest identification with the Wād Nūn as a homeland. For, unlike the Tikna, the clan was not united across its various lineages. This disunity contributed to their widespread dispersal. Besides Mūlāy Aḥmad al-Shaygar, who briefly governed the clan, the Awlād Bū al-Sibā‘ never developed a political tradition of leadership and often lacked cohesiveness as a group. Their southern migrations were consequently less “organized” or lacking coordination as compared with their Tikna counterparts. Moreover, because of their Sharifian claims and scholarly tradition, the Awlād Bū al-Sibā‘ carried tremendous prestige that indubitably promoted them to high social ranks wherever they wandered. In Shinqīṭi, Ibrāhīm al-Khalīfa helped reconstruct the mosque. In Timbuktu and Wādān, Mūlāy Aḥmad engaged in public theological debate. In Tīshīt, the reputation of Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl as a learned Sufi lives on to this day. Throughout western Africa, the Awlād Bū al-Sibā‘ typically performed as teachers of Islam. Their credentials were converted into economic capital, and it is not coincidental that many specialized in the book trade from Marrakech to western Africa. Indeed, the reputation of the Awlād Bū al-Sibā‘ as scholars and traders provided forms of symbolic capital available only to the Shurfa Tikna.

Aside from their common territorial identity, both the Awlād Bū al-Sibā‘ and the Tikna had much in common with the Jews of Guelmīm. In particular they all developed transnational identities that facilitated their commercial affairs. Indeed, it is especially in their exposure to multiculturalism throughout the ages by way of travel and contacts with foreigners, including Christian merchants of various European and American nationalities, that arguably these three groups shared a certain kind of cosmopolitanism. In many ways, Guelmīm formed a plural

society, and those who practiced long-distance trade would have embraced a transnational identity that also shaped the cultural determinants of locals.

Wād Nūn Women in the Diaspora

To varying degrees, Wād Nūn families reproduced and often reinvented their distinct cultural practices in the diaspora while embracing transnational identities. The first generation of migrant traders tended to marry locally, but subsequent generations strove to maintain their cultural cohesiveness by marrying within their own group. The Tikna especially maintained social distance in their western African host communities to the point of reclusiveness. They further set themselves apart by practicing female seclusion.¹⁴⁹ Tikna women, and single women and young wives in particular, were not to be seen by men other than their immediate family. Whether in nineteenth-century Shinqīṭi or in mid-twentieth century Dakar (Senegal), Tikna women were forbidden to leave the house uncovered or unaccompanied.¹⁵⁰ When guests came to their homes, women were confined to a section or quarter of the family compound. In mid- to late-nineteenth-century Shinqīṭi, for instance, the ‘Amāra family had a special room where women were locked up so as not to be seen by male guests.¹⁵¹ This room is still standing, although the rest of the ‘Amāra compound is now in ruins. On the walls of the small room, bearing narrow slits for light, are etched the names of women who once were locked between them.

Speaking of the gender segregation in Tikna homes, and women’s immobility, one informant explained:

All their houses are forbidden (*ḥarām*). One side was for the women, the other side was for the men. . . . In Shinqīṭi, in Aṭār, [among] all the Tikna, no one enters their houses, no one enters except them. . . . The women of Shinqīṭi . . . do

¹⁴⁹ Interview in Nouakchott with Fāṭimatu Mint al-Nājim known as “Djibi” (05/23/97). Al-Shinqīṭi (*Wasīt*, 525) explains that female seclusion was very rare and that he was not informed enough to describe its practice. I suspect that he was referring to the Tikna. On female seclusion in Maradi, Niger, see Cooper, *Marriage in Maradi*.

¹⁵⁰ It must be noted that the “veil,” worn by all the Saharan groups and by women across the Sahara from Mauritania to the Sudan, is somewhat of a misnomer. Known as the *milḥafa*, meaning wrap, it is a long cloth wrapped around the body that loosely covers the head but does not conceal the face.

¹⁵¹ Interview in Shinqīṭi with Dhahabiya Mint ‘Amāra (10/01/97).

not move for it is looked down upon by them. Their women do not travel. . . . Women of Shinqīti do not even exit their homes.¹⁵²

From the point of view of a Tikna patriarch, the practice of female seclusion served to limit access to women, especially to his daughters who could potentially help forge alliances. Such a strategy also served the reproduction of the cultural identity and traditions of the Tikna living outside the Wād Nūn homeland where women were in high demand. The seclusion of Tikna women, justified on religious grounds as a pious and respectable act, was not dissimilar to the Hausa *kulle*, meaning “locked,” of Muslims in northern Nigeria. Like the elite urban Hausa wives in seclusion, the Tikna relied extensively on the messenger services of children and slaves. But while they traded in beads, jewelry, and other locally manufactured household goods, these women did not develop as extensive a network as the Hausa “honey-comb” economy described by Polly Hill.¹⁵³

For men, marriage was instrumental as a business strategy. Marital alliances between families consolidated commercial collaboration. Regardless of bridewealth, the choice of acquiring a woman or giving one’s daughter’s hand away to a long-distance trader was a means of gaining entrance into a specific network. This was especially practiced by first-generation Wād Nūn traders. Evidence from the nineteenth-century inheritance report, discussed in Chapter 7, reveals that in Tīshīt several Tikna and Awlād Bū al-Sibā’ married Māsna women in addition to the wives they maintained in the Wād Nūn. To be sure, the Māsna operated a successful trade network extending into Malian markets, a connection that enhanced Wād Nūn commercial operations in obvious ways. Although it was an infrequent occurrence, especially after the second generation, marrying locally was a matter of practicality as much as a business opportunity for both the local family and the trader concerned.

Like the oft-exaggerated tales of seamen maintaining a wife in every port, it was not uncommon for caravaners to practice long-distance polygyny. This was true among Wād Nūn traders more than local Saharan traders, whose commercial businesses were less expansive and who usually were bound by prenuptial contracts that ensured marital monogamy (see Chapter 5). Polygyny was pervasive among the Tikna, and to a lesser extent

¹⁵² Interview in Aṭār with Khnātha Mint Aḥmayda (10/05/97).

¹⁵³ This is due to the relatively small size of the Tikna community in Shinqīti or Tīshīt. Hill, “Hidden Trade in Hausaland” and “Two Types of West African House Trade.”

among Awlād Bū al-Sibā'. It was as common among them as it was in the Senegalese and Malian societies where they took up residence.

Another option for long-distance traders was contracting short-term marriages for the duration of their sojourn in a given locality. On this subject, an elderly Tikna informant had the following to say:

Traders would go to all the places. They would load the trade on their camels. . . . If trade was not good here, then they would go to Rosso [on the Senegal River]. If trade was not good there, then they would go elsewhere or they would choose to sit four or five months. Because of the religion of Islam . . . they would prefer to marry. . . . If he married there he might have a child. Then he might leave and go trade in another place. If the trade was good, he would return the next year. But if it was not good he would not return, you see?¹⁵⁴

Such short-term marriages are reminiscent of the *mariages à la mode du pays* practiced by early Europeans in coastal Senegal described by Brooks.¹⁵⁵ Tikna or Awlād Bū al-Sibā' women, unlike local Saharan women, did not require prenuptial agreements of their future husbands since both polygyny and the practice of taking on concubines was customary among these groups.¹⁵⁶ Moreover, divorces were rare among Wād Nūn families, but abandonment of wives was not.

Widows of long-distance traders sometimes became involved in trans-Saharan trade. The histories of several women of the Wād Nūn network have survived in the historical record. One is the Māsna woman Fāṭima Mint Seri Niaba, who married the Awlād Bū al-Sibā' caravaner Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl in Tīshīt. As discussed further in the next chapter, she was an enterprising woman who participated in caravan trade in her own right, but is mainly remembered as a devout Muslim woman. Another nineteenth-century example is Mariam Mint Aḥmayda, the daughter of Ibrāhīm b. Aḥmayda, a Tikna caravaner (mentioned in the inheritance case). She married Mḥaymad Wuld 'Abāba, the prosperous Tikna who first made it big on an ostrich feather deal (discussed in Chapter 1) and came to own prime real estate next to the mosque in Shinqīṭi, alongside other Wād Nūn families.¹⁵⁷ After he died from a sudden illness on his way back from

¹⁵⁴ Interview in Nouakchott with 'A'ishātu Mint Mūlāy 'Aly (07/19/97).

¹⁵⁵ Brooks, *Eurafricans in Western Africa*, 210.

¹⁵⁶ When a prominent early-twentieth-century Tikna trader took on his first concubine, his Tikna wife wanted a divorce but could not obtain one. So "she freed the goats [in protest] and everywhere went screaming." Interview in Aṭār with Fāṭimatu Mint Mbārak b. Bayrūk (09/26/97).

¹⁵⁷ Interviews in Shinqīṭi with 'Abdarrahmān Wuld Muḥammad al-Ḥanshī (02/27/97), Muḥammad al-Amīn Wuld 'Abāba (02/27/97), and Ruqāya Mint Taqla Wuld 'Abba (10/

Senegal, Mariam Mint Aḥmayda continued her husband's commercial activities. She relied on the services of trade agents, namely, her son 'Abd al-qādir Wuld 'Abāba, who would most closely follow in the footsteps of his enterprising parents.¹⁵⁸

What is most remembered about Mariam Mint Aḥmayda, however, is her piety, generosity, and mystical powers. Informants concur that "she was a *Ṣāliḥa*," that is to say, she possessed certain powers as a pious, almost saintly woman.¹⁵⁹ The memory of this extraordinary woman was transmitted by word of mouth across the dunes to several Saharan oasis towns. Years after her passing, it is said that Mariam Mint Aḥmayda's ghost was spotted counseling travelers arriving on the outskirts of Shinqīti.¹⁶⁰ As in Fāṭima Mint Seri Niaba'a case, Mariam Mint Aḥmayda's reputation as a pious woman clearly overshadowed her commercial activities in the minds of informants.

In the [next chapter](#), I discuss the reliance of the caravan economy on family labor and the role of women as caravan investors. I argue that Saharan women were typically more empowered than their contemporaries elsewhere in the Muslim world. Wād Nūn women living in the diaspora, on the other hand, were considerably more subjugated by prescribed cultural norms. Information drawn from the Wād Nūn inheritance case discussed in Chapter 7 demonstrates to what extent their rights were curtailed, including their right to inherit from a deceased husband. Despite these constraints, however, Wād Nūn women did participate in the paper economy, which gave them access to long-distance trade. Many of their trade records are examined in Chapter 6. Like local Saharans, Wād Nūn women made extensive use of literacy by drafting contracts to trade via proxies and to protect their property rights. As for the involvement of Jewish women in caravan trade, I have no information on this important subject.

¹⁵⁸ Interviews in Shinqīti with Muḥammad al-Amīn Wuld Mḥaymed Wuld 'Abāba (02/27/97) and in Nouakchott with 'Andallah Wuld 'Abd al-qādir Wuld Mḥaymad Wuld 'Abāba (07/22/97). See, e.g., Debt Acquittal between Maryam Mint Aḥmayda and Aḥmad Wuld Idda (DI 7), Family Archive of Dāddah Wuld Idda (Tishīt).

¹⁵⁹ Interview in Nouakchott with Khadjatū Mint Muhammad Laḥmayda (01/04/03).

¹⁶⁰ According to one source, her spirit protected the encampment. Stories about her reputation were collected in Mauritania and Mali where interviewees often referred to her as a "saint" (*ṣāliḥa*).

CONCLUSION

For centuries the Wād Nūn region operated as the gateway to western Africa, on the one hand, and the gateway to northwestern Africa, on the other. In the early part of the nineteenth century, the market of Guelmīm developed as a terminus of trans-Saharan trade and a distribution center for European merchandise purchased on the Atlantic coast. It gained international fame because of the far-flung diplomatic relations entertained by its charismatic leader Shaykh Bayrūk. Under his leadership, the Tikna and their allies in trade, the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ, and the Jews of Guelmīm organized a trade network that effectively prospered from multilocal commercial activities. How the Wād Nūn trade network was structured and how its members cooperated in long-distance trade are addressed in Chapter 7. In the [next chapter](#), I provide a detailed discussion of the logistics of organizing camel caravans. As for Davidson, the British traveler with whom I began this chapter, he finally found passage to Timbuktu after waiting for several months in Guelmīm. He secured his way by paying a facilitation fee to Shaykh Bayrūk.¹⁶¹ But days following his anticipated departure, news broke that he had been mercilessly killed. Meanwhile, his travel guide and interpreter Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq (alias Edward Donnelan), a manumitted trans-Atlantic slave victim who had relatives in Timbuktu and Hausaland, was spared and apparently made it safely home never to be heard of again.

¹⁶¹ Davidson (and William Willshire), “Extracts from the Correspondence of the Late Mr. Davidson,” esp. 154–5. For a biography of Abū Bakr see Wilks, “Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq of Timbuktu.”

The Organization of Caravan Trade

When the Boötes star rises, the caravaners say: “let’s go!” (*Idha ṭal’a al-‘iwā’ yagūl al-jamāl aīwā!*)

Caravaners’ saying¹

The distance and the hardship of the road they travel are great. They have to cross a difficult desert that is made (almost) inaccessible by fear (of danger) and beset by (the danger of) thirst. Water is found there only in a few well-known spots to which caravan guides lead the way. The distance of this road is braved only by very few people.

Ibn Khaldūn²

In an effort to recover the capital she had invested in a caravan venture, al-Ḥuriyya hired her brother Ṣāliḥ as her trade representative (*wakīl*). The year was 1292/1875, as per the contract she drew up with him, which was a time of relative peace and prosperity in the western Sahara, according to the local chronicles.³ While this agency contract does not state where al-Ḥuriyya was located, nor where her brother was to travel to collect her due, she was a Tikna woman who probably resided in either Shinqīṭi or Guelmīm from where she engaged in trans-Saharan trade with markets further south via proxy. Ṣāliḥ was to collect a debt owed to her that

¹ Caravaners’ saying announcing the beginning of the caravan season. Interviews in Shinqīṭi with ‘Abdarrahmān Wuld Muḥammad al-Ḥanshī (02/27/97), in Touizekt near Atār with Jīli Wuld Intāha (09/25/97), and in Tishīt with Dāddah Wuld Idda (04/18/97).

² Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqadimah*, 809–10.

³ Wakāla contract between al-Ḥuriyya and her brother Ṣāliḥ (LA29), Family Records of Limām Wuld Arwīl, Archives of Shaykh Hammuny (Shinqīṭi). For Saharan chronology see Appendices 1 and 2. It is worth noting that, based on her name, al-Ḥuriyya, meaning “freedom,” was probably of servile origin.

amounted to 142 gold mithqāls (or about 600 grams of gold), as well as an unspecified quantity of silver, some cloth, and her camels.

While this source points to the risks involved in long-distance trade, including the failure of a caravan agent to deliver, it also reveals to what extent caravanning was not just a man's world. Historians have paid little notice to the use of written contracts by women. This is partially explained by the androcentric paradigm that dominates the literature, which assumes early modern long-distance trade to be an exclusively male occupation. Women, like men, relied on contractual agreements afforded by the paper economy to hire agents to trade on their behalf. The above case also shows to what extent contracts prevailed even between close kin, in this case between a sister and brother, for the bonds of family were insufficient to ensure the bonds of trust.

Like long-distance trade throughout the early modern world, organizing camel caravans involved resources and above all trust in people. These resources included networking and social capital, navigational expertise, physical stamina, and a certain amount of good fortune. As argued in the [next chapter](#), religious faith, in this case Islam, was an important element in trans-Saharan traders' "mental make-up" for it shaped their decisions and actions as well as those of their commercial correspondents. Embarking on a caravan was clearly a dangerous undertaking "braved only by very few people," as the fourteenth-century Tunisian historian Ibn Khaldūn admitted.⁴ Indeed, trans-Saharan caravaners were remarkable men with extraordinary skills and strength of character, fearless adventurers motivated by the lure of big gains. Aside from the business risks involved due to the vicissitudes of the market and ensuring trust, caravanning was fraught with potentially life-threatening encounters, from environmental hazards and wild animals to trigger-happy pirates. The western Sahara was a theater of chronic warfare throughout a good part of the nineteenth century, as seen in previous chapters. While violence was a regular backdrop to the activities of long-distance travelers, organizing caravans was a necessary occupation for oasis dwellers whose limited animal husbandry and date-palm cultivation did not meet all of their needs. Indeed, they depended on the movement of camel caravans for basic foodstuffs, commodities, and supplies, as well as enslaved labor.

This chapter discusses the logistics of interregional and trans-Saharan caravanning along the western routes. It is based in part on the oral

⁴ See Ibn Khaldūn quoted at the beginning of this chapter.

testimonies of retired caravaners and their descendants.⁵ Oral evidence gathered in the late twentieth century documents the internal workings of caravans and sheds light on the identity and itineraries of traders mentioned in the archival record. Taking into account the significant innovations that influenced both the size and the conduct of camel caravanning, namely, the spread of literacy and writing paper and the use of firearms and caffeinated green tea, this chapter is set primarily in a nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century “ethnographic present.” First, I take a few pages to consider the camel’s attributes before turning to a discussion of the different types of caravans that circulated on trans-Saharan trails. Second, I examine how caravans were organized in terms of labor to argue that families and shore-side institutions were essential to their efficient operation. In particular, I explore how women participated in the caravanning business. While family ties, friendship, and mutual trust were essential to trans-Saharan traders, the legal and institutional parameters of their paper economy favored this early modern commercial world. The third part of this chapter discusses how trans-Saharan traders attempted to solve fundamental problems of exchange through literacy and written documents. Finally, in the last sections, I discuss tolls, taxes, market rules, and regional trade fairs and consider dangers caravaners faced, including how they negotiated the political economy of raiding.

“SHIPS OF THE DESERT”

Before embarking on a study of the organization of caravans, it is appropriate to pay tribute to the camel – the “ship of the desert” (*safīnatu al-Ṣaḥrā*) as per the Arabic expression – that supplied the caravan’s locomotive power. As previously discussed, the use of camels, which spread to Africa sometime before 200 C.E., revolutionized trans-Saharan trade by making long-distance travel and cargo transportation feasible across the desert. The camel, designed by God with the desert in mind, according to Muslims, was the ideal vessel for trans-Saharan shipping. But camels did not perform simply as beasts of burden. Called collectively, in Hasaniya as in Arabic, *al-ibil* or *al-jimāl* (derived from the Arabic word for beauty), they provided sustenance and shelter, and in myriad ways they were the anchors of a caravaner’s existence.

⁵ I interviewed several active and many retired caravaners listed in the bibliography.

Camel Qualities

It is well known that camels can go without water and a regular food supply for days on end. Usually fed every two days, camels on caravans were given a variety of grain and hay, and they grazed on desert shrubs and grass during rest stops. But the fact that they could survive without drinking for up to ten days is not, as myth would have it, because their humps functioned as water reserves. Rather, they had a remarkable capacity to withstand great temperature variations and accordingly moderate their perspiration levels so as to gradually lose up to one-third of their body weight. For this reason, camels were habitually "lean on account of journeys through deep and distant mountain highways," as stated in the Qur'ān in the chapter entitled "The Pilgrimage," which naturally discusses the virtues of the camel.⁶

The camel had numerous advantages over its closest competitors. The ablest of all draft animals, only camels "could negotiate the hazardous footing of the full sand desert."⁷ Equipped with two-toed padded feet, they marched and trotted at about the same speed as a horse. They were built to kneel on the blazing-hot sands and tolerated water with higher concentrations of salt than could regular draft animals. Moreover, as Webb explains:

The camel had a further advantage over other desert herd animals in that the milch camel's lactation was not dependent upon the availability of fresh pasture, as was the lactation of cattle, sheep, and goats. Milch camels normally lactated for 11 months out of 12, and the camel's ability to turn salty water into sweet milk for almost the entire year allowed desert people to exploit lands which otherwise would have remained submarginal.⁸

Camels also could smell humidity from miles away, and their rubbery lips allowed them to graze and survive on the thorniest of desert shrubs. In fact, camels were so adapted to the Saharan environment that their eyes were sand-proof thanks to shutter-tight eyelashes.

With a steady walking pace, camels realized predictable daily distances alongside the caravaners who tended to walk with, rather than ride atop them. Far from the image of a slow-moving train, camel caravans moved relatively quickly, traveling at speeds ranging from four to five kilometers an hour. Male camels, and especially gelded ones (*azūzal*), realized the best performances. But small teams of mounted camel riders, such as couriers, could achieve distances of between sixty and eighty kilometers

⁶ Qur'ān (22:27; 22:36).

⁷ Webb, *Desert Frontier*, 11.

⁸ Ibid.

in a twelve-hour day. Fully loaded, camels averaged about thirty-five kilometers (22 miles) for shorter daily periods.⁹ The sturdiest of camels carried hefty loads weighing between 150 and 200 kilograms.¹⁰ With brass rings placed on their pierced noses, and tied to one another with cords knotted to their tails, camels joined together in single file could carry substantial cargoes. On average, one thousand camels formed a train over four kilometers long, and depending on the terrain, they sometimes walked in double file.

Among Muslims, a camel-load (*ḥamal*, plur. *ḥumūl* or *aḥmāl*) was an established measure of transportation. Its price must have varied across time, although I could not find any information on this subject. In the western Sahara, loads were denominated in fractions, and half a load was known as a *shagg*. In Timbuktu, however, half a load of salt (two salt bars, or *raʿṣ*) was an *ʿadīla*, a term also used generically in Libya's Ghāt and Ghadāmis for half a camel-load. As discussed below, this same word was used in Hasaniya to designate a salt bar (*ʿadīla*, plur. *ʿadā'il*) in the western oasis towns. In either case the word stems from the Arabic *ʿadāla*, to balance cargo on either side of an animal's back, and its derivative *ʿidl* means "two balanced halves of a load."¹¹ Camels southward-bound from Tishīt with loads of loose amersāl salt could carry on average three leather or cotton sacks (*zgāib* or *debesh*) weighing up to fifty kilograms each.¹² This freight corresponded to between five and six salt bars from Ijīl, or three to four slabs of salt mined in Tawdenni (Map 6).¹³

Sustenance and Shelter

Since they represented precious working capital, "camels were rarely killed in the past."¹⁴ As another informant expressed, "one did not kill

⁹ Interviews in Shinqīti with caravaner Ahmad Wuld Jidduh (10/01/97) and in Nouakchott with Muḥammad al-Ḥansī Wuld Muḥammad Sāliḥ (06/25/97).

¹⁰ Ibid.; Curtin, *Economic Change*, 278–85; Webb, *Desert Frontier*, 11. On the comparative productivity of camel and sailing ship transportation, see Austen and Cordell, "Trade," 82–4.

¹¹ Wehr, *Dictionary*, 696–7. See also Le Borgne, "Vocabulaire technique du chameau," 366.

¹² Interview in Tishīt with Ḥamallah b. Bāba Mine, Chief of the Māsna (04/15/97).

¹³ While oral sources claim that camels carried five or six salt bars from Ijīl, written evidence shows that occasionally this load was increased to seven. Letter between trading brothers (IS11), Family Archives of Imām al-Sāliḥī (Tijikja) and the Fatwa on the Wakāla al-Mufāwaḍa between Brothers (FS2), Family Archives Faḍil al-Sharīf (Tishīt).

¹⁴ Interview in Shinqīti with Aḥmad Wuld Jidduh (03/05/97); De La Chapelle, "Esquisse," 41.

camels, it was the last bullet."¹⁵ By this he meant that butchering a camel was an act of last resort in a context where smaller domestic animals, namely, goats and sheep, were destined for regular consumption. In former times, camels were slaughtered on grand occasions and for political reasons to pay allegiance or to honor customary obligations, as examined below. The regular butchering of camels is a more recent phenomenon that began in the second half of the twentieth century with the dramatic sedentarization of nomads and the end of large-scale caravanning. Eventually the sex ratio of the camel population shifted with the higher demand for she-camels, serving the same purpose as cows, supplying milk, offspring, and meat.

Aside from camel meat, the greasy hump of the camel was also consumed. It was stir-fried in morsels often with camel liver (a dish known as *al-kibda wa al-dhirwa*), liquefied for cooking, and used as a lubricant and as a wax to preserve foods. Likewise, camel milk was a staple of the Saharan diet, supplying sustenance on long crossings. In the event of a serious water shortage, men also could tap into its water reserve by temporarily perforating the camel's stomach. Desperate caravaners were known to drink camel urine when all other sources were exhausted. Furthermore, the furry hair of camels, with its insulating qualities, was sheared and woven by nomads to create dark and sturdy tents and other essential equipment. Likewise, their leather served to fabricate everything from saddles and sandals to thick ropes and buckets used to draw water from deep Saharan wells.

Grazing and Tending Herds

Managing camel herds was a year-round occupation. As seen previously, in the nineteenth century the preferred grazing land during the rainy season was the Tiris (Map 1). Camels were herded there and in other grazing spots several months out of the year. Saharan poems describe Tiris as a propitious environment for camels. One such poem conveys, "Four thousand camels and a bull, four nights and we have been on the move. No need to test urine on our forearms; four years and we are getting rich."¹⁶ First recorded by al-Shinqīṭī, the poem makes reference to a local veterinary practice to test for camel trypanosomiasis (locally known as *tāburīt*). By placing the animal's urine on their arms, letting it dry and

¹⁵ Interview in Nouakchott with 'Abdallah Wuld Muḥammad Sidiyya (10/16/97).

¹⁶ Ould Cheikh, "Herders," 201, 217, n. 2.

smelling it, cameleers could detect the presence of this most dreaded deadly disease.¹⁷

A number of nomads frequently camped in the Tīris all year round, including the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ, the Rgaybāt, and the Tikna. It is no coincidence that these groups specialized in herding and trading camels. As with goats and sheep, Africans of enslaved origin employed as shepherds typically tended to the herds. Various labor contracts governed the loaning and herding of camels, including the *mnīḥa*, an arrangement whereby the herder received milk and offspring in exchange for his herding services.¹⁸ In the early twentieth century, camel herds often traveled between Guelmīm and Louga, and to Timbuktu via Tindūf. As Fāṭima Mint ʿAbdarrahmān Wuld Buhay explained, when describing the activities of her Tikna father, “In those days this was known as *yasāwugu al-ibil* (meaning ‘to make the camel herd move forward’), that’s right. They bought camels, they took them from here and they sold them over there.”¹⁹ These groups tended to dominate the main camel markets in Saharan ports of trade. In the northern Sāḥil, the Wād Nūn town of Guelmīm was the principal camel market from at least the early nineteenth century, as already noted. In the south, the town of Louga in the Ganjool region of Senegal was the southernmost camel market from the late nineteenth until the end of the twentieth century. Then camels became essential to Senegal’s cash-crop colonial economy for transporting peanuts from fields to trading posts, and from the 1880s onward to railway stations. In both Guelmīm and Louga, there once was a weekly camel fair.

Camels were put on a high nutritional regimen in preparation for caravan expeditions. They also were denied water for three to four days to dehydrate their bodies so that they would drink fully on the day of the caravan’s departure. Black tar was applied to open wounds to protect from insects, to prevent infections, and to treat mange. Consequently, tar was an important item of exchange across the camel-herding zones of western Africa. While camels had extraordinary endurance and could withstand the harshest of conditions, there were limits to what they could tolerate. In the early twentieth century, a certain Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ caravaner left Ndar in Senegal with his loaded camels, traveling nonstop to reach the Tīris in a record three days’ time. But when he unloaded

¹⁷ Ibid.; Al-Shinqītī, *Wasīt*, 435.

¹⁸ Beslay, “Aperçu sur les croyances”; Bonte, “L’émirat,” 1187–93.

¹⁹ Group interview in Shinqītī with Muḥammad Saʿīd Wuld Buhay, Khadijatu Mint ʿAbdullah Wuld ʿAly, and Fāṭima Mint ʿAbdarrahmān Wuld Buhay (03/08/97).

the sacks from the exhausted camels' backs, the animals' skin tore off with them.²⁰

Branding and Camel Insignia

To protect their property Saharans branded their herds with distinct identification markers.²¹ Sometimes, several groups joined to brand all of their camels with one marker. All the clans of the Awlād Bū al-Sibā' used as a base the name of the holy city of Mecca (مكة), while the Tikna confederation had markers varying according to each clan. In Tishīt, the Shurfa families once branded camels with "V/" placed on the right side of a camel's neck, before they amended their symbol. The Māsna had a very different marker shaped like a wide "U." When purchasing a branded camel, the new owner added his own insignia to the preexisting one, with witnesses to confirm the modification. Incidentally, there were strict rules and regulations for handling stray camels. For instance, camels were not to be given water so they would not wander farther away from their owners, and they could not be slaughtered except in the presence of witnesses.²²

An incident preserved in the oral traditions illustrates how owners sometimes amended their camel insignia. It occurred during the lifetime of Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr, the legal scholar of Tishīt discussed in Chapter 3. After a devastating raid on the people of Tishīt, most probably occurring in 1241/1825–6, carried out by the Awlād Dīm, the notorious northern Saharan pirates, a Tishīt delegation traveled north to confront their chief, Shagh al-Manṣūr.²³ Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr led the deputation to negotiate the recovery of the stolen goods, namely, a number of slaves and camels. When they arrived at the chief's encampment, Shagh al-Manṣūr revealed that his daughter suffered from a mental illness. After miraculously curing the chief's daughter overnight, Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr and his people were then invited to reclaim their property. But confusion surrounded the similarities between the camel insignia of the Shurfa of Tishīt and the Awlād

²⁰ Interview in Nouakchott with Nayta Mint 'Abdarrahmān and Mūlāy Ibrāhīm Wuld Mūlāy Ibrāhīm (06/19/98).

²¹ On camel insignia in the Trārza, see Marty, *L'émirat*, 189–91, and Le Borgne, "Vocabulaire," 362–5. For eastern groups, see Marty, *Soudan*.

²² Beslay, "Aperçu."

²³ Based on interviews in Tishīt with Mariam Wuld Limām (04/28/97) and Dāddah Wuld Idda (04/28/97). There is only one raid on Tishīt by the Awlād Dīm mentioned in the Chronicle of Tishīt (*Ḥawliyat Tishīt*); see Appendix 1.

Dlīm. For this reason the Shurfa amended their branding symbolized by “V/” by adding an “o” to the left side of the camel’s neck in order to avoid further problems of identification.

Before discussing the composition of camel caravans, something must be said about the noble character of the ship of the desert. Camels long have captivated the Western imagination as intelligent, but exceedingly unforgiving and spiteful beasts of burden. As the domesticated animal *par excellence* in the Muslim world, the camel is highly revered. Camels are discussed in at least seven chapters of the Qur’ān, and countless tales are told about their cunning, intuition, memory, sense of direction, and vengefulness toward insensitive or ruthless masters. In many Saharan oral traditions recounting wars and organized violence, camels often appear as heroes and saviors. In the Ādrār region of northern Mauritania a story is told about a mad camel (*jamal al-kalib*) “no one could kill” that helped one group vanquish another during a protracted forty-year-long war.²⁴ Many other tales are told of camels that saved the day by carrying a rider to safety or finding water in time to spare an entire caravan from the grips of fatal dehydration.

CARAVANS BIG AND SMALL

First described by Ibn Ḥawqal in the tenth century, caravans big and small continued to circulate a thousand years later on Saharan routes. Generically known as *qāfila* (plur. *qawāfil*), from the verb “to return home,” caravans serving western African markets were of two types. One was smaller and interregional, transporting salt bars and miscellaneous loads to exchange in southern markets primarily for subsistence goods. The other type of caravan was more international and truly trans-Saharan in nature, circulating from Morocco to the northern and western African markets further south and among Saharan oases. Until the first half of the nineteenth century, the size of interregional caravans ranged from a few hundred to several thousand camels, whereas international caravans usually numbered in the thousands. As argued in Chapter 3, these sizes were significantly reduced with the proliferation of firearms in the nineteenth century, when interregional caravans rarely exceeding one thousand camels (except for salt caravans), and international caravans frequently numbering several hundred only.

²⁴ Interview in Touizekt, near Aṭār, with Jilli Wuld Intāha (09/25/97).

The Akābār International Caravans

International caravans traveling between western and northern African markets, transporting merchandise, salt, and slaves, varied greatly in size. Large caravans, usually covering the longest distances, were composed of many different groups of men. Known as the *akābār*, a word derived from the Arabic superlative meaning largest or biggest (*akbār*), this trans-Saharan convoy used to be launched annually. The classic *akābār* was organized in the northern desert edge and destined for southern markets, and then in Timbuktu it reassembled anew for the return trip. As the Tuscan consul in Morocco, Graberg di Hemsö, explained in the 1830s, “the *Accabe* is an aggregate of many *caffile* that reunite for a voyage.”²⁵ In other words, it was not a single but a collective caravan, bringing together multiple individual caravans of varying sizes that joined the convoy as it passed through several locations before embarking on the big crossing. Upon arriving at its destination, the caravan would split up. Only in Timbuktu would an annual *akābār* form again for the journey in the opposite direction or heading eastward toward Libyan markets.

Similar to European maritime expeditions in the pre-modern era, the *akābār* involved a large number of people. The *qafilas* that fed into the annual *akābār* ranged from one to fifty people and units of two to over one hundred camels, at the lower end of the scale, to “100 or 150 people at most with 1000 to 1500 camels.”²⁶ The Tikna and the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ were renowned for organizing and participating in *akābārs*. As noted in Chapter 3, with the increased traffic in the first half of the nineteenth century heading toward the Senegal River trading posts and Ndar, there was a marked shift in the composition, frequency, and size of caravans. In the early twentieth century, the word *akābār* came to be used for caravans going to these destinations, as well as those linking markets on both edges of the Sahara from Guelmīm to Ndar and Timbuktu (Map 5).

One of the most vivid accounts of an *akābār* was collected by Riley from his Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ captor Sidi Hamet, who described a trans-Saharan crossing from Wād Nūn to Timbuktu.²⁷ Sometime in the first decade of the 1800s, Sidi Hamet, his brother, and their four camels joined a large *akābār* that “consisted of about three thousand camels and eight

²⁵ Graberg di Hemsö, *Specchio*, 144.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 145.

²⁷ Riley, *Sufferings*, 159–77.

hundred men, with goods of almost every kind that are sold in Morocco.”²⁸ In a second trip to Timbuktu, Sidi Hamet participated in a rather disastrous expedition of 4,000 camels and close to 1,000 caravaners. He tells the chilling story of how this large caravan was almost entirely swept away by a severe sandstorm that spared only twelve camels and twenty-one men who miraculously reached Timbuktu.²⁹ In 1850 Panet notes that caravans leaving Guelmīm for western Africa counted between two and three thousand camels, but these sizes reflect pre- rather than post-mid-nineteenth-century activity.³⁰

The large akābārs from the western Maghrib were composed yearly up until the first half of the nineteenth century, when anywhere between four and six large caravans would leave Wād Nūn to either Ndar, through the Ādrār, or Timbuktu.³¹ Previously, some Moroccan towns, such as Fez, launched akābārs every two to three years heading to Timbuktu with stops in Taflālt and Wād Nūn.³² Throughout most of the caravan season, much smaller, international caravans were launched on more regular Saharan expeditions. Smaller caravans had the advantage of being more mobile, hence faster, and they required less water, fewer supplies, and therefore less coordination. Because they did not enjoy the armed protection of large akābār convoys, these smaller caravans often traveled at night by the light of the moon for speed as well as for safety. There are no more reports of large-scale akābārs composed of several thousand camels traveling along western routes after the 1850s, unlike the eastern and central branches of trans-Saharan trade. The increased availability of firearms in the nineteenth century rendered large convoys unnecessary as fully armed caravaners now could ensure their own protection with the latest modern weaponry. But conversely, the proliferation of firearms in the region contributed to regional instability, making larger armed convoys no longer secure. Although they were sometimes manufactured locally, high-performance rifles may have been less accessible to local caravaners on eastern routes, or in large commercial termini such as Tripoli, as argued in Chapter 3. Other factors, including environmental and political

²⁸ Ibid., 160. He gives the figure of 800 men, corresponding to a ratio of 3.75 camels per man.

²⁹ Ibid., 163–5.

³⁰ Ibid., 155–6. Mathews’ claim that akābārs of 10,000 camels ran in the late nineteenth century is, in my view, erroneous (“Northwest Africa,” 198, 211.)

³¹ Faïdherbe, “Renseignements,” 1024 (based on his interview with a Moroccan merchant from Figuīg).

³² Venture de Paradis, “Itinéraires,” 226.

circumstances, may further explain why large-scale caravans continued along eastern trans-Saharan routes well into the twentieth century.³³

No local records describing the internal dynamics of *akābārs* were found. This is surely because in such large-scale convoys participating caravaners only kept individual accounts, sometimes preserved in private Saharan libraries. In one late-nineteenth-century document, a returning caravan heading northward was composed of “twenty-four camel-loads carrying a mix of merchandise from the Sūdān including seventeen loads belonging to the aforementioned [man] and the remainder entirely for the aforementioned [woman].”³⁴ The woman in question, a Tikna named al-Ṭāhira bint al-Sa‘īd Muḥammad, dispatched her seven camel-loads with a hired caravan worker. Her share of this small caravan, perhaps previously part of a larger convoy, was about one-third of the total camel-loads. Although women’s shares tended to represent but a fraction of the overall volume, such evidence serves to disprove notions that long-distance trade was carried out by men alone. As discussed shortly, women were also involved in the caravanning business in other ways.

Interregional Rafga and Caravans of Salt

The other type of caravan was the *rafga* (plur. *rafā’ig*), derived from the Arabic for company, companion, or friend. The *rafga*, also known by the generic term for caravan (*qāfila*), was smaller in size and usually traveled shorter distances. Typically, it was launched to obtain food, slaves, and other supplies in exchange primarily for salt, dates (transported whole or in a paste in leather pouches), dried meat (*tishtār* in Hasaniya and *bukané* in Soninké), and crafts. The bulk of the returning cargo of salt caravans was loads of foodstuffs, primarily millet, as well as European merchandise, such as cotton cloth and writing paper.

Depending on size and destination, interregional caravans sometimes had specific names. In the late nineteenth century, the caravan of the Shurfa Tikna merchant Mūlāy ‘Aly, the father of the most prominent trader in early colonial Mauritania, was so large that it was called an *akābār* and named after him (*akābār Mūlāy ‘Aly*).³⁵ Some known destinations signaled

³³ Saied, “Commerce.”

³⁴ Inheritance Case (DB2), Family Archives of Daḥmān Wuld Bayrūk (Guelmīm).

³⁵ Interview in Aṭār with Sīdī Muḥammad Wuld Daydī Wuld al-‘Arabī Wuld Mūlāy ‘Aly (09/26/97).

certain interregional caravans, such as the *gārib* that came to designate caravans traveling from present-day northern Mauritania to the trading posts along the Senegal River.³⁶ Caravans from Shinqīṭi and Tīshīt were often organized by the clerical clans or *zwāyā* who, as learned merchants, sometimes served as experts of Mālikī law. The most active groups were the Idaw al-Ḥājj and the Kunta, who managed the salt pan of Ijīl, together with the Idaw ‘Aly of Shinqīṭi, Tijikja, and elsewhere and the Laghlāl of Shinqīṭi, who organized southbound salt caravans. In Tīshīt, the Shurfa ran caravans between Ijīl and the agricultural regions further south, while the Māsna operated regional caravans specializing in the amersāl salt trade from Tīshīt to Malian and Senegalese markets. Other important caravanning groups were the Tajakānit, who, as previously seen, founded the caravan hub of Tindūf in the 1850s and partook in the salt trade to Timbuktu. Wād Nūn traders, such as the Tikna and the Awlād Bū al-Sibā‘ residing in western African towns, also participated in the organization of interregional caravans, combining these activities with larger commercial ventures.

Salt caravans leaving Tīshīt and Timbuktu evidently remained large into the late nineteenth century, perhaps due to the insecurity reigning in the millet belt during much of the century or simply because they were rarely targeted by raiders. Typically, the Shurfa and the Māsna of Tīshīt jointly organized caravans. A rare caravan list dating from the mid-nineteenth century documents an interregional caravan from Tīshīt headed south to exchange loads of salt bars and amersāl for millet.³⁷ The document, written in phases as the caravan was being constituted, identified the caravan organizer, Muḥammad, as “the scribe” (*al-kātib*). He participated in the caravan as a shareholder, but was also paid for his services by each participant in salt bars added in the list next to each individual’s load of salt. In total, Muḥammad received fourteen full bars and twelve half-bars for a total of twenty salt bars corresponding to five camel-loads. This may have represented only partial payment, for he also would have derived profits from the sale of his own twenty-six camel-loads and perhaps made some additional profits on the entire salt cargo.

The total number of camel-loads, including both kinds of salt, was 1,050, with the largest shareholder owning 142 loads. It appears that there

³⁶ Interviews in Shinqīṭi with Ghalāna Mint ‘Amāra with Khnātha Mint ‘Amāra (10/02/97) and with Tikbir Mint al-Ghulām b. al-Ḥabbut (09/30/97). *Gārib* means boat in Hasaniya (from the Arabic *qārib*).

³⁷ Salt Caravan List (AS₃), Family Archives of Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr (Tīshīt).

was only one woman participating in this caravan as a shareholder, who contributed six camel-loads. A similar list, documenting a salt caravan leaving Tishīt sometime in the mid- to late nineteenth century, was composed of 2,892 camel-loads and 88 participants.³⁸ This was a sizeable enterprise for a regional caravan. The largest shareholder had 115 camel-loads, while the smallest took part with only half a load. Here there were at least seven female participants, and the fact that six other shareholders were listed as families may indicate the pooling of family resources.

Just as the camels were branded with insignia, so, too, did each salt caravan participant or family mark their salt bars with a personal sign in order to tell their property apart. When loads were expedited through contracts, the markings were specified in written agreements. For instance, in a multiparty salt lease contract, examined in Chapter 6, the types of salt bar markers mentioned included “a great dot with bluish dye on the head of every salt bar . . . a dot on the top-edge of every salt bar . . . two dots, one on the head of the salt-bar, the other on the top.”³⁹ In such a way, caravaners could keep track of salt accounts to distinguish camel-loads and register sales.

Further east, in the Azawād region, camel caravans that transported (and still do) to Timbuktu the salt mined from the pans of Tawdenni were called *azālāt* (a word perhaps of Songhay origin).⁴⁰ These were organized by the people of Arawān and Timbuktu, such as the Kunta and the Tajakānit, with the collaboration of the Ṭuāreg and the Berābīsh. In the nineteenth century, two regular *azālāt*s were launched annually with the salt extraction season beginning in the winter months. The salt caravan season coincided with the swelling of the Niger River, which allowed boats to transport the salt from neighboring Timbuktu to the port city of Mopti, where trade radiated to various regional markets.⁴¹

The Blessed Caravan Season

Whether it was a subsistence convoy from the salt pan to the millet belt or a trans-Saharan voyage across the shores of the Sahara Desert, the movement of caravans was weather-related and seasonal. Circulation of

³⁸ Caravan List (DI₅), Family Archives of Dāddah Wuld Idda (Tishīt).

³⁹ Salt Lease Contract 1329/1911 (DI₁₃), Family Archives of Dāddah Wuld Idda (Tishīt).

⁴⁰ Interview in Mopti with Yahya b. al-Kuttām, known as “Quthm” (04/20/98).

⁴¹ Interviews in Timbuktu with Muḥammad Wuld Khaṭra (04/22/98) and Sīdī ‘Umār b. Sīd Aḥmad al-Sulṭān (04/22/98).

nomads between regions was year-round, but the regular caravan traffic took place in the colder winter months. In the towns of Tishīt and Shinqīti, the caravan season was announced by the appearance on the horizon, sometime in mid-autumn, of the Boötes star, *al-‘iwā* in Hasaniya or *al-‘awwā* (“the Barker”) in Arabic. As per the Saharan saying cited above, when this star rose on the horizon, the caravaners would say “let’s go.” It was then that all the months of planning would spin into action, when camels were loaded and caravans headed out.

In Mauritania, the caravan season was either called “the time of the camel rein” (*zamān al-gawda*), meaning the time when the caravan is launched, or “the time of the blessed caravan” (*zamān al-rafga al-mubāraka*).⁴² It was preceded by the salt-mining season, known as “the time of extraction” (*zamān al-hūsh*), or other times referred to as “the time of partitioning” (*zamān al-jazāri*), in reference to the work of the salt miners.⁴³ Lasting typically from October to March, the caravan season was determined by the end of the strong heat, and it followed the agricultural calendar, namely, the harvesting of millet and gum arabic.

During these winter months, caravaners tended to travel from dawn until about one in the afternoon, around the time of the first afternoon prayer (*ṣalāh al-zuhr*). Because caravans would often travel at night, especially in the warmer months, the daily distance covered by a loaded caravan, usually counted in daily stages (*jibda*), was also numbered in nights (*layāli*). As noted earlier, these daily distances averaged thirty-five kilometers, but performance was contingent on many factors, including the size of caravans and their cargoes, the state of the winds, and the conditions of the terrain traversed. By sending fresh camels and supplies posted mid-way ahead of the crossing, couriers could realize speedy performances, traveling in a fraction of the time it would take an average caravan.⁴⁴ Wells were not encountered for several days during portions of the trip along western Saharan routes. Crossing the sea of sand of the Marāyya (literally “mirror”) or the Ma’jabāt al-Kubrā regions, for instance, meant spending eight to ten days without water. Average distances in camel-days between several key markets in the region are listed in Table 5.1.

⁴² Caravan List (AS 11), Family Archives of Muhammad Wuld Aḥmad Wuld al-Ṣaghīr (Tishīt). The expression *zamān al-gawda* literally means the time when the caravan is launched by yanking the camel by the bridle.

⁴³ Fatwa on the Caravan Worker (SBA 3), Family Archives of Shaykh Bū ‘Asriyya (Tishīt). The expression is derived from the act of slaughtering or butchering (*jazr*) and refers to the partitioning of salt bars.

⁴⁴ Davidson, *Notes*, 191.

TABLE 5.1. *Distances between key markets (in camel days)*

	Ndar	Guelmīm	Timbuktu	Tishīt	Shinqīṭi	Walāta	Nioro
Nioro	45	57	22	12	16	12	
Walāta	45	50	18	8	10		12
Shinqīṭi	30	35	25	10		10	16
Tishīt	35	40	20		8	7	12
Timbuktu	40	45		20	25	18	22
Guelmīm	40		45	40	35	50	57
Ndar		40	40	35	30	45	45

Walking, sometimes without a landmark in sight on the hazy horizon for days, could cause a caravaner's mind to wander into mirages. Accompanied by feelings of euphoria, mirages resulted from a combination of dehydration, sleep deprivation, physical exhaustion, sheer ennui, blinding reflections from the sand, and the hovering, dense heat waves – factors described in both interviews and travelers' accounts. As one informant explained, the intensity of the voyage sometimes “breaks the [caravaner's] head” (*yadigdig rā'shu*).⁴⁵ In his first crossing to Timbuktu in 1275/1858 Aby Serour had numerous optical illusions because in the desert “the ground is uniform as a sheet of paper and reverberates in your eyes like crystal.”⁴⁶ Fields of rocks so vividly resembled a standing army that they would fool even the camels, while a camel-dropping at a distance could be mistaken for a lonely rider. A French geographer caravanning in the Sudan in the same time period was so convinced that he had killed a hungry hyena that he had to check his pistol to confirm that it was just a powerful daydream.⁴⁷

As explained by a seasoned nomad, quoted in Chapter 1, caravan itineraries were not predicable or direct for they were largely dictated by the environment.⁴⁸ Based on interviews with caravaners in 1880, American Consul Mathews also acknowledged this when he wrote:

The akabahrs do not proceed in a direct line across the trackless desert to their destination, but turn occasionally eastward or westward, according to the

⁴⁵ Interview in Tishīt with Muḥammad al-Amin Wuld Muissa nicknamed al-Mashbūh (04/16/97).

⁴⁶ Aby Serour, “Premier établissement,” 351–4; see Chapters 1 and 3.

⁴⁷ D'Escayrac Lauture, “Routes,” 234–7. He describes feeling completely oppressed by the immensity of the sky, losing balance, and seeing vivid mirages.

⁴⁸ Interview in Nouakchott with 'Abdallah Wuld Muḥammad Sidiyya (10/16/97); see Chapter 1.

situation of certain fertile, inhabited and cultivated spots, interspersed in various parts of the Sahara like islands in the ocean.⁴⁹

If there were no rains and therefore no pastures, then crossing certain areas was rendered impossible some years. Access to information about recent rainfall activity and the formation of pools was critical to the success of a long-distance trip. Of course, there were known regions, wells, and passages where caravan traffic passed regularly, leaving permanent tracks. North of the Ādrār region there was the notoriously narrow passageway across the Bani mountains in the Ādrār Setūf, called Arrsān. This is a *fūm*, or mouth, in the mountain where camels had to tread delicately in a straight line.

CARAVAN WORKERS

We have already seen, based on original caravan lists, that organizers such as scribes were paid wages for their services. This and other evidence corrects the assumption that “there was virtually no wage labor on the caravans.”⁵⁰ A variety of people worked on behalf of and/or traveled with caravans. Preparing for the caravan season took several months – as many as or even more than the months actually spent on the trail – and endless permutations of camel owners, merchants, agents, and workers existed because the composition of caravans changed from one expedition to the next. Trans-Saharan caravans, big and small, required careful planning. Preparations entailed networking with trading partners to plot itineraries and targeted markets, to decide on the number of participants and their contributions in camels, resources, and capital, and to negotiate agreements among all parties involved. Moreover, the element of trust among caravaners was critical, as conveyed somewhat optimistically by the Saharan proverb “The caravan companion does not lie” (*al-rafiḡ mā yukadhib*).

A hierarchy existed between merchants and the itinerant traders they collaborated with or simply hired. At the top were the main caravan organizers and financiers who employed the services of caravaners and trade agents (*wakīl*) through a combination of oral and written contractual agreements, examined in the [next chapter](#). In the small inter-regional caravans, the leader sometimes was the principal caravan merchant. As discussed above, the number of shareholders with stakes in a caravan, that is to say, participants with camel-loads who either owned or

⁴⁹ Mathews, “Northwest Africa,” 214.

⁵⁰ Austen, “Marginalization,” 340.

hired camels, depended on the nature of the caravan, and whether it was a *rafga* or *akābār*. Although numbers varied greatly, there were anywhere between one and five camels per caravaner. As can be imagined, coordinating groups of people on the larger caravans was a logistical challenge.⁵¹

In towns such as Tīshīt and Shinqīṭi caravans were frequently organized by town residents of notable family and clan affiliations. Members of the Wād Nūn trade network collaborated with local merchants in inter-regional caravans. Often, particular sets of families pooled resources to form a caravan. Typically, they selected or hired a manager to oversee preparations, logistics, and accounting. There were tremendous advantages in joining caravan collectives since larger caravans tended to be safer, albeit much less mobile. As in the case of the caravan of salt from Tīshīt discussed above, sometimes the whole town partook in one large caravan. There the town council (*al-jamā'a*) nominated a caravan organizer yearly. He was the principal coordinator in charge of book-keeping by drawing up lists of caravan shareholders and loads. In consultation with others, organizers selected the leader to direct the caravan. They hired men of servile origin, such as former slaves (*ḥarātīn*), to serve in the position of *'aqādīm*, discussed shortly. Leaders together with caravan participants agreed about the market stops and the final destination, as well as the selection of a representative or group of representatives to negotiate terms of trade.

Caravan Leaders

Depending on the size of the caravan, or the aggregated caravans, either one man or a hierarchy of men was elected to lead. Reputation, skill, and experience were key factors determining the choice of the leader, who generated revenue and wages through a variety of arrangements. On caravans originating from Shinqīṭi, he had a right to load long leather bags (*taravāt*) on each camel, on top of his other transactions.⁵² Typically, he owned caravan loads and derived profit directly from commerce.

Terms designating caravan leaders varied regionally. On trans-Saharan caravans leaving Wād Nūn, the leader often took on the distinguished title

⁵¹ Camel to caravaner ratios varied greatly depending on the size and purpose of the caravan. On caravans of unloaded camels, there could be four men per one hundred camels. For discussions of caravaning in the region, see McDougall, "Camel Caravans of the Saharan Salt Trade"; Austen and Cordell, "Trade"; and Roberts, "Long Distance Trade and Production."

⁵² See Du Puigaudéau, *La route du sel*, for illustrations of caravan gear.

of “shaykh,” the same as in Libyan caravans.⁵³ In Tīshīt he was simply called head or leader of the caravan (*raʿīs al-rafga*). He was known as the *mrābut*, from the Arabic *rabāṭa* “to bind, tie up, connect,” by the people of Shinqīti. This designation may date back to the Almoravids (*al-Murābiṭūn*), who led caravans of commerce and conversion in the eleventh century, as seen in Chapter 2. It is from this term that the French in Senegal derived the word *marabout*, used strictly in the colonial context for religious leader.⁵⁴

The title of *mrābut*, with its religious and legal implications, was befitting. As captains and privateers represented the legal authorities on board pre-modern mercantile ships, so, too, did caravan leaders assume the role of sheriff and arbiter.⁵⁵ More often than not, leaders were learned men who typically led the congregation in prayer and performed other religious duties if no other Muslim cleric joined the caravan. Leaders were required to be literate in Arabic for basic organizational purposes, such as accounting, correspondence, and to read and write waybills and tags identifying merchants’ names and lists of goods pinned to bundles of merchandise.⁵⁶ They also needed to be versed in Mālikī law to arbitrate disagreements and mediate disputes among caravan members that could erupt en route.⁵⁷ If any given conflict could not be resolved by either the caravan leader or a traveling Muslim cleric, then the case could be reported to a legal authority upon arrival in the nearest town or encampment.

In large caravans, Muslim clerics took charge of religious services, often doubling as medical doctors dispensing prayers, amulets, and medicine. Similar to the diviners on board the nineteenth-century portage caravans of the Yoruba described by Toyin Falola or those of Tanzania discussed by Stephen Rockel, so, too, did Muslim clerics bless expeditions and provide spiritual guidance to crew members.⁵⁸ Caravaners often were superstitious and they expended time and resources to ward off the evil eye and to ensure spiritual safety in travels.

⁵³ Albergoni, “Bédouins et les échanges,” 206.

⁵⁴ Interview in Nouakchott with Muḥammad al-Ḥanshī Wuld Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ (06/25/97).

⁵⁵ Benton, *Law and Colonial Cultures*, 45–7.

⁵⁶ Such was the practice along western as well as eastern routes of trans-Saharan trade. See Brûlard, “Aperçu,” 208–9.

⁵⁷ Panet (*Première exploration*) discussed an instance when the caravan leader had to arbitrate when one of the camels fell sick and loads needed to be reallocated.

⁵⁸ Falola, “Yoruba Caravan System,” 122–3; Rockel, “Enterprising Partners,” 759.

Clerics crafted amulets or talismans to protect caravaners from specific threats. They used incantations and other local knowledge to cure illnesses and ailments such as snakebites, and to prevent diseases or such predicaments as thirst, fatigue, or attacks.

On large convoys, the caravan leader operated as military general, commanding teams of army units and coordinating logistics. Leaders made the major decisions, such as those concerning the caravan layout, sequencing, and team rotation, as well as night-guard duty. As authoritative figures in a Muslim environment where reputation was measured in religious currency, caravan leaders were considered pious, learned, and adroit diplomats. Their symbolic capital served to lubricate extensive networking in human resources and information gathering and to help them bargain their way across political barriers. The leader used diplomacy in the caravan's dealings with local inhabitants and dreaded caravan raiders, highway robbers, or so-called road cutters (*qaṭʿ al-tarīq*), as well as merchants and agents in foreign markets. Social skills, cunning, and cultural knowledge were necessary tools for negotiating with aggressors and steering clear of trouble. The caravan leader also needed to have access to information on the state of trails, pastures, and wells, the recent movement of sand dunes as well as certain enemy nomads, the market conditions in distant towns, and the activities of other caravans in a given area. All this information was vital to the success of a caravan expedition.

Caravan leaders were knowledgeable in a number of areas but would delegate when necessary. They possessed excellent veterinary knowledge to treat tired, sickly, or injured camels. In all circumstances, leaders were required to be proficient in cross-cultural communication and have knowledge of local customs and languages. However, they also could hire a translator or count on the services of local brokers, as discussed below. In the above-mentioned interregional salt caravan from Tīshīt, one of the shareholders was simply listed as *al-tarjīmān*, meaning "the translator," an indication that such experts at times contributed their interpreting skills to caravan expeditions. And while leaders possessed navigational skills, they typically employed the services of expert guides on large-scale convoys or for certain destinations.

Professional Guides

Caravan guides were those who possessed the best navigational skills to steer caravans through the unpredictable Saharan weather and terrain. They were authorities on regional geography, topography, and hydrology

and had access to the most up-to-date environmental reports. Guides also had to detect changes in the landscape, since sand dunes varied in size, shape, and position from year to year. Because of their profound knowledge of the desert environment, guides sometimes were referred to as *khabīr* or “expert.”⁵⁹ Not unlike gifted Native American trackers, the caravan guide could read animal spoor and scan the periphery to ascertain the movement of fauna and nomads. His intimate knowledge of the principal landmarks in the region would assist him better than a sextant or a compass. The fourteenth-century globe-trotter Ibn Baṭṭūṭa described in amazement the skills of his caravan’s *khabīr*: “Our guide was blind in one eye and diseased in the other and yet knew the way better than anyone.”⁶⁰

The caravan guide required a good command of astronomy in order to navigate with the constellations. While many Saharans made a hobby of stargazing, caravaners’ survival rested on their astronomical expertise. As Fuṣṣayl Wuld al-Tayr’s testimony in Chapter 1 reveals, caravaners were guided by the North Star, for one “could travel without fear guided by that star . . . which does not move.”⁶¹ Another caravaner explains that “when we returned from Guelmīm, the star was to our right, and when we went north it was to our left.”⁶² Based on oral testimony collected in the early 1850s from eastern Sudanese caravaners, a French geographer noted that the *khabīr*

knows at each hour of the night what is his position according to that of all the stars, most of which he knows by name. The polar provides the north, a certain star close to the southern pole guides him to a certain location, for he knows at all hours of the night by how many degrees he must place his right or left shoulder to follow a direction that is perfectly straight.⁶³

With calculations based on astral movements and the lengths of shadows, a guide could measure distances in relationship to time. Like their seafaring counterparts, guides and caravaners in general wore black *khol* around their eyes to sharpen their vision or to deflect the sun’s rays. Given Saharan weather patterns, a guide was usually assured of clear skies. But on an overcast day or during even the lightest of sandstorms, a caravan

⁵⁹ On Sudanese and Egyptian caravans the term *khabīr* designated the caravan leader, who also doubled as the caravan guide. See G. M. La Rue, “Khabīr ‘Alī at home in Kubayh.”

⁶⁰ *Corpus* (Ibn Baṭṭūṭa), 283.

⁶¹ Interview in Aṭār with Fuṣṣayl b. al-Tayr (10/09/97).

⁶² Interview in Nouakchott with Aḥmad Sālam Wuld ‘Alī b. Sālam (06/21/98).

⁶³ De Lauture, “Routes,” 207.

would be in a position not unlike that of a ship caught in bad weather, having to rely on other landmarks or to await the dissipation of clouds or heavy fog.

Skilled Caravaners

The Azer or Znāga term *‘aqādīm*, used predominantly in Tīshīt, Walāta, and possibly Shinqīti, designated either a transportation manager, a trade agent, or simply a hired caravan worker. His responsibilities were many, so much so that in large caravans the *‘aqādīm* would take along an apprentice or hire at his own expense an assistant, called a *shaddād* (a term perhaps derived from the Arabic for camel-riding saddle). Sometimes these workers were young boys. To be sure, child labor was employed in various tasks and boys of ten years and older typically accompanied their fathers as part of their initiation into the caravaning business.⁶⁴

The *‘aqādīm* and his crew were in charge of the camels and preparing meals. They loaded camels in the morning and unloaded them at the end of the day, sometimes with the assistance of the other caravaners. They organized the cords made of leather or date palm foliage with which to tie camels to one another and to fasten the bundles of merchandise and the salt bars to the camel’s back.⁶⁵ They also prepared the grass cushion padding (*tikārīr*) placed between the camel’s back and the slab of salt. They fixed bundles and repaired broken bars by strapping them together. The job of the shepherd (*rā’i*) was to tend to the camels. After the day’s walk, he took the camels to the well, if available, where he drew water with a leather bucket. He would feed them their rations or take them to graze on whatever grass or shrubs grew in the vicinity. Caravan workers also prepared the meals and usually were the first ones up in the morning to light the fire with local flint stones. Dates, dried meat, camel milk, and occasionally millet porridge (*‘aysh*) comprised the caravaner’s staple diet, which, from the late nineteenth century onward, was supplemented by green tea and sugar.⁶⁶ Arguably, one of the caravan workers’ most

⁶⁴ Rockel (“Enterprising,” 751, 767–8) discusses the labor of children on East African caravans.

⁶⁵ Interview in Shinqīti with ‘Abdarrahmān Wuld Muḥammad al-Ḥanshī (02/27/97) and in Nouakchott with Muḥammad al-Ḥanshī Wuld Muḥammad Sālīh (06/25/97). These sacks fitted atop the camel could either be four *dharf* (a medium-sized leather bag designed for merchandise), two *mezūd*, or two *ravid*, with sometimes an *‘aliya* on top of the bundle.

⁶⁶ On Libyan caravans, the staple diet consisted of date and millet patties with coriander and cumin (known as *tikra*), and roasted barley.

important tasks was to prepare tea for the crew. As already noted, it was in the late nineteenth century that caravaners, like other Saharans, became addicted to sugared green tea. Retired caravaners repeatedly stressed that it was thanks to this highly caffeinated beverage that they managed to sustain the hardships and fatigue of long crossings. Indeed, in suppressing hunger, thirst, and sleepiness, green tea was to Saharans what kola nuts were to caravaners in other regions of West Africa.⁶⁷

Responsibilities and wages varied across time, place, and route. Based on a fatwa examined more fully in Chapter 6, in Tīshīt the salary for a single expedition of an ‘aqādīm servicing southern interregional caravans in the early nineteenth century was between four and five *mudds*, or the equivalent of twenty to twenty-five kilograms, of millet.⁶⁸ On early-twentieth-century salt caravans between Tīshīt and the salt pan of Ijīl, the ‘aqādīm’s salary per trip reportedly varied between one salt bar (*‘adila*) and half a salt bar (*fāṣ*) per camel.⁶⁹ He would sell his salt in the southern markets and receive a similar weight allocation for the return trip. Al-Mashbūh, who first went on caravan in the early 1940s as an apprentice (*shaddād*) when he was first shaved (around age twelve), explains that if any of the salt bars broke during the trip he would not get paid, for “they [the caravan owners] were not kidding!”⁷⁰ Like the ‘aqādīm, the rā’i was paid by the caravan leader a salary determined by the caravan’s size. Typically the rā’i, like the shaddād and the ‘aqādīm, tended to be men of servile origin, usually freed slaves who worked for their former masters in exchange for wages.

Servile Caravan Workers

The reliance on enslaved laborers or former slaves as caravaners, couriers, and commercial representatives was quite common in Africa, as elsewhere. It was a long-standing practice in the Muslim world, which explains why enslaved commercial workers enjoyed special rights in Islamic

⁶⁷ Lovejoy, *Caravans of Kola*.

⁶⁸ Fatwa of Shaykh Sīdī ‘Abayda b. Muḥammad al-Ṣaghīr b. Anbūja (c. 1840s) on Caravanning Wages (SBA 3), Family Archives of Shaykh Būyahmad (Tīshīt). The *mudd* is a dry measure discussed below.

⁶⁹ Interviews in Tīshīt with Muḥammad al-Amīn Wuld Muissa al-Mashbūh (04/16/97) and in Nouakchott with Muḥammad al-Ḥanshī Wuld Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ in Nouakchott (06/25/97).

⁷⁰ Interview in Tīshīt with al-Mashbūh (04/16/97). His father was of Bamana origin and his grandparents had been sold by Samori.

law.⁷¹ Mālikī legal manuals discuss at length the rules and regulations governing their activities and property rights, and the rights of their masters. According to one source, an enslaved caravan agent “is allowed freedom of action in all matters coming under the heading of commerce, such as making a deal, and in this respect he is like a plenipotentiary agent.”⁷² Moreover, “the slave who is authorized to trade cannot be sold to cover debts he incurred,” as another Mālikī rule stipulates.

Loyal slaves or former slaves trained in matters of commerce were employed as managers, agents, couriers, or transporters on behalf of their masters or former masters. As the son of a wealthy merchant of Tīshīt, interviewed by Bonte, explained, “for the caravans we used some of our slaves; as for everything to do with [trade in] salt, the harātīn [freed slave] of Tīshīt, the agdadin [ʿaqadīm], specialized in caravans.”⁷³ In a document detailing the shares of a caravan loaded with millet returning from southern markets to the town of Tīshīt, a male slave (ʿabd) belonging to two daughters of the Limām family was listed as their caravan worker.⁷⁴ As seen shortly, Saharan women usually did not join caravan expeditions, but they participated by hiring agents or simply exploiting enslaved caravaners. Similarly, migrant traders without access to their extended family networks would usually employ slaves as caravan leaders or workers. The Tikna of Shinqīṭi, for example, relied on the services of a freed slave named Mūsa Djan Traoré as their main commercial broker and lodger in late-nineteenth-century Nioro (Map 5). Two enslaved men, Samba and Sarāq, worked as commercial agents for Sīdī ʿIsa b. Aḥmayda, a merchant from Ghadāmis, and their commercial correspondence is preserved in Timbuktu.⁷⁵

Aside from skilled, professional, and enslaved workers, many performed as everyday laborers assisting their masters directly or by working for others on caravans. The fate of a particular enslaved man may have been all too common. He was entrusted by his owner to work for the owner’s nephew on a salt caravan between Shinqīṭi and Tīshīt, and was

⁷¹ Lydon, “Slavery,” 127–8; Walz “Black Slavery in Egypt,” 148–9. See also Hunwick and Powell, *African Diaspora in the Mediterranean Lands*, 25–7.

⁷² Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Gharnāṭī al-Kalbī, known as Ibn Juzayy, *Qawānīn al-aḥkām al-sharīʿiyya wa-masāʾil al-furūʿ al-fiqhiyya* (Beirut, 1974), 317–8, quoted in Hunwick and Powell, *African Diaspora*, 26.

⁷³ Bāh Wuld Muḥammad Mahmūd, interviewed on 09/24/1981 by Bonte, “L’émirat,” 1480.

⁷⁴ Caravan list (FS4), Family Archives of Fādīl al-Sharīf (Tīshīt).

⁷⁵ Folios no. 7532 and no. 8294, CEDRAB. These are among the rare sources written or dictated by slaves or former slaves. See Lydon, “Slavery,” 129–32.

violently beaten and placed in irons upon arrival.⁷⁶ After a series of transactions and the intermediation of the Qāḍī of Tishīt and the town council, the enslaved caravan worker eventually was returned to his original owner in Shinqīṭi.

Messengers and Market Entries

Caravans were ambulant fairs featuring ongoing commercial deals in and out of central markets and encampments. When approaching a destination the crew sent a scout or messenger (*takshīf*) ahead of the caravan to check prices and the mood of the market, inquire about clients, arrange for accommodations, and eventually announce the caravan's impending arrival. As Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's fourteenth-century caravan was approaching Walāta, the caravaners sent a messenger four days ahead of the caravan. He distributed "letters to their associates there [instructing them] to come out to meet them with water," while the rest of the caravan waited at a known resting stop.⁷⁷

Informants explained this practice as follows: "You know the ancestors would go forward (*yamurrḡū legeddam*). They would drink tea in the morning and go forward . . . to see what they could buy and sell."⁷⁸ Pre-emptive market inquiries not only increased the bargaining power of caravaners, but they also were a means of controlling social discord by limiting the flood of clients. The same technique was reported on nineteenth-century Yoruba caravans, and in the Sahara it prevailed into the twentieth century.⁷⁹ But this strategy was also a matter of superstition, for some believed that if the merchandise was seen before the caravan formally entered the market it would become spoiled by the evil eye.⁸⁰ Often, the *takshīf* negotiated and sold caravan loads before the caravan arrived at the market. When Panet's caravan finally reached Shinqīṭi in the early months of 1266/1850, 800 bales of cotton cloth constituting the bulk of

⁷⁶ Case of the Battered Slave (SS28), Family Archives of Sharīfnā Wuld Shaykhnā (Tishīt); Lydon, "Islamic Legal Culture," 290–4.

⁷⁷ *Corpus* (Ibn Baṭṭūṭa) 283.

⁷⁸ Interview in Nouakchott with Mūlāy 'Umar Wuld Mūlāy Aḥmad and 'Ā'ishatu Mint Mūlāy 'Aly (07/30/97).

⁷⁹ Ibid., and Falola, "Yoruba Caravan," 114.

⁸⁰ Interview in Nouakchott with Mūlāy 'Umar Wuld Mūlāy Aḥmad and 'Ā'ishatu Mint Mūlāy 'Aly (07/30/97). Panet (*Première exploration*, 61) reports the caravaners as expressing that a person endowed with magical powers only had to say "look at that wonderful cotton cloth" for it to burn instantly.

their cargo had been sold within twenty-four hours.⁸¹ In other cases, the principal council of a town would meet to discuss prices and the distribution of goods.⁸² Sometimes, however, rumors of an inbound caravan previously spotted by nomads would have already reached the market.

Lodging and Landlord Services

As Hill, Brooks, Baier, Curtin, and others have shown, landlords and cross-cultural brokers were critical to the operation of long-distance trade in western Africa.⁸³ Not unlike the situation in Morocco or Egypt described by Olivia Remie Constable, lodging in the central market of Timbuktu was ensured by the multifunctional institution of the inn or travel lodge (*funduq*). But for the most part, trans-Saharan caravaners in western Africa relied on more informal arrangements, trade networks, and family-based services in foreign markets.⁸⁴

Once in town, caravaners depended on the housing, hosting, and brokerage services of so-called landlords, known as *jaajgis*, a word of Soninké origin. This was especially true for interregional caravaners who did not have family representatives in foreign markets. Typically, Saharan groups developed long-term relationships with known *jaajgis* to whom they would return year after year. Such was the case for many Saharan caravaners coming to trade in Nioro (present-day Mali) from Tishit and Shinqīti who, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, lodged in the houses of the aforementioned Mūsa Djan Traoré and of Aly Sibi.⁸⁵ These men acted as “commercial representatives and served as intermediaries between the Bīḍān traders and those of Nioro.”⁸⁶ When he died in the 1930s, Traoré, a former slave of the Tikna, was reputedly the oldest man in Nioro and one of the most respected landlords. Trans-Saharan traders such as those from the Wād Nūn tended to operate elaborate networks with relatives or dependents in key western African markets. And so, for instance, in early-twentieth-century Nioro, the Tikna

⁸¹ Panet, *Première exploration*, 65.

⁸² This was also the case in the Algerian Sahara. See Chentouf, “Monnaies dans le Gourara,” 81.

⁸³ Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade*; Hill, “Landlords and Brokers”; Brooks, *Landlords*; and Baier, *Economic History*.

⁸⁴ Remie Constable, *Housing the Stranger in the Mediterranean World*.

⁸⁵ Interview in the Nioro market with al-Ḥājj ‘Aly Bakary Diagouraga, Samba Daffé, and Gaye Nimaga (05/12/98); also in Nioro with Shaykhna Sibi (05/14/98) and in Shinqīti with Aḥmad Wuld Jidduh (03/02/97).

⁸⁶ Interview in Nioro with Shaykhna Sibi (05/14/98).

Muḥammad Mālik settled there permanently, replacing Mūsa as the main landlord of the Tikna. In Tīshīt, caravaners from Shinqīti in the early twentieth century typically lodged in the house of a Māsna woman named Habsa, who reportedly was also a trader.⁸⁷ The next section examines the role of women in caravanning and the Māsna of Tīshīt's exceptional long-distance trading vocation.

FAMILY LABOR AND WOMEN CARAVANERS

In the predominantly nomadic world of the western Sahara, entire households, including enslaved workers, extended families, and herds, traveled in caravans. They followed the clouds that determined grazing conditions and settled near wells according to the seasons. Sometimes these mobile encampments traveled together to market, as the Frenchman Douls observed in the 1880s. He spent five months among nomads of the western Sahara and reported intercepting a caravan composed of thirty men, ten women, several children, and forty-eight camels loaded with dates returning to the Tiris from the commercial center of Tindūf.⁸⁸ Cradle-like wooden cots covered by tents (*shabri*) placed atop the camel's hump carried women and small children for long crossings or when relocating encampments. Other times nomadic men, like their oasis-dwelling counterparts, traveled alone, leaving women and children in their tents for months on end.⁸⁹ Saharan men were not known to bring along their female slaves or concubines for "domestic and sexual services as well as companionship," unlike the case of the Nyamezi caravaners described by Rockel.⁹⁰

With notable exceptions, caravanning, the physical act of joining trans-Saharan caravans for the purposes of trading, tended to be a male-dominated occupation. As already mentioned, male children were initiated on caravans at an early age. Yet the organization of the caravan trade, from the all-year-round affair of preparing for the caravan season to holding the fort during the long absences of the men, involved the participation of entire communities. In fact, when considering the "shore-side" institutions that supported these expeditions, one realizes to what extent caravanning was a family affair. Both oral and written sources

⁸⁷ Bāh Wuld Muḥammad Maḥmūd, interviewed on 09/24/1981 by Bonte, "L'émirat," 1480.

⁸⁸ Douls, "Cinq mois chez les maures nomades," 211.

⁸⁹ Douls (*ibid.*, 214) reports encountering tents with only women present.

⁹⁰ Rockel, "Enterprising," 763.

document the involvement in the caravanning business of families and the multiple levels of women's participation. Yet there was an overwhelming tendency for oral informants to either underplay or even completely deny the involvement of women in trans-Saharan trade.

Saharan Women and Trade

Some interviewees underscored that in the past it was "very shameful (*shayn 'andhum*) for women to engage in trade."⁹¹ Speaking of the 1920s and 1930s, another informant was categorical: "a woman did not work, she did not brand with iron (*mā tekwa bilḥadīda*)."⁹² She meant by this that women did not engage in productive labor such as branding camels and tending to herds, an expression laden with a sense of the forbidden. Of course, such remarks were embedded in local definitions of what constituted "work."

Other sources, both written and oral, proved local interpretations of women's work to be misleading, revealing to what extent the erasure of women's caravan participation belonged to a gendered rhetoric. In an article where she underscores the importance of oral sources for uncovering the history of Muslim women, Valerie Hoffman noted this very tendency on the part of informants who described an "idealized modesty norm" as opposed to experiences of actual behavior.⁹³ Yet it is paradoxical that Muslim women would deny their participation in the caravanning business, which, after all, was the profession not only of Prophet Muḥammad, the founder of the religion of Islam, but of his employer, his chief sponsor, and first wife, Khadīja bint Khuwāyid. Indeed, the Muslim cult of domesticity generally portrays the younger, betrothed 'Ā'isha as Muḥammad's model wife while systematically relegating the status of Khadīja, the entrepreneur, to a pre-Islamic era.⁹⁴

Islamic practice and gender are both products of cultural practice, as Victoria Bernal has underscored.⁹⁵ As elsewhere in the Muslim world, the rights of Saharans were defined by cultural norms, local interpretations of the scriptures, and the extent to which these were enforced. In the Saharan

⁹¹ Interviews in Aṭār with Fūjī Wuld al-Ṭayr (03/07/98) and Khanātha Mint Hmayda (10/05/97) and group interviews in Shinqīti with Muḥammad Sa'īd Wuld Buhay, Khadijatu Mint 'Abdullah Wuld 'Aly, and Fāṭima Mint 'Abdarrahmān Wuld Buhay (02/25/97).

⁹² Interview in Nouakchott with Fāṭimatu Mint al-Nājim known as "Djibi" (05/23/97).

⁹³ Hoffman, "Oral Traditions as a Source for the Study of Muslim Women," 371.

⁹⁴ Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*.

⁹⁵ Bernal, "Gender, Culture, and Capitalism."

context, however, the status of women was an offshoot of matrilineal traditions prevailing in this part of western Africa in pre-Islamic times. Indeed, as is evident from the written genealogies of Saharan clerical groups, until the first half of the nineteenth century fundamental remnants of matrilineal structures prevailed whereby the lineages of both men and women were defined by the identity of their mothers.⁹⁶ In a nineteenth-century essay about his parents, Sīdī Muḥammad b. Sīdī al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī (Chapters 2 and 3) extols the intellectual virtues of women, concluding in prose that “the feminine sex is no more deprecatory to the sun than the masculine sex does not add glory to the crescent of the moon.”⁹⁷ Matrilineal descent would gradually give way to patrilineal patterns, although in some cases, even the practice of female surnames persisted until more recent times.⁹⁸

Without a doubt, this matrilineal heritage serves to explain local Saharan women’s ascendancy vis-à-vis their sisters in other parts of the Muslim world. Already in the nineteenth century, the exceptional status of Saharan women impressed foreign travelers.⁹⁹ In the 1820s, the intrepid Caillié, who spent time in the Brākna region of southwestern Sahara to study Arabic, remarked:

Moorish women have great power over their husbands, and sometimes they abuse of it. Polygamy is not practiced among the Moors of this part of Africa; their wives would not bear that they take on concubines. The king [of Brākna] himself only has one wife, same as his subjects.¹⁰⁰

Forty years later, another Frenchman on an exploratory mission to the north near Shinqīṭi was quite surprised to witness how women seemed to “interfere in the affairs of men.” When Capitaine Vincent asked a woman, through his interpreter Bū al-Mughdād, why this was so, she replied, “The lion kills, but the she-lion kills as well.”¹⁰¹ In the 1880s, Douls

⁹⁶ See, e.g., the genealogy of Muḥammad al-Yadālī in Hamet, *Chroniques de la Mauritanie-Sénégalaise*.

⁹⁷ Hamet, “Littérature arabe saharienne,” 386.

⁹⁸ Families named after a remarkable mother were not uncommon in the early twentieth century. See, e.g., the case of al-Husayn ibn ‘Ā’isha Mint Bu’angar cited in a trade agency contract (LA9) in Limām Wuld Arwīlī Family Records, Archives of Shaykh Ḥammuny (Shinqīṭi).

⁹⁹ In the fourteenth century, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (*Corpus*, 285) described the matrilineal patterns of descent in the oasis town of Walāta that he had “seen nowhere in the world except among the Indian infidels.” He was shocked at the liberty women in Walāta enjoyed, on the one hand, and the complacency of their husbands, on the other; he simply concluded women had “a higher status than the men.”

¹⁰⁰ Caillié, *Journal*, 128.

¹⁰¹ Vincent, “Voyage,” 60. See also Panet, *Première exploration*, 63.

observed women in his encampment as they folded tents and loaded camels.¹⁰² Noteworthy are his remarks about the Saharan woman's high levels of education and how she

learns to write and read like her brothers with whom she shares the lessons This education results in an intellectual development and a moral uplifting that distinguishes the nomadic woman from all other Muslim women.¹⁰³

It goes without saying that all three Frenchmen were observing the nineteenth-century Saharan elite and not the tributary or enslaved women of lower status.

Saharan women also were empowered, to some extent at least, by their educated reliance on Arabic literacy and Islamic law to protect their rights. Like their male counterparts, Muslim women could own, transfer, and otherwise dispose of personal property, such as slaves, camels, palm trees, and real estate. They drafted legal contracts and partnership agreements to hire trade agents or otherwise participate in trans-Saharan trade. Moreover, Saharan women often consulted legal experts on various matters such as commercial transactions.¹⁰⁴ As Muslim women they inherited half the amount of their male counterparts, and legally their word was worth half that of men.¹⁰⁵ They became "adults" through marriage and it was only after a divorce, and especially in widowhood, that women achieved their fullest rights. Yet they were able to use the law to exercise their civil rights, including their right to initiate a divorce (*khul'*). More revealing was Saharan elite women's reliance on the marriage contract to oppose polygyny, even though these contracts did not stop husbands from marrying other women or acquiring concubines without their knowledge.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, given the

¹⁰² Douls, "Cinq mois," 204, 206.

¹⁰³ Douls, "A travers le Sahara occidental," 461.

¹⁰⁴ Saharan women sought the advice of scholars of jurisprudence on matters ranging from barter exchange to the lawfulness of rotating credit associations, discussed in Chapter 6.

¹⁰⁵ Qur'ān, especially II (Sūrat al-Baqara) and IV (Sūrat al-Nisā'), where many of the rules concerning women's rights are laid out; Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*; J. Esposito, *Women in Muslim Family Law*; Lydon, "Droit islamique et droit de la femme," 293–5.

¹⁰⁶ A husband's violation of the contract was legal grounds for a divorce. Indeed, Saharan women regularly demanded of their future husbands the written declaration that they would not take on a second wife. The contract typically included the well-known clause "*lā sābiqatan wa lā lāhiqatan*" stating that at the time of the marriage the man was not currently married to another woman and would not take on a second wife. Interviews in Shinqīṭi with Tikbir Mint al-Ghulām (09/29/97) and Zaynabu Mint Sīdī Wuld al-Ṭalīb (01/10/97) and in Tishīt with Mariam Mint Buyahmad (04/27/97). For a

itinerant lifestyles of male caravaners, opportunities abounded to engage secretly in long-distance polygyny.¹⁰⁷

Manufacturing Caravan Equipment

While the profession of camel caravaner, the one who physically walked the caravan, tended to be a male-dominated activity, the caravan business was a family enterprise where labor crossed gender lines. Many factors serve to explain the prevalence in the region of the proverb “The woman is the man’s trousers” (*limra’ sirwāl al-rajul*), which conveys the idea that a wife protects her husband and, by extension, their family. Women’s skilled labor was especially critical in upholding the shore-side institutions that caravans depended on, such as the production of caravaning gear. They manufactured the leather pouches used for the transportation of all kinds of goods, from dates and date paste, butter, and millet to general merchandise. Women also crafted the leather components of camel saddles, as well as riding blankets and water gourds. From palm tree fibers and leather strips they wove straps, bridles, and cords for harnessing and fastening. Indeed, it would be difficult to overestimate how vital this work was to caravaning. For not unlike the rigging of sailing ships that reached tens of kilometers in length, so, too, did caravans require large amounts of cordage to secure merchandise, supplies, and salt bars to the camels.

In addition to their roles as immobile caravaning partners, discussed below, Saharan women worked in a variety of areas from trading in local markets to supervising small-scale agriculture.¹⁰⁸ Saharan women’s work also involved weaving rugs and mats, sewing cloths, and carving utensils. They monitored and supervised domestic workers, as well as enslaved labor, in the palm date groves and the small plots beneath the trees where vegetables, beans, and cereals (wheat and barley) were cultivated. Moreover, they manufactured beads and jewelry, trading in local and imported beads, as well as in their other crafts. While oasis-dwelling

discussion of the debates over marriage contracts in Egypt, see El-Azhary Sonbol, “History of Marriage Contracts in Egypt.”

¹⁰⁷ That secret marriage arrangements, in violation of the prenuptial agreement, existed was confirmed by one informant who discussed the case of a wife who only found out about her late husband’s secret marriage to a former slave as he had made arrangements in his will for her share of the inheritance. Interview in Aṭār with Fāṭimatu Mint Mbārak Wuld Bayrūk (09/26/97).

¹⁰⁸ Information in this section is derived from numerous interviews and Du Puigaudeau, *La Route du Sel* and “Arts”; Dupuis-Yakouba, *Industries et principales professions*.

women participated in the caravan economy, it does not follow, however, that decision making or profit sharing was on a gender-equal basis or that women had equal access to the economy. In many respects, women's lives were shaped by inequalities inherent in Muslim patriarchal systems. They had fewer choices than men in terms of access to resources or opportunities to prosper or travel, and they may have been constrained in the past by an ideology of domesticity.

Immobile Partners Holding the Fort

Aside from their manufacturing work, the shore-side institutions supervised by women included managing households during the long absences of their husbands or fathers. Similar to "saltwater families" and the nineteenth-century wives of absentee New England sailors, Saharan women had "to care for the young, the sick, and the old; to oversee property, manage budgets, maintain households, and integrate the networks of kinship and neighborhood ties through which the larger community survived."¹⁰⁹ Since caravans ran seasonally, families had to budget their yearly consumption.¹¹⁰ Given the precarious Saharan environment and the need to supplement dates, animal products, and small-scale cereal cultivation with regular supplies of millet, nuts, and other foodstuffs, managing and rationing household consumption between caravans would have been a delicate task.

During the caravan season, oasis towns and encampments were emptied of their young men and older itinerant traders. The most notable role of married women was to "hold the fort" during the absences of their fathers and husbands, averaging three to six months, and sometimes much longer. Unless a caravaner appointed another representative to oversee his family and affairs, usually a married woman assumed the responsibility of managing the household and business in his absence. Similar patterns prevailed among the "noble" long-distance male traders of the Damaragam in nineteenth-century Niger, where Baier noted "women of servile origin [were left] in charge of their houses and possessions."¹¹¹ Arguably, their responsibilities as household managers, which increased considerably during the caravan season, defined Saharan women's status. That female-headed households were often the norm may further explain why

¹⁰⁹ Norling, "Ahab's Wife," 79.

¹¹⁰ Interview in Shinqīti with 'Abdarrahmān Wuld Muḥammad al-Ḥanshī (02/27/97).

¹¹¹ Baier, *Economic History*, 47–8.

Saharan women appeared emancipated to foreign visitors. In such a context, the requirements of self-reliance and autonomy demanded of them would have empowered them. For several months out of the year, wives could be in charge of all the decision making that ordinarily they deferred to their husbands when they were around. That many households during the caravan season depended on the authority, management, and resilience of these immobile female partners-in-trade was a significant factor in Saharan oasis economies.

Caravan Shareholders and Entrepreneurial Widows

If few women rarely embarked on commercial caravans, whether this was by choice or not, they did participate directly in their financing, as the example of al-Huriyya, with which we began this chapter, attests. While admittedly the evidence shows that women were few, as the above-mentioned lists of interregional salt and millet caravans suggest, their presence as caravan shareholders was not insignificant or altogether absent. Women engaged in trans-Saharan commerce through the intermediary of family members and hired trade agents. As seen shortly, they, too, relied on the paper economy to contract even their husbands to trade on their behalf.

However, few women became independent caravan entrepreneurs unless they happened to be born into a commercial family or if they took over the sedentary merchant positions of their deceased husbands or fathers. It is not coincidental that, just like Khadīja of seventh-century Arabia, caravanning widows continued the family business. Indeed the great majority of caravanning businesswomen emerging from the historical record of the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century western Saharan region were widows. Given the dangerous nature of trans-Saharan expeditions, the low life expectancy, and the common age gaps between husbands and wives, it is not surprising that the number of widows was proportionally high. However, Saharan caravanning widows tended to be remembered for their piety and religious achievements and not necessarily for their entrepreneurial activities. The phenomenon of entrepreneurial widows, discussed in the [preceding chapter](#), is manifestly universal in world history.¹¹²

¹¹² For a study of twelfth-century Genoese women investors in the North African maritime trade, see Krueger, "Genoese Trade," esp. 385, 392 (where he states that a certain trader needed the contractual consent of his wife to engage in a transaction and that "women and minors often made investments") and "Wares of Exchange," 63 (where mention is made of Malbika, "the woman who transacted more business than any other women in

Female Caravaners: The Case of the Māsna

Unlike other Saharan groups, the Māsna women of Tishīt took a more active part in the caravanning business. Like the above-mentioned Habsa, and possibly Fāṭima Mint Seri Niaba discussed shortly, they lodged incoming caravaners. What is more, Māsna women actually joined commercial caravans.¹¹³ Indeed, unlike the Bīḍān, or much less the Wād Nūn migrant families, Māsna women not only accompanied their husbands or male relatives on the caravan, but they also traveled alone to trade on their own accounts.¹¹⁴ In this respect, the Māsna shared many similarities with Yoruba caravanning women and their East African Nyamwezi counterparts.¹¹⁵ While women's participation in interregional caravans heading to the southern markets of Mali was extensive, Māsna women apparently never went on salt caravans northward bound or on trans-Saharan expeditions.¹¹⁶ The Māsna, moreover, did not possess large herds and tended to rent camels from their Shurfa neighbors (with whom they usually collaborated in caravans as partners) or supplied caravan labor and guiding skills.

According to one former caravaner, "There were no [Māsna] women who joined the caravans who were not traders."¹¹⁷ Even the wives of caravaners engaged in commercial transactions, selling their crafts, beads, and leather goods.¹¹⁸ What is more, women reportedly played a crucial role in negotiating the prices of the most sought-after trade items, namely, millet, peanuts, textiles, and slaves.¹¹⁹ In fact, the same informant claimed

Genoa"). For eighteenth-century British and Spanish history, see A. M. Carlos and L. Neal, "Women Investors in Early Capital Markets"; and M. Vicente, "Textual Uncertainties." For the nineteenth century, see C. Goldin, "Economic Status of Women in the Early Republic."

¹¹³ Interviews in Tishīt with Bāba Ghazzār (04/24/97) and Falla Mint Būbū (05/02/97).

¹¹⁴ Ibid., and interview in Tishīt with Taha Mint al-Khatābi b. Dawūd (05/01/97). These last two informants were female caravaners. Falla Mint Būbū, then in her seventies, was the last active female caravaner in Tishīt. While she was married to a caravaner she explained that they did not always travel together. Falla learned the tricks of the trade from her caravanning mother. Like many Māsna, she spoke enough Bamanakan to effectively transact in Mali without the intermediary of a cross-cultural broker.

¹¹⁵ Falola, "Yoruba"; and Rockel, "Enterprising."

¹¹⁶ Interview in Tishīt with Bāba Ghazzār (04/25/97). V. Blanchard de La Brosse ("Femmes, pouvoir et développement," 175), describing contemporary Soninké communities in southwestern Mauritania, remarks that women in the past often joined caravans.

¹¹⁷ Interview in Tishīt with Bāba Ghazzār (04/16/97).

¹¹⁸ Interviews in Tishīt with Taha Mint al-Khatābi b. Dawūd (05/01/97) and Falla Mint Būbū (05/01/97).

¹¹⁹ Interview in Tishīt with Bāba Ghazzār (05/01/97).

that women in effect subsidized caravan expeditions with their lucrative trading activities.¹²⁰ Aside from joining caravans, Māsna women, like other Saharan women, participated in caravans by hiring proxies to trade for them.

With good reason, several Tikna and Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ trans-Saharan caravaners residing in Tishīt in the mid-nineteenth century strategically chose to marry Māsna women (Chapter 4). One such man was Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl, the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ merchant of Tishīt, discussed in previous chapters, who married Fāṭima Mint Seri Niaba sometime in the first half of the nineteenth century. According to a descendant, Fāṭima Mint Seri Niaba was a *ṭāliba* or student of Islam.¹²¹ Aside from her scholarly and pious reputation, her relatives remember her as a prosperous and influential businesswoman who had many caravan workers (*ʿumāl al-murāḥil*), including slaves. The sources are unclear about the timing of her commercial career in relationship to her marriage. But certainly, her southern trade connections and her husband's expansive northern network made theirs a prosperous union.

The case of the Māsna of Tishīt, with their ancient ties to millet-producing regions of present-day Mali, is indeed exceptional by Saharan standards. As seen in Chapter 2, the Māsna were related to the Soninké, who were renowned in western Africa for their long-distance trading networks and, like the Jakhanké, may well have inherited this commercial tradition from ancient Wangara ancestors. Obviously, distances between Tishīt and southern markets were not as great as those across the desert. This alone may explain why the Māsna walked the caravan to engage in commerce as independent caravaners, unlike other Saharan women. Return trips could take as little as one month and would not have been too disruptive of women's child-bearing and -rearing responsibilities. Memorable businesswomen such as Fāṭima Mint Seri Niaba who ran a caravan business were not uncommon in the history of Tishīt. But it is important to consider to what extent Māsna women's work may have been necessary to the livelihood of their families, that their involvement in long-distance trade may not have been by choice, and that dependency on their caravanning activities may have changed over time.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Interview in Nioro with Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl's great-grandson and his great-great-grandson, Muḥammad b. Sīd Aḥmad b. Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl, (05/16/98); interview in 'Ayūn al-ʿAtrūs (Mauritania) with Mūlāy Ibrāhīm Wuld Sīd Aḥmad "Dāddah" Wuld Muḥammadu Wuld Sīd Aḥmad b. al-Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl (05/18/98).

THE PAPER ECONOMY OF CARAVANNING

It is often thought that little if any technological change occurred in the organization of camel caravans across the centuries.¹²² Since few scholars had access to Arabic source material, many were not in a position to recognize how literacy and legal institutions, which flourished in and around the Sahara in the nineteenth century, promoted efficiencies in caravanning. Several historians, however, have made important contributions to African commercial history based on Arabic source material. Anders Bjørkelo is one of the rare historians of Africa to have studied contractual agreements, based on his case study of the nineteenth-century Sudanese merchant ‘Abd Allah Bey Hamza.¹²³ On the history of Timbuktu (Mali), Ismaël Diadié Haïdara published a collection of the nineteenth-century documents of Jewish traders, and Hunwick has worked with contracts.¹²⁴ For Morocco, Mohamed Ennaji and Paul Pascon translated nineteenth-century trade records from Illigh, and McDougall has examined the Guelmīm commercial archives.¹²⁵ Moreover, Ahmed Saied relied on private papers to document his nineteenth-century commercial history of Libya and Ulrich Harmann published a discussion of nineteenth-century trans-Saharan trade based on published records from Ghadāmis.¹²⁶ But aside from these works, the commercial papers of trans-Saharan traders remain largely untapped by historians.

As argued in Chapter 1, historians also have overlooked the significance of writing and operating in a paper economy to the development of early modern trade. In his seminal work on the influence of writing on the organization of society, Jack Goody explains how it contributed broadly to economic development, by

promoting new technologies (and the associated division of labour), in extending the possibilities of management on the one hand and of commerce and production on the other, in transforming methods of capital accumulation, and finally in changing the nature of individual transactions of an economic kind.¹²⁷

¹²² Bulliet, *Camel*; Austen “Marginalization”; Austen and Cordell, “Trade.”

¹²³ Bjørkelo, *Prelude to the Mahidiya*, “Credit, Loans and Obligations in the Nineteenth-Century Sudan,” and “Islamic Contracts in Economic Transactions in the Sudan.”

¹²⁴ Diadié Haïdara, *Les Juifs*; Hunwick, “Islamic Financial Institutions.”

¹²⁵ Ennaji and Pascon, *Le Makhzen et le Sous al-Aqsa*; McDougall, “Conceptualising the Sahara.”

¹²⁶ Harmann, “Dead Ostrich”; Saied, “Commence.”

¹²⁷ Goody, *Logic of Writing*, 46.

It follows, therefore, that access to cheaper paper had a significant impact on institutional change and the administration of the economy by enabling increased instrumental complexity in finance and exchange.

Writing meant that transactions were no longer reliant “upon the memory of witnesses who were subject to the constraints of forgetfulness, mortality or partisanship.”¹²⁸ It made it easier to manage complicated transactions by keeping track of accounts, payable and receivable, and communicating such dues “not only with others but with oneself.”¹²⁹ A Hasaniya proverb conveys the importance of preserving the written word: “What left the head does not leave the paper” (*Illī marrga ar-rā’s mā yumarrg ak-kurās*). But literacy also ensured legal transparency between contracting parties, favoring compliance with commercial agreements and the enforcement of sanctions. Literacy, therefore, represented a technological innovation that transformed trade between familial and non-familial partners, rendering it more efficient.

When faced with the overwhelming evidence of the use of the Arabic script in commerce and the function of Islamic law as an organizational framework, it is undeniable that Islamic practice positively influenced trans-Saharan trade. The volume of trade records of prominent and even not so prominent trans-Saharan traders from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries demonstrates their reliance on a paper economy. Paying the price for paper obviously was necessary for running commercial businesses, even though it added significantly to a trader’s overhead costs. It enabled information flows across long distances and the recording and enforcement of transactions, including contractual agreements. Saharans took seriously the Qur’ānic verse enjoining Muslims to put contracts in writing. While many agreements were oral in nature, and not everyone possessed levels of literacy or resources to operate fully in a paper economy, the abundance of written contracts produced by trans-Saharan traders leaves no doubt that this was the preferred mode for conducting caravan trade. Aside from a variety of contractual models, discussed more fully in the [next chapter](#), Table 5.2 lists the types of documents used in the nineteenth-century paper economy of caravanning.

Lists, Letters, and Ledgers

Trans-Saharan trade could only be successfully organized in a paper economy favoring reliable information flows, contractual accountability,

¹²⁸ Ibid., 70–1.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 83.

TABLE 5.2. *The paper economy of caravanning*

Accounting books and ledgers (accounting and record-keeping)
Caravan lists (participants and their merchandise)
Contracts (agency contracts, labor contracts, leasing contracts, debt and equity contracts, storage contracts, forward purchase contracts, commission contracts, <i>commenda</i> -type contracts and other partnership agreements)
Correspondence (information flows and financial transfers)
Financial instruments (bills of exchange, money orders, debt-swapping, traveler's checks)
Shopping lists (with purchasing instructions)
Waybills (lists of goods to establish ownership of dispatched parcels and camel-loads)

and proper accounting methods. Letter writing, shopping lists, and the use of account books or commercial ledgers enabled commercial transparency and communication between long-distance trade correspondents. Camel owners and their families would place orders and send commercial agents on caravan expeditions equipped with waybills or reminder notes detailing goods and terms of trade. Such documents could sometime serve as passports to be presented to potential interceptors and caravan raiders.¹³⁰ The reputation of certain important traders listed therein would often protect the caravan from being ransacked by unscrupulous road-stoppers.

The following excerpt illustrates the types of commercial arrangements prevailing among caravaners. Judging from the mint condition of the paper, in all likelihood, this document is a copy of the original that probably traveled with the caravaner. Like most such lists, this one is not dated, but based on genealogical inference, it was written in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Reminder note (*tadhkīra al-nisyān*) regarding what the writer can at least expect to receive from his salt. . . . He gives to you (the caravan leader), on behalf of ‘Abdarrahmān b. al-Ghāsī, one mithqāl for the purchase of a good-looking unmarried slave girl (*ama jayyida wa ‘azaba*) or an ugly but very young one. And six salt bars and one half for the writer and the salt must be sold for gold at the rate of one mithqāl per one and a half salt bars. . . . If millet can be found at the price of four mudds (per salt bar), then buy the equivalent of five camel-loads and

¹³⁰ Interview in Shinqīti with ‘Abdarrahmān Wuld Muḥammad al-Hanshī (02/28/97). Harmann (“Dead Ostrich,” 12, n. 15, and 17–18) describes similar documents also called *tadhkīra* produced by Libyan traders from Ghadāmis.

five bars (or a total of 35 bars). And if millet is less than that, then buy three camel-loads for whatever price you find.¹³¹

This interregional caravan was organized by traders of the Laghlāl, the second most important clan in Shinqīṭi. What is interesting here is the process whereby the caravan shareholders commissioned their trades. The salt loads were to be exchanged for millet depending on current market prices. Orders were at times quite explicit, such as the one to purchase a single slave girl, either nice-looking or very young.

Shopping lists of this kind were also common among international Wād Nūn traders who tended to be professional slave traders. For example, the late-nineteenth-century Ḥamād b. Muḥammad b. Bayrūk dispatched a cargo via his wakīl from Shinqīṭi to his cousin in Guelmīm of three enslaved girls and one enslaved boy.¹³² The letter specifies the delivery was delayed due to “fear of the road” (*khawf al-ṭarīq*). Because they were of little value to subsequent generations, shopping lists are even less commonly preserved than letters.

To better coordinate their activities, trans-Saharan traders actively engaged in letter writing with family, colleagues, and network members, requesting and supplying business intelligence. Aside from oral communications through the use of messengers, letter writing was the main conduit for information flows. It was carried out by literate traders or by hired scribes. In the nineteenth century, a majority of trans-Saharan traders penned their own letters and contracts. As noted above, shopping lists in the form of letters often accompanied cargo. To confirm reception of debts sent via a wakīl, a follow-up letter could be initiated.¹³³ Sometimes these were angry letters conveying disagreements and disputes about certain transactions gone awry.¹³⁴ Indeed, letters served numerous functions. They communicated current prices and market trends, the movements of caravans and traders’ activities, and the latest political news. Correspondence also enabled merchants to locate and monitor the behavior of their trade agents, settle debts through debt-swapping with intermediaries, and put pressure on debtors. At the same time, other information, including contractual agreements, could be enclosed in commercial correspondence.

¹³¹ Caravan Shopping List (MH 14), Family Archives of ‘Abdarrahmān Wuld Muḥammad Wuld Ahmad Wuld Muḥammad al-Hanshī (Shinqīṭi).

¹³² Letter Detailing Slave Trade Loan Contract (DB 9), Family Archives of Dāḥmān Wuld Bayrūk (Guelmīm).

¹³³ Letter from Muḥammad al-Amīn Wuld Awbilla to al-‘Arabī Wuld Mūlāy ‘Aly, 1333/1915 (AMA 14), Family Archives of Daīdī Wuld al-‘Arabī Wuld Mūlāy ‘Aly (Aṭār).

¹³⁴ See, e.g., a commercial letter featured in Lydon, “Islamic Legal Culture.”

To enforce contractual compliance and pressure debtors, a common strategy was to write to the defaulting party and other members of the community. Addressees could include the most reputable trader residing in a distant market, a particular family or clan member, or the local representative of a trade network. Sometimes letters were addressed directly to legal service providers such as qāḍīs. Alternatively, dispatching letters to the widest membership possible, including the debtors, guaranteed that a particular claim became known to the immediate community or the general public.

One letter, written by way of a scribe, was addressed to Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl in Tīshīt. It targeted other Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ traders and their families for loan reimbursements and is worth citing in full (see Table 5.3). Here Bakkār employed the common tactic of holding a whole clan, or in this case three sub-clans of the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ, accountable for the debts of several of its traders. A comparable action was described in Chapter 3 when men from the clan who had purchased Aby Serour's pillaged goods, again members of the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ, were imprisoned to pressure the wrongdoers into coming forward. In Bakkār's case, he was holding Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl accountable for the debtors belonging to his clan. While putting pressure on the community to make due on their debts, Bakkār was sure to threaten that if "the closeness that they share" was not respected, this could lead to "reproach" and conceivably compromise future transactions. In a comparable case described by Greif, an eleventh-century Maghribi merchant armed with pen and paper engaged in a widespread defamation campaign against his defaulting debtor to "ruin" his reputation.¹³⁵ Indeed, the reliance on correspondence for settling long-distance debts or threatening collective punishment was a popular strategy in early modern trade.

A series of letters exchanged in the late 1870s and early 1880s between two Tikna brothers of the Wād Nūn trade network, Muḥammad b. Sālim and Ibrāhīm, illustrates other functions of commercial correspondence. The writer, residing in Walāta, corresponded with his brother stationed in Shinqīti, while their younger brother, named Buhay, traveled between them and Timbuktu, relaying their correspondence and cargoes. Like all such letters, they begin with warm salutations, a statement about everyone's health, and religious invocations before proceeding to business. In a letter, cited in the previous two chapters, Muḥammad first discusses the outcome

¹³⁵ Greif, "Cultural Beliefs," 924, and *Institutions*, 309–12; see also Goitein, *Letters and Mediterranean*, I, 164–9.

TABLE 5.3. *Commercial letter with debt recollection purpose (mid-nineteenth-century)*

-
-
1. In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate . . .
 2. This is from Bakkār b. al-Sūfī Aḥmad to Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm
 3. al-Khalīl. It is addressed to you, to your brothers and your sons
 4. and your family in general and especially Bubakkar b. Lam'iz
 5. and his sons and his brothers and other sons of 'Amrān [from the 'Amrān sub-clan of the Awlād Bū al-Sibā' to which Shaykh Ibrāhīm belonged]
 6. and the sons of Baggār [other Awlād Bū al-Sibā' sub-clan] generally, and in particular 'Abdī
 7. b. Karidanna and al-Bashīr b. Sālīh and 'Abād
 8. b. Yūghlām and the sons of the Hājī [other Awlād Bū al-Sibā' sub-clan] in general
 9. and in particular the sons of Sīdī Ḥamma and 'Abd
 10. al-Jalīl b. al- Sa'ad, to inform you that you should send
 11. what you have in debts to assist him [the author of the letter] and to assist you and also
 12. that they respect the closeness that they share (*al-qarāba bainakum*) between you and between them
 13. You must do that which makes it [the closeness] continue or else you will be reproached (*lama 'alaykum*).
 14. This was written on the order of the above-mentioned Bakkār and it was written by
 15. 'Abaydallah b. 'Abdarrahmān b. al-Ṭwaylib^a
-

^a Debt reclamation letter circa 1850-60s (IK12), Family Records of Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl (Tīshit).

of the sale of the cloth his brother had forwarded, indicating that he had sold a portion on credit with a due date soon to come. He then gives an account of the evolution of market prices, starting with the exchange rate of the cotton bale or bayṣa in gold and silver, before turning to the price of the female slave (then varying between ten and thirteen bayṣas or the equivalent of 15–19.5 grams of gold or 320–416 kgs of millet).¹³⁶ He writes that he sent, via third parties, a shipment of ostrich feathers and another of gold, detailing precisely the contents to make his brother aware of what to expect upon delivery.

Muḥammad then relates that “a team of Rgaybāt from Guelmīm arrived in Walāta” requesting payment of a debt owed by his brother and correspondent. He recommended that he either forward the amount due or “send the (written) contract,” showing that the debt was paid. The

¹³⁶ Letter 1 (circa 1880) from Muḥammad b. Sālīm (Walāta) to his brother Ibrāhīm (Shinqīṭi), Buhay Family Records (Shinqīṭi); see quote in Chapter 3.

Rgaybāt and the Tikna were close allies, although the first were not considered full-time members of the Wād Nūn trade network. What is interesting about this exchange is the request for information concerning the debt contract between his brother and the Rgaybāt. A courier could have made it to Shinqīṭi and back in the space of eight days. One wonders why this group had not stopped first in Shinqīṭi, which was on the way from Guelmīm (or perhaps it had, and this is when the Rgaybāt would have extended the loan). In any event cashing debts from kin was clearly a common practice.

The letter-writer then reports on the activities of other trade network members. He discusses current politics, noting that the road was not safe. He and his partners had just learned that Shaykh ‘Umar’s son Aḥmadu had allied with the French, and this could potentially disrupt trade with Senegal and cause a shortage of cotton cloth. The writer includes a message from his brother’s son, Aḥmad, also stationed in Walāta, ordering a shipment of goods from Morocco, including thick cloth, “white silk and silk of other colors,” Moroccan leather slippers (*agangā’ir*), sulfur, tar, and paper. Another message, included in an addendum, is from a network wife requesting from her negligent husband that he forward her maintenance fee (*naḥaqa*), which he had not paid since 1295/1878, to support her and their daughter. The writer asked that the husband be reminded that she is “a cousin and close kin,” in an effort to bring family pressure to bear.

A second letter, addressed to his brother by Muḥammad, contains similar market information, namely, the price of specific kinds of cloth.¹³⁷ He recounts the recent movement of nine other network traders, in both Walāta and Timbuktu, including their brother Buhay, acting as their go-between. Buhay was delaying his departure from Timbuktu to Shinqīṭi while waiting for another Tikna to complete his business. Another Tikna had exchanged all his cloth for ostrich feathers. Yet another had not reimbursed a debt but promised to make due upon his return. Meanwhile two others were expected on an incoming caravan, and so on. Tellingly, he writes that “it came to our ears” that Ibrāhīm b. Swaylim, a Tikna in Timbuktu, had pocketed a large debt of four *qantār* (200 kgs) of ostrich feathers owed to another network trader, as well as the inheritance of one recently deceased. What is more, he reports on his erratic spending behavior for “every day he squanders one bayṣa or more . . . on his family.”¹³⁸ The

¹³⁷ Letter 2 (circa 1880) from Muḥammad b. Sālim (Walāta) to his brother Ibrāhīm (Shinqīṭi), Buhay Family Records (Shinqīṭi); see quote in Chapter 3.

¹³⁸ Ibid. The *qantār* is discussed below.

letter also contains questions about the arrival of his shipments, as well as inquiries about other traders.

Before the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, rare were the trans-Saharan commercial entrepreneurs who made use of account books or ledgers (*kunnāsh*) to record contracts such as loans. Muḥammad, the son of Shaykh Bayrūk, held such a *kunnāsh* from 1256/1840–1 to 1286/1869–70 primarily registering loan contracts in merchandise (gum arabic and cloth), gold, and silver. Loan terms varied from either three or six months, until the next Sīdī al-Ghāzī fair or the arrival of specific caravans.¹³⁹ The ledger of Limām Wuld Arwīlī, the nineteenth-century Tikna stationed in Shinqīṭi, lists his financial transactions in gold mithqāl, millet, and salt.¹⁴⁰ Another Tikna trader, also residing in Shinqīṭi, Sīdī Muḥammad Wuld al-ʿArabī b. Mūlāy ʿAlī, kept an account book until his untimely death in the 1930s while on pilgrimage.¹⁴¹ His widow, Khadaīja Mint Ḥamad ʿUmar, then continued the ledger, recording commercial transactions, providing financial services mainly in the form of short-term loans, and drawing written contractual agreements with trade agents.¹⁴² In these ledgers payments were indicated by crossing out lines on contracts or by adding memos below the specific amounts disbursed. Naturally, these types of records are extremely informative about the multiplicity of currencies circulating in the financial world of caravaning, a subject to which I now turn.

CURRENCIES ON TRANS-SAHARAN TRAILS

Many different currencies prevailed in nineteenth-century western Africa, as the record of the paper economy of caravaning discussed above reveals. Due to the lack of a unified regional market economy, trans-Saharan traders invariably were confronted with the problem of valuating currencies and measuring equivalencies. Because they frequently raised

¹³⁹ Muḥammad b. Bayrūk Nineteenth-century *Kunnāsh*. Copy, originally obtained from Mustapha Naïmi, shared by Daniel Schroeter. For a discussion of the Bayrūk commercial registers, see McDougall, “Conceptualising the Sahara,” 372–8.

¹⁴⁰ *Kunnāsh* of Limām Wuld Arwīlī (LA 12–17). Arwīlī Family Records, Archives of Shaykh Hammuny (Shinqīṭi).

¹⁴¹ Interview in Nouakchott with Muḥammad al-Amīn b. Mūlāy Ghāly (06/02/98).

¹⁴² For example, she collected money owed to a Tikna trader who was out of town. The trader was Sīdī Muḥammad Wuld Buhay, the head of the Tikna community in Shinqīṭi, who succeeded her late husband (see *Kunnāsh* of Sīdī Muḥammad Wuld Mūlāy ʿAlī and Khadaīja Mint Ḥamādu ʿUmār, Family Archives of Muḥammad al-Amīn b. Mūlāy Ghāly, Nouakchott).

these problems with legal service providers, namely, muftīs or jurists, they often are described in fatwas (Chapter 6). Naturally, the value of the salt bar was the subject of intense legal debates. Muftīs also discussed the use of gold, cotton cloth, metal coins, and colonial paper money (starting in the first decades of the twentieth century) as currencies.

The Salt Bar: Currency and Condiment

Since the bar of rock salt (*ʿadilat al-milh*) was a major currency in western Africa, jurists discussed it at length. As one of Mauritania's finest contemporary legal experts, or *faqīhs*, Ḥamdan Wuld al-Tāh explains, the manner in which the earliest legal scholars deliberated on the salt bar is an indication that "salt held the same place as money does in the mentality of Mauritaniens today."¹⁴³ Salt bars were bought, sold, stored, loaned or "rented," inherited, and consumed. They served the same monetary functions as, and sometimes more than, gold, silver coins, or cowries. Although salt bars tended to have a customary or fairly standard rectangular shape and size, they were never carved with precision since they were a product of human workmanship.¹⁴⁴

As previously noted, the two largest western Saharan salt quarries (*sabkha*) were Ijil (Mauritania) and Tawdenni (Mali). According to the nineteenth-century ethnographer al-Shinqīṭi (and confirmed by oral sources), the higher quality salt produced in Ijil was preferred by western Africans over that of Tawdenni.¹⁴⁵ Softer and loose salt was mined in other salt pans such as in Nterert (meaning "the one of salt"), located in the Trārza just north of the Senegal River (Map 6).¹⁴⁶ The grayish salt bars from Ijil were approximately 30 centimeters wide, 90 centimeters long, and 5 centimeters thick, weighing 25 to 30 kilograms. The salt bar of Tawdenni, north of Timbuktu, was whiter, harder, denser, slightly

¹⁴³ Interview in Nouakchott with Ḥamdan Wuld al-Tāh (06/06/97). Wuld al-Tāh is a former Minister of Islamic Orientation, and despite his age, he is a progressive thinker and remains actively engaged in Mauritanian public life.

¹⁴⁴ McDougall, "Ijil"; Bonte, "L'émirat."

¹⁴⁵ Al-Shinqīṭi, *Wasīt*, 460. I was able to confirm this through inquiries in Mali, Senegal, and Mauritania. The author mentions the salt pan of Aglil/Awlil (also noted by M. b. al-Mukhtār b. al-A'mish, *Nawāzil*), which was probably near or on the site of Nterert.

¹⁴⁶ In Znāga (Yahya Ould El Bara, personal communication 01/09/97). The salt trade from this quarry, transported along the Senegal River, was such that in the late nineteenth century it impelled the Devès, a métis family of Ndar, to purchase extraction rights from the Emir of Trārza.

thinner, wider, and longer.¹⁴⁷ As noted above, the Hasaniya word for salt bar is ‘adīla, half of which was known as a fāṣ (the typical payment of the caravan worker). The term *gandūz* (plur. *agnādiz*) was a bulk measure equal to twenty salt bars.¹⁴⁸

The Standard Gold Mithqāl

The salt bar was to regional western African exchange what the gold mithqāl was to international trade. But the mithqāl was a considerably more stable measure across the markets of Africa and the Middle East, from Timbuktu to Kumasi, Marrakech, Tripoli, and Cairo. The mithqāl, derived from the Arabic for weight (*thiqal*; plur. *athqāl*), was the standard measure for weighing gold dust.¹⁴⁹ The *mithqāl al-dhahab*, or gold mithqāl, was a fairly standard weight averaging 4.25 grams; any variations were due to custom and weighing techniques, for it was measured with small scales and various seeds or grains, including carob, wheat, and pumpkin.¹⁵⁰ It was the only pre-colonial western African measure, besides the *ratl* used for ostrich feathers, corresponding to an actual weight as opposed to a quantity. Silver was also weighed in mithqāls. In the nineteenth century, the *mithqāl al-fīḍī*, or silver mithqāl, mostly current in Saharan markets and Morocco, was priced between one-quarter and one-fifteenth of the gold mithqāl, as it fluctuated with market conditions. In Tishīt in the 1850s, for example, silver was exchanged for gold at an even four-to-one ratio. From then onward, the silver mithqāl gradually became current in western Saharan exchange, and by 1308–9/1891, it had replaced the gold mithqāl as the standard currency in Timbuktu.¹⁵¹ Besides being a measure of weight, the mithqāl was also a standard unit of account in Saharan commerce.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁷ Curtin (*Economic Change*, 224) gives the dimensions for the Tawdenni bar as 100 cm long, 40 cm wide, and 3 cm thick, weighing 35 to 40 kg.

¹⁴⁸ Interview in Tishīt with Dāddah b. Idda (04/26/97). Capitaine D. Brosset (“La Saline d’Idjil,” 262) wrote that a *gandūz* (guendouz) was 200 salt bars and that a *natir*, a term I found nowhere else, was 100.

¹⁴⁹ Johnson, “The Nineteenth-Century Gold ‘Mithqal.’”

¹⁵⁰ For an example of the variations in the weighing of gold in Guelmīm, see Panet, *Première exploration*, 162–3.

¹⁵¹ Diadié Haïdara, *Juifs*, 67.

¹⁵² Several scholars have written about the use of the mithqāl in western Africa. The most authoritative is Garrard, *Akan Weights and the Gold Trade*, and “Myth,” esp. 455–9. See Johnson, “Nineteenth-Century Gold”; Leriche, “Mesures maures,” 1248.

The Bayša, or Cotton Currency

As previously noted, imported cotton calicoes functioned as currency in Saharan exchange. As early as the seventeenth century, Saharan jurists discussed the attributes of the cotton currency, or bayša. When asked to determine whether it was a precise or an approximate measure, Bila'amish (discussed in the [next chapter](#)) replied affirmatively that the bayša was a recognized standard of measure (*al-bayša al-mithliya*). The word "bayša" may derive from the Portuguese or the French word for piece or coin. Interestingly, the French term for the cotton currency was *pièce de guinée*. This cloth was either white or dyed in dark blue to mimic local indigo dyes. The word *guinée* or British "guinea" (a gold coin minted between 1663 and 1813 worth 21 shillings) was perhaps named after Ghana or Jenne, the oldest continuous market in western Africa and the center of the gold trade.¹⁵³

Al-Shinqīṭī, the nineteenth-century ethnographer, provided an interesting discussion on how the bayša regulated exchange in his native Shinqīṭī, functioning as a currency alongside the standard sheep.

As for the bayša, its size is thirty arms (*dhirā'*)¹⁵⁴ of fabric. It is just like the *riyāl* (silver coin) is to others. So they say for example: "How much is that slave or that camel, or that cow?" And so it is said "It is ten bayša." However in the regions of Tagānt or the Hawd, the general bayša that is most coveted is the *filatūr*. This is a thick kind of cloth and not very nice. Among the people of the Gibla they prefer the *bayša al-maylīs*, commonly known as "*al-āmlīs*," and this a good variety of cloth. And so they differentiate according to the different kinds except when specified. So each community uses a distinct variety of cloth. The majority of people value the price of the bayša in terms of the sheep. So they say: "How much is the price of the bayša in sheep?" And they answer: "Three young male sheep."¹⁵⁵

Often dyed in blue indigo, the bayša remained a standard unit of cloth measuring thirty "arms" (*dhirā'*) or 15 meters in length, and usually 1.5 meters wide. Seemingly, this measure did not vary in size for several centuries.¹⁵⁶ The *bayša al-shigga*, a rough cotton weave of local and later imported provenance, however, was twice the size of the standard bayša

¹⁵³ One guinea was originally 20 shillings; the rate was changed in 1717. The fact that this term came into use in French western Africa might be explained by the fact that the British occupied the Senegalese capital twice (see Chapter 3).

¹⁵⁴ One *dhirā'* was equal to 50 cm. See Leriche, "Mesures," 1238.

¹⁵⁵ A *jidha'* is a sheep or a goat of one to two years in age (Taine-Cheikh, *Dictionnaire Hassāniya Français*, vol. II, 299).

¹⁵⁶ Curtin, *Economic Change*, 237–40; Roberts, "Guinée Cloth"; Webb, *Desert Frontier*.

(30 meters in length). One bayša equaled two *milḥafas*, which was the robe typically worn by Saharan women. Sometimes bayšas were designated as “packaged” (*al-maḥzūma*) since they often were sewn together or “sealed with a ribbon to keep [them] intact.”¹⁵⁷ Numbers of bayšas were used for wholesale transactions while smaller denominations were expressed in arm’s lengths.

As al-Shinqīṭī noted, there was a wide variety of cotton textiles used as bayšas that circulated in nineteenth-century western Africa. In Hasaniya, *khunt* was the generic term for cotton cloth, and in the nineteenth century it came to designate predominantly the industrial calicoes imported through Ndar and Al-Ṣawīra. The *akḥal* was a black cotton cloth, manufactured in South Asia, which was the product of trade with northwestern Africa. West African cloth dyed in indigo was highly prized by the people of western Sahara and southern Morocco, who used it for turbans.¹⁵⁸ Other textiles, commonly listed in trade records, were the *filatūr* (from the French for textile mill) and *maylīs* (origin unknown; perhaps from the French for smooth), two varieties of industrial cloth imported by French and British merchants and mentioned above in al-Shinqīṭī’s quote. From the 1830s onward the *marikān* (American) cloth, imported at Al-Ṣawīra, circulated as far south as Tishīt and Timbuktu. Other varieties included the *shandhūra* (described in Chapter 2), the *mamkūsa* (basic quality), and the *bayša al-nīla* (a black cloth now worn primarily by elderly women).

By the late eighteenth century, the bayša had become what Jane Guyer calls an “interface currency.” She proposed this concept instead of “primitive money” to describe cowries, manillas, metal rods, and other imports that served as money in western Africa and defined them as “currencies largely created from the outside, and whose capacities to permeate economic relationships across the borderland were kept limited.”¹⁵⁹ The blue guinée or bayša, imported by European agency, is a model example of an interface currency that functioned as a medium of exchange, unit of value, and standard for deferred payments.¹⁶⁰ By the nineteenth century the bayša so permeated Saharan exchange that it became the standard unit of account for market transactions, taxation rates, and property rights. The above-quoted nineteenth-century letter

¹⁵⁷ Interview in Shinqīṭī with ‘Abdarrāḥmān Wuld Muḥammad al-Ḥanshī (02/27/97).

¹⁵⁸ Interviews in Āsrīr with ‘Abdāṭī b. Ḥamdī (3/31/99) and in Likṣābī with Ibrāhīm b. ‘Alī (08/01/99); Abitbol, “Maroc,” 14, n. 61.

¹⁵⁹ Guyer, “Introduction: The Currency Interface,” 8.

¹⁶⁰ Hopkins, *Economic History*, 71.

between the Tikna brothers reported prices using the bayša as the common denominator, as al-Shinqīṭī states was the prevailing practice. Similarly, the emirs of Brākna, Trārza, Tagānit (Idaw'ish), and Ādrār demanded that the French pay their tributary duties, known as *coutûmes*, in this currency (Map 1). In the nineteenth century they increasingly demanded their constituents disburse their taxes and tributary offerings in bayšas. Like salt bars and cowries, bayšas were subject to variations in size, color, quality, and origin – factors that clearly determined value. Similar to many other currencies regulating trade in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century western Africa, bayšas were directly tied to definitions of social identification since they clothed the majority of Muslims.

The Ubiquitous Cowry Shell

The cowry shell (known as *al-wada'* in Arabic, *ludā'a* in Hasaniya) was one of the most intriguing and enduring currencies in western African history (Chapter 2). While in ancient times cowries may have been collected on the shores of the Atlantic, by at least the eleventh century, bulky bundles of cowry shells, originally from the Indian Ocean, made their way across the continent by way of caravans. The cowry currency continued to be used as a unit of account among traders of the central Sudan and Libya's Ghāt, Murzuk, and Ghadāmis into the late nineteenth century, as revealed in the trade records published by Bashīr Qāsim Yūsha'.¹⁶¹ In the region that concerns us, the cowry was fully monetized in Mali while it circulated with less frequency in the regions of Senegal and Mauritania.

Since at least the twelfth century, cowries were a major currency in Timbuktu where they were imported from all directions and distributed to radiating markets. In the late eighteenth century, older cowries (known in Songhay as *konorī*) were demonetized in favor of the newer or "white" cowry shells coming from the southern coastal trans-Atlantic slave trade economy.¹⁶² The monetary policies of Timbuktu rulers were an attempt to curb the growing cowry inflation in the wake of the flooding of the cowry market by European merchants who, by then, were shipping the shell money directly from the Maldives, and other Indian Ocean locations, as

¹⁶¹ Bashīr Yūsha', *Ghadāmis*; Harmann, "Dead Ostrich," 21–2; Saied, "Commerce," 59, 196–8.

¹⁶² According to a Timbuktu chronicle (see Abitbol, *Tombouctou*, 26 and n. 383), this occurred in the year 1210/1795.

well as eastern Africa.¹⁶³ Mauny suggests that the price of the shell money remained stable in the region from the late seventeenth until the early nineteenth century with an exchange rate of around 3,000 cowries to the gold mithqāl.¹⁶⁴ In the mid-nineteenth century, Johnson remarks, the price of cowries varied greatly even within West African markets.¹⁶⁵ But in the course of the century, as Johnson and Jan Hogendorn document, the shell money progressively lost value due to import-led inflation.¹⁶⁶ In the 1890s, that same amount was exchanged for the five-franc piece, which by then, had begun to impose itself as a currency while still being primarily sought for its intrinsic silver content.¹⁶⁷ Although no cowries are seen in today's Tīshīt besides the ones used in fortune telling (*ligzana*), some elders still remembered a time when they were currency. There, a string of 140 cowries was a *ḥabl*, whereas the smaller unit of forty cowries was called *khaīthu*, meaning sewn, because they were strung together for easy transportation.¹⁶⁸

Three commercial records illustrate the use of the cowry currency in central and southeastern Mauritania. An undated document from Walāta documents the sale of a bull for 23,000 cowries.¹⁶⁹ A contract from eighteenth-century Tīshīt details the sale of a roll of cotton cloth (*infia*) of either Bamana or Hausa origin for 3,140 cowries.¹⁷⁰ Another contract found in Tīshīt describes a land sale of undisclosed size but with water access (*ard* 'ayn) enclosing seventeen date palm trees for the amount of 40,000 cowries. This sales contract, concluded in 1318/1900 between Yadis b. al-Amīn and Muḥammad b. Sīdī b. al-Ḥājǧ 'Aly (grandson of an important trader discussed in Chapter 7), was to take effect as soon as the former had freed the land from pawnship (mortgaged for two bayṣas).¹⁷¹ Meanwhile, large transactions in cowries were still taking place in Timbuktu at this time.¹⁷²

¹⁶³ Johnson, "Cowrie Currencies;" Johnson and Hogendorn, *Shell Money of the Slave Trade*; Lovejoy, "Interregional Monetary Flows."

¹⁶⁴ Mauny, *Tableau*, 421. See also Monteil, *Djénne*, 280.

¹⁶⁵ Johnson, "Cowrie," 336–7. ¹⁶⁶ Johnson and Hogendorn, *Shell Money*.

¹⁶⁷ Guillaumet, *Le Soudan en 1894*, 87 (clearly, the cowry zone should be extended further north as compared with the map of Johnson and Hogendorn, *Shell Money*, 108).

¹⁶⁸ In Tīshīt conversation with Dāddah Wuld Idda (04/28/97), and interview with Bāba Ghazzār (04/25/97).

¹⁶⁹ Document no. 1048 (37), Al-Tālib Abū Bakr Library (Walāta).

¹⁷⁰ Contract between Sīd Aḥmad b. Sīdī b. Abū Bakr and Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Zayn al-Tāhīr (dated by genealogical inference to the early 1200s/1800s), Family Archives of Shaykhnā Būyahmad (Tīshīt).

¹⁷¹ (MS 1), Family Archives of Sharīf b. Muḥammad al-Sharīf (Tīshīt).

¹⁷² Diadié Haïdara, *Juifs*, 34–5.

Silver Coins and Foreign Currency

Independent of the presence of European powers in western Africa, Muslims were fully aware of the existence of “modern” money in the shape of minted coins. As noted in Chapter 2, the Almoravids began minting coins in the eleventh century, pointing to the fact that some Africans would have become familiar with coinage before most Europeans. Besides, coins are repeatedly mentioned in the Qur’ān. Proximity to the Moroccan economy, fully monetized by the eighteenth century, meant that travelers and pilgrims as well as traders experienced transactions in gold, silver, and brass coinage.¹⁷³

In the mid-nineteenth century, the chief of the Idaw al-Hājj, a clan originally from Wādān that engaged in transhumance to the north and south of the Senegal River, described the amounts and types of currencies the Senegalese Panet would need to cross the Sahara to reach the Wād Nūn. He estimated that with

300 pièces of guinée (4,500 francs), [he] could arrive at Nun. From there to Morocco, and from Morocco to Algeria. There, (silver) coinage (*l’argent*) replaced the guinée, and, for this additional itinerary, four or five bags of one thousand francs would not be excessive.¹⁷⁴

At the turn of the nineteenth century, a fatwa by Muḥammad Yahya b. Muḥammad al-Mukhtār al-Walātī (b. 1843) bears witness to the changing monetary landscape in western Africa with the infiltration of European coinage. On his return from his pilgrimage to Mecca (1317/1900), he was asked by a trader of the Tajakānit clan to write a legal opinion on the lawfulness of paying debts in foreign currency.¹⁷⁵ The question concerned the repayment in Mali of a loan contracted in Morocco in one currency (Spanish réal) with another (French franc). Al-Walātī’s fatwa discussed the various silver coins prevalent in western and northern Africa at that time, to conclude that transactions in multiple coinage were usurious and therefore unlawful. Relying on Mālikī sources, he opined that loans should be reimbursed with the same currency in which they were contracted, because

¹⁷³ Āfa, *Mas’alāt al-nuqūd fī tā’rīkh al-maghrib*.

¹⁷⁴ Panet, *Première exploration*, 36. On the Idaw al-Hājj, see Webb, *Desert Frontier* and “Evolution,” 455–76.

¹⁷⁵ Al-Walātī, *Al-Rihla*. This very informative fatwa on the exchange of coins concerns the markets of southern Morocco, western Algeria, and northern Mali. Unfortunately, it was left out of the publication of al-Walātī’s travelogue. I thank Professor Wuld al-Sa‘ad for alerting me to the existence of this fatwa. Its transcription and commentary were the subject of the master’s thesis of Mariam Mint ‘Abaydallah (“Fatwā al-Walātī,” 12–48).

the variety of coins [available in north and western Africa] for exchange operations and debt settlements is exceptional as compared with other Muslim lands and leads to a practice that constitutes a dissimulation of the edicts of Qur'ān and the Sunna. It is the imitation of Christian law. . . . What is taking place between people in financial transactions of one unit of *francisse* (French franc) against 1 and $\frac{3}{4}$ *zabīl* (Spanish réal) is usurious interest. [Such transactions are] therefore completely forbidden.¹⁷⁶

The writing of this fatwa coincided with a hyper-devaluation of the Spanish réal on the Moroccan market that was clearly affecting trade across the Sahara.¹⁷⁷ Because of its stable value and higher silver content, the French “piece of five,” which the French called *gourde* and Saharans first called *riyāl*, like the Moroccan coin, and later *ūqiya* or “ounce,” fetched a higher price in western African markets than in the north.

Aside from their use as currency, silver coins were in demand for their metal content. Saharan women preferred silver to gold for their jewelry perhaps because silver was less available and therefore a rarity. They commissioned blacksmiths to make pins, earrings, and beads as well as thick and very heavy silver ankle bracelets (*khlākhil*). As symbols of wealth worn by the Saharan elite, these bangles also were used to slow down or immobilize young pubescent girls in forced fattening sessions.¹⁷⁸

The Age of Paper Money

In the second decade of the twentieth century, Saharan jurists replied to questions pertaining to yet another regional shift in currency use. As discussed in Chapter 1, “the year of the paper” (*ʿām al-keyit*) started in 1338/1919–20 when the French introduced paper money in western Africa, mainly as a means to recuperating French coins at a time of silver shortage following the First World War. The imposition of paper money, its value, and exchangeability profoundly concerned western Africans.

In the 1950s, Shaykh ʿAbdallah Wuld Dāddāh was asked to provide a fatwa on the exchange of coins for paper money.¹⁷⁹ This Saharan jurist was from the Gibla of southwestern Mauritania, a region that experienced the most enduring relationship with the French and colonial rule

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 36. The Spanish réal was called *riyāl zabīl* or the réal of Queen Isabella of Spain.

¹⁷⁷ Miège, *Maroc*, 117–19. The devalued Spanish coin imported en masse into Morocco in the 1880s and 1890s further destabilized an already depressed regional economy.

¹⁷⁸ Vincent, “Voyage,” 60, for a description of the practice (known as *liblūkh*) in the 1860s.

¹⁷⁹ Shaykh ʿAbdallah Wuld Dāddāh, “Suʿāl wa Jawāb ʿan tabaddul al-keīt bil-nuqūd,” No. 1917, IMRS.

because of its proximity to Senegal (Map 1). In his opinion, which was shared by several of his contemporaries, coins could not be exchanged for paper money because coins had an intrinsic and dependable value (*lam tadhhab bihi al-ribh 'aks al-keyit*). They were made of metal, unlike paper money that was light in weight and too close in composition to writing paper. To support his position, Wuld Dāddāh relayed the anecdote of two caravaners carrying coins who, when intercepted by burglars (*luṣūs*), hid their money under a tree. Paper money, he argued, could not be hidden in such a way since “the wind can blow it, the earth can destroy it, and insects can eat it,” while “coins cannot be burned by fire.”¹⁸⁰ But in time, Saharan jurists and their constituents came to accept banknotes alongside the various weights and measures imposed by the French to administer their colonial economies.

MEASURES AND THE PROBLEM OF VALUATION

The multiplicity of currencies prevailing in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was not the only topic of deliberation in legal scholars' commercial writings. For just as there was an array of units of exchange, so, too, did standardized measures vary across markets, making valuation in long-distance trade a complicated affair. Units of account for measuring staples, such as millet, as well as for valuating livestock and even enslaved Africans, tended to be regionally determined.

The Multiple *Mudds*

Across Muslim Africa and the Middle East, the *mudd* (plur. *mdūda* (Hasaniya); *amdād*) was a common unit for measuring cereal.¹⁸¹ Each market tended to have its own version of the mudd as well as other measures. The mudd was used to measure millet, barley, rice, henna, baobab-seed flour, red peppers, dates, and other dry goods such as gum arabic. Each mudd was divided into units known as *nafga*. According to Islamic tradition, the mudd of Prophet Muḥammad (*mudd al-nabī*) was equal to four *nafgas*, which would have been an early Muslim measure.¹⁸² Timbuktu once had an additional measure, called the *sunu* (or *sunīya*) in

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ According to Leriche (“Mesures,” 1229), the mudd is a very ancient measure. In Hebrew to measure is “madad.” In Latin a measure is a “modus.” The “muid” once was a measure for cereals in France.

¹⁸² Interview in Nouakchott with Muḥammad al-Ḥanshī b. Muḥammad Sāliḥ (06/25/97).

the Songhay language, which varied in size from 48 to 60 kilograms. It apparently fell out of use after the 1123/1711 famine when the *sawāl* of approximately one liter became current.¹⁸³

In the western Sahara, the mudd container was carved in wood (usually in *Comiphora africana* or *Balanites aegyptiaca*), and each region had a distinct mudd size.¹⁸⁴ Sizes of mudds provide a good indication of the proportional wealth of each Saharan market. According to Dāddah Wuld Idda, a custodian of Tīshīt's history, mudd size was a reflection of the relative economic power of a locality, for "the bigger the mudd the stronger the currency."¹⁸⁵ French ethnographer Leriche estimated the size in kilograms of several mudds current in colonial Mauritania. He claimed that the mudd in Shinqīti weighed approximately 2.5 kilograms, while the Tagānt mudd was 3.5 kilograms.¹⁸⁶ It must be stated, however, that before the imposition of colonial weights and measures, the mudd was calculated by volume and not by weight.

With its twelve nafgas, the largest mudd of all was that of Tīshīt, equal in weight to approximately 5.5 kilograms. Tīshīt's proximity to the millet belt of Kaarta and Sokolo explains its prominence in the cereals market (Map 6). Walāta, just to the northwest, had a mudd of about 4 kilograms. Despite Tīshīt's proximity to the Tagānit region, the Tagānit had a different mudd, which was three times smaller than that of Tīshīt. Trade records show that both mudds were used simultaneously, with the Tagānit mudd serving as a fractional measure for smaller amounts. Shinqīti's mudd, in comparison, was one-quarter smaller (equal to seven nafgas), whereas the mudd of Wādān was half the size of the mudd of Tīshīt. The mudd of Aṭār, a town that became the economic capital of colonial Mauritania in the first decades of the twentieth century, was the smallest of all (four nafgas).

Certain regions and groups used multiples of the mudd for taxation and the *zakāt* or annual Islamic tithe.¹⁸⁷ Such was the case in the regions bordering Senegal, where the *tanitchfāga*, a Znāga-Pulaar word meaning the fee of the Muslim scholar, was a set amount of thirty mudds (presumably of the Trārza region). Another was the *mudd al-ḥagg*, also used

¹⁸³ Abitbol, *Tombouctou*, 56, n. 288. See also Dupuis-Yakouba, *Industries et principales professions*, 143.

¹⁸⁴ Leriche, "Mesures," 1228.

¹⁸⁵ Conversation in Tīshīt with Dāddah Wuld Idda (04/97).

¹⁸⁶ Leriche, "Mesures," 1227–56. He reports the following mudd sizes: Aṭār: 1 kg 400, Shinqīti: 2 kg 450, Tagānt: 3.5 kg.

¹⁸⁷ Leriche, "Mesures," 1230–5.

in the southern Saharan regions, for contractual arrangements with workers such as well-diggers. Perhaps the mudd was the subject of legal debates, but I have yet to find evidence of this.

Other Weights and Measures

Additional measures for specific goods were used alongside the mudd. The *raṭl* (plur. *arṭal*), for specific trans-Saharan commercial transactions, was a weight of approximately 500 grams. It was used primarily for light-weight goods such as tobacco and ostrich feathers. A late-nineteenth-century fatwa issued by a Tishīt jurist to a trans-Saharan trader discussed the *raṭl* in a legal question about the poor quality and high value of ostrich feathers.¹⁸⁸ Clearly, this was a period when the ostrich population was being wiped out and unscrupulous traders were mixing in feathers of other birds to fluff up their merchandise. For lesser weights the *raṭl* was subdivided into sixteen ounces (*ūqīya*), while the *qintār*, equal to 100 *raṭls* or about 50 kilograms, served to measure heavier goods including large quantities of gum arabic.¹⁸⁹ Moreover, three *qintārs* was the amount considered the average camel-load.

In the first half of the twentieth century, western African traders and consumers began using the metric system imposed by French colonial rulers, namely, the kilogram (*kīl*), half a kilogram (*lībīr*), and the ton (*tūn*). Other measures, such as the French *barrique* (*barīga*) or quintal, served to measure quantities of peanuts in Senegal.¹⁹⁰ In time, most local measures were replaced by new imported metric containers. The small shot glass of eight centiliters that became the standard teacup in twentieth-century western Africa was used to measure *nafgas*. These glasses, imported from France via Marseille, were not only common tea-drinking utensils in Senegal, Mali, and Mauritania, but they also became measuring receptacles for small quantities of dry goods. During World War II, the *ga'r al-kās*, or the bottom of the glass turned upside down, became a new measure. The quantity of tea leaves (*warga*) filling the small hollow of

¹⁸⁸ Fatwa on the Problem of Stinginess in the Commerce of Ostrich Feathers by 'Abayda b. Muḥammad al-Ṣaghīr b. Ambūya (DI9), Family Library of Dāddah Wuld Idda (Tishīt).

¹⁸⁹ Wehr, *Dictionary*, 399 345, 793. Saïed ("Commerce," 199) notes similar weight equivalencies in Libyan markets.

¹⁹⁰ Leriche ("Mesures," 1232) mentioned many other measures that were imported such as the *kar* (quart) and the *wichem* ("huitième," or one-eighth). The year 1911 is remembered as 'ām *barīga ūqīya*, the year the quintal of peanuts was worth 5 French francs (interview in Nouakchott with Maymūna Mint Aḥmad Targa 05/21/97).

a shot glass turned upside down sold for the considerable sum of five French francs in the early 1940s.¹⁹¹ In those difficult years of famine and deprivation, tea portions were sold in even smaller quantities, such as in bottle caps.¹⁹² According to one informant, after the recession of the late 1940s, the size of the *nafga* in the town of Aṭār rose from five to six shot glasses.¹⁹³ By the 1950s in Senegal, as Leriche explains, “the small tea glass [was] the unit of measure in the shops of the Moors of St. Louis [Ndar],” used for retailing butter, oil, and several other liquid products such as vinegar and bleach.¹⁹⁴

Variations in weights and measures were extremely common elsewhere in the world before the mid-nineteenth century. Johnson notes:

In the 1830s every trading city in Italy had its own standards, and Spain had at least four different standards, though most of Germany and the Baltic states were using the Cologne standard. In many countries, England included, different weights were used for gold and for the weighing of other commodities.¹⁹⁵

Because of the multiple sizes of the mudd, as well as the use of other variable weights and measures, trading between regions involved complicated conversions.

Fractions of Slaves and Livestock

Among the pastoral and nomadic communities of the western Sahara, slaves alongside camels, cows, goats, horses, and sheep represented units of wealth. Enslaved individuals, like livestock, were valued and partitioned in the process of exchange, and joint ownership was common practice among Muslim societies. All forms of property could be co-owned in halves or quarters. As a French colonial ethnographer observed, “the different types of animals formed a real monetary system which used to allow for the valuation and payment of dowries, exchanges of animals and merchandise, partitioning of inheritances, payment of debts and usurious loans.”¹⁹⁶ Others, including an early-twentieth-century French administrator, remarked that “the slave is the banknote [!] of Africa.”¹⁹⁷

¹⁹¹ Leriche, “Mesures,” 1235.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Interview in Nouakchott with Muḥammad al-Hansī b. Muḥammad Sālāḥ (06/25/97).

¹⁹⁴ Leriche, “Mesures,” 1237. He explained that twelve and a half glasses equaled one liter.

¹⁹⁵ Johnson, “Gold ‘Mithqal,’” 549.

¹⁹⁶ Dubié, “Vie matérielle des maures,” III–252, 220.

¹⁹⁷ Poulet in Lovejoy and Kanya-Forstner (eds.), *Slavery and Its Abolition*, 39.

Al-Shinqīṭī described the barter system prevalent in nineteenth-century Shinqīṭī, for which I have located no other evidence.

The *tāfkīt* means the exchange-rate (*al-tabai'a*). And if the *tāfkīt* was the value between the cow and the sheep, then they say, for example, the price of this camel is four *tīfukkātin* (sing. *tāfkīt*) and the *tāfkīt* of sheep is set at six young sheep, and therefore they say “*diya* sheep” which means that the value is equal to one and a half young sheep. And if they say *gāṭa'ah*, it means the value is divided into two young sheep. In other words the price of the two suffices.

A rich vocabulary exists in Hasaniya to describe with precision the quality of different animals in terms of age, origin, and other criteria. For instance, a *diya* sheep, used in pecuniary transactions such as fines and blood money, sometimes was equal to an adult of medium quality or “one and a half young sheep,” as in al-Shinqīṭī's time. Animal equivalencies were well established in such a way that a sheep ready for consumption was equal to either two sheep less than a year old, four young sheep not yet weaned plus one *diya* sheep, three weaned sheep plus one young sheep with two teeth or two weaned sheep, and so forth.¹⁹⁸

An unsettling legal case illustrates how slave-owners exchanged shares of enslaved peoples. In the late nineteenth century, a muftī of Tishīt wrote a fatwa about the joint ownership of an enslaved mother's offspring. As a gift to her son a mother donated the ownership rights over half a young female slave sometime before she delivered. When the enslaved mother gave birth to twin girls, the son, as co-owner, sought to establish whether he owned one of the slave's twins or half of both twins. Because Mālikī law condemned the sale of a female's womb, whether human or animal, it follows that the donation of the same would be considered reprehensible (*makrūh*). However, the muftī, citing Saḥnūn's *Mudawwana* (a classic Mālikī legal reference discussed in the [next chapter](#)), focused on the question of intent, and ended with an inconclusive statement that the son had to find testimonial evidence about his mother's intent in order to proceed with splitting the ownership of the babies.¹⁹⁹ Contests over property such as this one were common in the ostensibly litigious societies of the Sahara.

¹⁹⁸ Dubié, “Vie matérielle,” 219–21.

¹⁹⁹ Lydon, “Slavery” and “Islamic Legal Culture.”

MARKET RULES, FAIRS, AND FEES

Especially from the mid-nineteenth century, long-distance trade in western Africa involved mastering new skills, such as marksmanship. As seen in previous chapters, the region then became a theater of numerous clashes between Saharan clans, adding to the instability caused by jihads. As the chronicler cited in Chapter 3 explains, “the mayhem prevailed until 1289/1872,” when Aḥmad wuld Lemḥammad assumed the leadership of the Ādrār Emirate (Map 1). The good governance of this emir was achieved through effective diplomacy with regional leaders, providing a forum for resolving local political tensions and placing emphasis on the law for establishing social, political, and economic order.²⁰⁰ All of these initiatives had a positive effect on the conduct of commerce.

Setting Market Rules

It is said that to curb regional violence, Emir Aḥmad Wuld Lemḥammad proclaimed the following edict, complete with fines for breaking the rules:

Any sheep slaughtered unlawfully was reimbursed four times its value, any stolen mounted animal (horse or camel) was cause for the payment of an indemnity four times equal to the current price of lease for the distance traveled, and all atrocities would lead to reparations four times superior to the damage sustained.²⁰¹

In the same time period, prominent Tiknas of the Aīt Mūsā Wa ‘Aly clan convened with Daḥmān b. Bayrūk of Guelmīm to decree that year’s market rules (*qanūn al-sūq*).²⁰² Among the twenty-three men present were Muḥammad b. Barka and his cousin Aḥmad b. Būl‘āraf, as well as Mberikāt b. al-Ḥājj Muḥammad Arkūk, all three trans-Saharan traders with families and interests in Timbuktu.²⁰³ The infractions described in the agreement bear a close resemblance to the types of market rules prevalent in early modern towns in England and on the continent.²⁰⁴ This exceptional document, dated 1293/1876, which set current market entry fees and fines for misconduct, sheds light on how the market of Guelmīm

²⁰⁰ Interview in Shinqīti with ‘Abdarraḥmān wuld Muḥammad al-Hanshī (09/19/97).

²⁰¹ Ba, “Grande figure de l’Adrar,” 546.

²⁰² Qanūn al-Sūq Guelmīm (2 Jumād al-Awal 1293/May 26 1876), Family Archives of Bashīr b. Bakār b. Muḥammad b. Bayrūk al-Ghazāwī, Guelmīm (Morocco).

²⁰³ For a brief biographical note on Aḥmad b. Būl‘āraf, see Lydon, “Ink wells.”

²⁰⁴ Postles, “The Market Place as Space in Early Modern England.”

was regulated during seasonal fairs. Similar to the agreement concerning the *jizya* of the Jews (Chapter 4), these rules were periodically renegotiated. That year the fine for “stabbing another with a dagger is 30 mithqāls, and if there were four fingers left he pays 50 mithqāls; and whomever shoots [a firearm] and misses pays 50 mithqāls.”²⁰⁵ Moreover, the one who slapped another in the market was fined ten mithqāls, and if someone caused another to fall in such a way that “bone shows,” the perpetrator paid fifteen mithqāls. Fines, which were expressed in silver and not gold, increased proportionally to the level of the violence committed. In theory, market-goers bore no weapons and settled their disputes after closing day. This decree included further fines for major and minor insults or condemnable acts such as harboring thieves.

Aside from setting the price of these *ansāf*, or penalties for “breaking the market,” such agreements typically included the fees for depositing goods in someone’s home (*sank*), as one informant explained.²⁰⁶ Fines presumably were paid to the town council, and funds perhaps were used in part to cover communal expenses such as providing food to visitors. Similar rules prevailed in other western African markets, but even for the market of Timbuktu comparable documentation has not come to light. According to Mauny, who cited the cases of pre-colonial Togo and Guinea-Bissau, access to the weekly market was refused to reputed troublemakers as well as the sick.²⁰⁷ Policing was done by agents of the established authority, whose duty it was to protect strangers and severely punish infractions and fraud. In tune with caravan traffic, the intensity of raiding activities was seasonal. Often raids occurred when people migrated to oases in the date-harvesting season known as the *Getna* in the Ādrār and Tagānit regions.

The Getna Date Festival and the Amuggar Fairs

From late July to early September several Saharan oases held annual date festivals. This was the occasion for town-dwellers to abandon their hot stone houses for more pleasant tent living and a rare opportunity for noble women to leave town. Groups congregated around the main date palm oases to eat large amounts of fresh dates while visiting with friends and

²⁰⁵ Qanūn al-Sūq Guelmīm (2 Jumād al-Awal 1293/May 26 1876); Family Archives of Bashīr b. Bakār b. Muḥammad b. Bayrūk al-Ghazāwī, Guelmīm.

²⁰⁶ Interview in Likṣābī with Muḥammad b. al-Nājim (08/01/99).

²⁰⁷ Mauny, *Tableau*, 354, n. 2.

family. Some would buy the temporary rights to certain date palm trees to harvest for the duration of the season.²⁰⁸ Socializing was an important feature of the Getna when the latest news or gossip from distant towns was disseminated.²⁰⁹ It was also the occasion for those in debt to make good on their loans. Indeed, as discussed in the [next chapter](#), fairs usually marked the official contraction and termination of financial agreements, as creditors often extended loans “up until the Getna” or until the next regional fair.

In the Wād Nūn region the towns of Guelmīm, Āsrīr, and Liksābī held week-long summer fairs known as *amuggar* (*mawsim* in Arabic), each taking place within two weeks of one another.²¹⁰ Fairs commemorated particular patron saints. And so Guelmīm’s was dedicated to Sīdī al-Ghāzī, while the fair of Āsrīr was for Sīdī Muḥammad b. ‘Amar, and Liksābī celebrated the Awlād Bū al-Sibā’ ancestor named Sīdī ‘Amru ‘Amrān (see Chapter 4). Unlike most towns, Āsrīr, located near the ruins of Taghawust, had two amuggars, perhaps an indication of its commercial importance before the rise of Guelmīm in the eighteenth century.²¹¹ The first and the last (nicknamed *al-ma’īlīl* or “the repeated one”) framed the entire fair season in the Wād Nūn region.

Unlike the Getna festival, amuggars were large markets where all the people in the region came to town to exchange credit, information, merchandise, slaves, wares, fresh produce, and livestock. But like the Getna, the amuggar marked the yearly get-together, and because it reunited many people, it was fraught with potential danger. For not only did traders come to sell their wares and find their debtors, but others found this an opportune moment to deal with their enemies. In principle, however, the yearly market rules made most Wād Nūn fairs peaceful events. According to Mathews, “so much respect is paid to the interest of commerce, that men who meet their enemies at the fair or on their way to and from it, are neither molested or allowed to molest until the

²⁰⁸ De La Chapelle, “Esquisse,” 47, n. 2.

²⁰⁹ For a description of the Getna in the 1930s, see Du Puigaudéau, *La foire aux dates*.

²¹⁰ One informant claimed the Amuggar of Liksābī began in the eighteenth century at the suggestion of Mūlāy Hāshim, the chief of Illīgh (interview in Liksābī with Ibrāhīm b. ‘Aly b. al-Ṭālib (08/01/98)). As a result of an arrangement between the Tikna Aīt Lahsan and Mūlāy Hāshim, the first would have ensured the safety of the southern trade routes and the latter the northern routes.

²¹¹ Interviews in Āsrīr with ‘Ā’isha Mint Muḥammad al-Amīn (07/30/99), Habūb b. Ahmad b. al-Mā’tī, and Aḥmad Fāl b. Muḥammad b. Laḥbib (07/30/99) and in Liksābī with Ibrāhīm b. ‘Aly b. al-Ṭālib (08/01/99) and Muḥammad al-Nājim b. Muḥammad al-Nājim (08/01/99).

fair is over.”²¹² But some years, the Sīdī al-Ghāzī fair was “broken” by epidemics, violent disputes, or caravan raids.

IMMINENT DANGERS AND ORGANIZED VIOLENCE

Insecurity caused by violence was common in nineteenth-century trans-Saharan trade, as it was in preceding periods. The chronic threat of outright warfare, predatory robbery, or criminal assault was factored into long-distance trading operations. Strangers, those unfamiliar with the area, and those with no local “protectors” ready to vouch for their safety, were especially at risk. Robert Bates, Avner Greif, and Smita Sing proposed that in stateless environments, coercion was a necessary cost of exchange.²¹³ In other words, individuals had to invest in organized violence to ensure security, to protect property rights, and to generate wealth. At the same time, several cities such as Guelmīm developed mechanisms to safeguard market exchange through highly regulated fairs, controlled access, and punishment of violent behavior. To travel across the Sahara, it was necessary to be armed both physically, with deterring weapons, and socially, with the endorsement of a political or religious leader. Besides these elements, amulets and spiritual blessings offered an added sense of security to caravaners on their crossings.

Perilous Crossings

Before undertaking his trans-Saharan voyage, Panet was warned by the chief of the Idaw al-Ḥājj about the dangers involved. He reflected, not without some amusement, that if he was to believe everything that he was told about the hazards of crossing the Sahara, “one needed to be equipped with a rubber boat to traverse the lakes of blood produced by the blood spilt in the wars between the Doviche [Idaw’ish], the Oulad-Nâcir, the Oulad Deleim and the Kountas.”²¹⁴ Ten years later, when Bū al-Mughdād was entering the Ādrār region, the caravaners were warned about the political instability brought about by a succession war after the sudden death of the emir. They considered turning back to Ndar to wait out

²¹² Mathews, “Northwest Africa,” 199.

²¹³ Bates, Greif, and Sing, “Organizing Violence.” For an excellent discussion of what he calls the “social code of violence” in Mauritania, see Bonte, “L’émirat,” 1151–76.

²¹⁴ Panet, *Première exploration*, 35.

the political storm rather than running the risk of finding themselves in the middle of a civil war. In the end, they decided to avoid the center of the Ādrār by traveling along the western Tīris region.²¹⁵

While caravan crossings were fraught with danger, raids were not the first of worries, according to the testimonies of retired caravaners. Nature more than humans constituted the biggest threat, since it could not be controlled. Particularly vivid in oral traditions from Mauritania, Morocco, and Mali were stories about devastating sandstorms and caravans capsizing or running adrift like ships at sea swallowed by unrelenting waves. The veteran Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ caravaner Fuījī Wuld al-Ṭayr was in his nineties when recounting a gripping voyage when half his caravan was swept under a sand dune. Its remains, including the skeletons of the deceased, were found on the crossing the following year.²¹⁶ Besides burying caravans alive, storms and constant winds caused displacement of sand dunes, covering and uncovering landmarks and active wells. At the same time, strong hot winds caused goatskin water pouches (*girbas*) to burst or quickly dry up.

The Threat of Thirst

Dying of thirst near an empty well was the common fate of caravaners. The chronicles of Tīshīt, Walāta, and Nīʿma contain several entries reporting entire caravans perishing of thirst (see Appendix 2). Thirst menaced the mid-nineteenth-century crossings of both Panet and Bū al-Mughdād. The first spent three days and three nights waiting with the rest of the crew for two caravaners to return with filled *girbas*.²¹⁷ As for Bū al-Mughdād and his traveling companions, they exhausted their water supply faster than expected in the Tīris. Their thirst then was exacerbated by eating excessive amounts of the dried salted meat (*tishtār*), the caravaners' staple.²¹⁸ They began to disagree about whether to slaughter a camel to drink the water contained in its stomach, dump their loads and accelerate the pace to the nearest well or travel by night. Choosing the third option, they rode under a moonless sky, finally reaching a well in the nick of time. In the early 1900s, Ḥamūd b. al-Mukhtār al-Nājim, the son of the chief of the Aīt Laḥsan, a sub-clan of the Tikna, also "died of thirst coming from Mauritania with a caravan full of goods. He died in the sun

²¹⁵ Bou El-Mogdad, "Voyage," 484–5.

²¹⁶ Interview in Aṭār with Fuījī Wuld al-Ṭayr (02/10/97).

²¹⁷ Panet, *Première exploration*, 107–9.

²¹⁸ Bou El-Mogdad, "Voyage," 488–9.

and thirst and we only found his arm, the rest of his body had been eaten by wild animals.”²¹⁹ Such was the fate in the first decade of the twentieth century of Ḥamā Wuld Maḥjūb Wuld al-Jumānī and his recently acquired female slave, who died of thirst by a dry well in the Guelta Zemmūr region on their way back from Timbuktu.²²⁰

The Menace of Wild Animals

The attack of wild animals, especially lions, was another peril faced by caravaners, although it receded somewhat with desertification and the popularization of firearms. In 1266/1850, Panet recalls that on their way to Shinqītī one of the camels almost fell victim to a large lion that had apparently devoured a young enslaved man two days prior.²²¹ The nineteenth-century writer al-Shinqītī spent several pages describing the menace of lions in the region.²²² Retired caravaner Muḥammad b. al-Ṭālib recalled a time in the late 1950s when his caravan traveling from Tijjġā to Tīshīt was stalked for several days by a lion.²²³ Other beasts, such as venomous snakes and reptiles, scorpions, and poisonous spiders, were common foes. Common, too, was catching a deadly disease, feared by most long-distance travelers, while camels could also fall sick or become injured.²²⁴ Such predicaments would complicate a caravan expedition as choices had to be made in terms of what loads to discard and how to proceed.

The Political Economy of Raiding

In the mid-nineteenth century, being pillaged while on caravan (as Baghlīl was, the caravaner with whom I began this book) was too common a fate.

²¹⁹ Interview in Liksābī with Kara Jamī’a Mint ‘Abaydna b. Barak (08/01/99). Kara Jamī’a was born to two slaves and stolen from Shinqītī when she was very young by the Awlād Djarīr clan. Later she was sold to a third party before being sold to the Tikna family of al-Mukhtār b. al-Nājim in Guelmīm. In the late 1990s she was in her 70s.

²²⁰ Interviews in Āsrīr with ‘Ā’isha Mint Muḥammad b. ‘Umar (07/30/99) and with Ḥabūb b. Aḥmad b. al-Ma’ṭī and Aḥmad Fāl b. Muḥammad b. Laḥbib (07/30/99).

²²¹ Panet, *Première exploration*, 42.

²²² Al-Shinqītī, *Wasīt*, 524–6.

²²³ Interview in Tijjġā with Muḥammad b. al-Ṭālib and Makhāla b. al-‘Amish (05/06/97).

²²⁴ ‘Abidin b. Bayrūk died of sickness in Tiris on his return from a trip to the Ādrār in the early part of the twentieth century. Interview in Guelmīm with Bashīr b. Bakār b. Muḥammad b. Bayrūk (07/29/99). This was also the fate of Mḥaymad Wuld ‘Abāba (discussed in Chapter 1).

A document simply entitled “the raid” (*al-ghazwa*) involving the aforementioned Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr, lists the names of known perpetrators of a raid on the oasis of Tishīt and those who incurred losses in stolen cows and camels.²²⁵ Town-dwellers, nomadic encampments and itinerant traders, all were prone to raids by warrior groups. This is perhaps the main reason why general stores, periodic or even open markets were not common in nineteenth-century western Sahara. Merchants stored and sold goods out of their homes and often hid their merchandise in secret chambers in the walls and floors. The town-dwellers of Shinqīṭi even created an elaborate underground system, the entrance of which was hidden in a well, where a significant number of people could hide with their possessions when the danger of a raid was imminent.

While raids represented imminent dangers, long-distance traders who temporarily took up residence in the markets of western Africa were easy targets for raiders. Travelers tended to be socially and politically isolated and, therefore, more vulnerable and less likely to effectively retaliate than locals. This simple fact was stated in an inheritance report concerning Baghlīl and the Wād Nūn traders examined in Chapter 7. The inhabitants in the Ādrār and Tagānit regions used the term “Hanatīt” generically for raiders and highway robbers, about whom they had a saying: “May God get rid of the Hanatits and the Shrattits too.” The Shrattit were a ḥasānī group of the Brākna and Tagānit regions also known for raiding (Map 1).²²⁶

Tolls, Taxes, and Protection Payments

Raiding sometimes was connected to systems of redistribution, taxation, and tribute collection. Both warrior and clerical groups periodically exacted various known taxes and toll fees. Saharan mobile emirates, such as the Trārza, the Ādrār, and the Idaw‘īsh of Tagānit, as well as independent ḥasānī, collected annual, seasonal, or random tribute from farmers, fisher people, and other sedentary workers living within their political boundaries. The most important of these was the *ḥurma*, a tax imposed on tributary groups in exchange for protection from the raids by other nomads.

The *ghāfar* (meaning “pardon”) was another yearly tax collected by the ḥasānī on the zwāyā and on strangers, including caravaners

²²⁵ (AS 2), Family Archives of Muḥammad Wuld Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr (Tishīt).

²²⁶ Interview in Shinqīṭi with ‘Abdarraḥmān b. Muḥammad al-Ḥanshī (09/29/97).

crossing their paths. This tax, akin to a customs duty, was especially enforced on caravan traffic crossing the Trārza on its way to Ndar. In the first decade of the twentieth century, it might have been as high as five French silver francs per camel in addition to one-tenth the value of the loaded merchandise.²²⁷ Conversely, a heftier ghāfar known as the *ghāfar al-shadd* (meaning the pardon for camel-loads) was exacted from the Trārza emir on trans-Saharan caravans. Oral sources maintain that the fee there was typically 100 cotton bayşas.²²⁸ But rates must have varied considerably over time and depending on caravan sizes. Conversely, in recognition of their assistance to ‘Aly Shandhūra in the seventeenth century, the emirs of Trārza paid an annual ghāfar to the Tikna, as already noted.

During the relatively stable reign of the “emir of peace” in late-nineteenth-century Ādrār, trans-Saharan caravaners so “enjoyed the freedom and the protection . . . that they paid without difficulty the “ghafar shadd” or import tax.”²²⁹ Ba further reports that these duties were calculated in the following way:

one rug per camel load of rugs, one haik [Moroccan woolen cloak] per camel load of haiks, a *guinée* (bayşa) per load of one hundred *guinées*; two sugar-cones for every hundred; one horse out of ten; twenty-five kilos [N.B. the mudd not kilograms was current then] per camel load of cereal; twenty kilos of tobacco per camel load; one skin bag (*girba*) of tar per camel load; and so forth.²³⁰

As for the *zwāyā* of oasis towns, they tended to collect several taxes generally known as the *mudārāt*. For a price, a *zwāyā* clan could purchase the annual protection obligation of a specific ḥasānī group.²³¹ Another tax was administered by town councils on all the inhabitants for covering various expenses, including those incurred by the periodic hosting of guests, such as the emirs (*mudārāt al-diyāfa*).

Fees usually were exacted by Saharans on caravans passing through their particular region or camp. As noted above, emirates such as the Trārza imposed heavy duties on trans-Saharan caravans entering their turf en route to Senegal. Another fee was the regular tax or *mudārāt al-qāfila*

²²⁷ Frèrejean, “Région des Idouaich,” 78.

²²⁸ Interview in Nouakchott with Sidi Wuld Dahī (06/12/98); Bonafos, “Tribu,” 227.

²²⁹ Ba, “Grande figure,” 552.

²³⁰ Ibid., n 2.

²³¹ One example is the *mudārāt* payment negotiated between al-Hājj ‘Aly and the Awlād Dīm (SMS 5), Family Archives of Sharīf b. Muḥammad al-Sharīf Family in Tishīt; Frèrejean, “Région,” 77–9.

(sometimes called *mukūs*) for interregional caravans.²³² Caravan leaders negotiated these taxes, paid by all crew members proportionally to their caravan shares. Panet, Bū al-Mughdād, Sidi Hamet, and others discuss the countless occasions when their caravaners had to pay “gifts” to caravan-stoppers. From the evidence gleaned from documents dealing with ghāfar and protection contracts signed between groups, it appears that the accepted means of payment for tributes and tolls in mid-nineteenth-century western Africa was the bayša. To some extent, the Moroccan *z̧tāta* paid by an individual to a caravan leader for “courageous protection through his port of arms and not through his personal influence” shares few similarities to the ghāfar paid to local authorities for caravan safety.²³³ This kind of tax, which was akin to charging a travel-safety fee per individual and not per load, does not seem to have been practiced on trans-Saharan caravans. Abdalhad Sebti notes that the topic of protection fees was intensely debated by Maghribi muftīs for centuries.²³⁴

Desert Spies and Vigilantes

Various nomadic groups were likely to have representatives scouting the main wells and passageways typically used by caravans, called *liṣān* (“tongue”).²³⁵ At the well of Akjūjt, for instance, which was a water refueling stop for caravans circulating between the Ādrār and Ndar (Map 6), a representative of the Awlād Talḥa, the “spies of desert pillagers,” as Bū al-Mughdād describes this group, was in charge of “spotting caravans.”²³⁶ Fortunately for Bū al-Mughdād, they avoided trouble since the caravan leader knew the representative and managed to buy him off with a small “gift.” Young girls or boys, in charge of reporting caravan sightings, often performed as desert spies. In the Tīris, a particular mountain overlooking a well was named “the hill of the young tributary girl” (*Galb al-znāgiya*). An oral tradition collected by Bū al-Mughdād explains that a group of the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ tried to sneak by unnoticed with their caravan to avoid the toll. When the young girl finally saw them nearing the well, she let out such a powerful screech to alert her people that it is said she died on the spot.²³⁷

²³² For a discussion of the mudārāt paid by the Bayrūk family, see McDougall, “Conceptualising the Sahara,” 374–6.

²³³ Sebti, “Z̧tāta et sécurité de voyage,” 39, quoting Muḥammad al-Sijilmāsi’s (d.1214/1799) *ʿAmal al-Fāsī*; Albergoni, “Bédouins,” 207.

²³⁴ Sebti, “Z̧tāta,” 40–1.

²³⁵ Ould Cheikh, “Nomadisme,” 371.

²³⁶ Bou El-Mogdad, “Voyage,” 485.

²³⁷ Ibid., 488.

Another regular “tollbooth” was located just north of Ndar, in a village called Ndiago (Map 6). Here, the emir of Trārza had a permanent representative to ensure that each loaded caravan headed north paid the ghāfar. If a caravan was attacked during the crossing of the Trārza territory, however, caravan leaders could request refunds, since the agents of the emir had failed in their protection duties. It was the emir’s responsibility, at least in theory, to find the raiders and return the stolen goods, or otherwise compensate the victims. Because of the low population density, the fact that regions were interdependent in western Africa, and also that trading was vital, those who committed crimes or exacted unreasonable claims typically were easily identified and reprimanded.

Clan Alliances

Another means to purchase protection was the practice of “*dhabiha*,” or ceremonial slaughter among groups. Prevalent in the northern Sahara, this was the symbolic slaughtering of a camel by one group with another to reach a political *entente*.²³⁸ As Julio Caro Baroja explains, “Strong tribes (cabilas) of the western Sahara, such as the Tikna, establish alliances with their tributaries through the *debiha*.”²³⁹ By way of an example, the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ in the Wād Nūn slaughtered for the family of the Ahl Ḥamdāt of the Azwāfiṭ, a Tikna sub-clan.²⁴⁰ In this way, the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ promised to symbolically or literally slaughter a camel every year for the Ahl Ḥamdāt in exchange for their protection services. This ritual meant that they became fictive kin sharing solidarity (*ʿaṣabiyya*) by creating a political alliance for the purposes of cooperation in warfare and commerce. Also in the Wād Nūn there was a customary protection treaty negotiated for strangers living in towns such as Guelmīm called the *al-ʿurfiya al-gazūla*.²⁴¹ Moreover, the Jewish community there paid the jizya tax to the Bayrūk family for protection. Likewise the small Jewish community in nineteenth-century Timbuktu was made to pay an annual camel-load of sulfur (Chapter 3).

The politics of protection, contingent on the size, purpose, and identity of those aboard a caravan, varied across time. To be sure, regional or

²³⁸ Bonte (“L’émirat,” 1176–87) provides an in-depth study of ritual slaughtering in the Ādrār region.

²³⁹ Caro Baroja, *Estudios Saharianos*, 42.

²⁴⁰ Document dated 1298/1880 consulted in the archives of Aḥmād Fāl b. al-Mahjūb b. Mujidrī, Guelmīm.

²⁴¹ Interview in Guelmīm with Aḥmād Fāl b. al-Majūb b. Mujidrī (07/27/99).

subsistence caravans traveling the classic routes, from say Shinqīti to Tishīt, could rely, to some extent at least, on local agreements among clans to ensure their safety. Despite the fact that the behavior of many nomadic warriors was often far from devout, they did, in theory, “fear God,” respect reputed Muslim leaders and their constituents, and had every incentive to encourage caravan traffic. In practice, however, warrior groups’ erratic and reckless activities made them outlaws in the eyes and opinions of local jurists.

Arming the Convoy

Caravaners traveling on trans-Saharan trails, on the other hand, were perhaps individually more vulnerable. This is why in the past they tended to travel in such large caravans regrouping hundreds of men and camels. Aside from the power through sheer numbers afforded by large-scale caravans, long-distance traders naturally had other defense mechanisms. As seen in Chapter 2, the early trans-Saharan traders carried leather shields (*lamṭa*) for which they were renowned. Daggers, sabers, and spears were once part of the international caravaners’ gear. As already noted, the propagation of firearms, from muskets to rifles, in the nineteenth century changed the dynamics of caravan organizing.

Engaging in long-distance trade across western Africa, therefore, required access to weapons or armed convoys to control violence, in addition to capital, connections in distant markets, and political or religious endorsements. The availability of firearms allowed for a decrease in caravan size over the course of the nineteenth century. Conversely, it rendered large convoys less secure, while smaller, more mobile, and less conspicuous caravans with armed crew were better prepared to defend their cargoes against increasingly armed nomadic pillagers. In any event, the cost of paying for protection, for tolls at certain passageways, and unforeseen negotiations with nomads was a varying but important share of overall transaction costs. These costs were considerably lowered when traders belonged to a trade network, an argument I develop further in Chapter 7.

CONCLUSION

Long-distance trade is one of the oldest professions in the world and is all too commonly believed to be dominated by men. This study contradicts the prevailing androcentric paradigm by demonstrating, first, the vital

role that women played in shore-side institutions and, second, the importance of family labor – both of which made caravanning possible. Indeed, not unlike many professional occupations in the nineteenth century, caravanning was a family affair involving husbands and wives, as well as their offspring and extended kin, including slaves. When examined from the point of view of family labor, the organization of caravans is comparable to maritime trade across the Mediterranean and the Atlantic and Indian Oceans in the pre-modern period. Indeed, just as gender was “a fundamental component of seafaring,” so, too, was it in the caravanning business.²⁴²

Trans-Saharan trade was a dangerous endeavor on numerous accounts. The financial risks were high. But also the physical hardships of long crossings, harsh environmental conditions, and the threats of running astray, succumbing to thirst, or being beset by wild animals or predatory raiders were constant. Rare were the women who engaged in this highly perilous and physically grueling activity which could be considered somewhat of a privilege. Given a choice, few would have dared to go voluntarily on trans-Saharan caravans were it not for sheer necessity, an eagerness for commercial gain, or a taste for extreme adventure. Yet, as shown in the example with which we began this chapter, and those examined more fully in the [next chapter](#), it is clear that women participated in caravanning via proxies, while relying on the paper economy of faith to draft contracts, document transactions, and protect their property rights.

²⁴² Norling and Creighton, *Iron Men*, vii.

Business Practice and Legal Culture in a Paper Economy of Faith

Tel est le désert. Un Coran, qui n'est qu'une règle de jeu, en change le sable en Empire.

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry¹

Now, honest (traders) are few. It is unavoidable that there should be cheating, tampering with the merchandise which may ruin it, and delay in payment which may ruin the profit, since (such delay) while it lasts prevents any activity that could bring profit. There will also be non-acknowledgement or denial of obligations, which may prove destructive to one's capital *unless (the obligation) had been stated in writing and properly witnessed. The judiciary is of little use in this connection, since the law requires clear evidence.*

Ibn Khaldūn²

In the late nineteenth century a trader from Tīshīt entrusted merchandise, by way of an agency contract, to a caravaner traveling to the commercial center of Guelmīm in the Wād Nūn region. When he finally returned to Tīshīt after an absence of four years, the caravaner denied having been entrusted with some of the goods, and he declared that the *qāḍī* (judge) of Guelmīm had taken possession of one portion. As for the rest of the merchandise, he claimed that it got “lost along the way” (*dā‘a fī al-ṭarīq*).³ The original owner of the merchandise asked the *qāḍī* of Tīshīt to mediate the dispute, but he found no proof that the caravaner had lied to, or otherwise cheated, him. So he called on the services of a *muftī* (jurist), Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm of the Awlād Bū al-Sibā‘ clan, who probably himself was from Wād Nūn, for the issuance of a fatwa. He was to

¹ De Saint-Exupéry, *Terre des Hommes*, cited in Norris, *Saharan Myth*, 90.

² Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah*, 342 (emphasis added).

³ Fatwa issued by Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Sbā‘ī on entrusted trade goods (MA1), Family Archives of Muḥammad Wuld Aḥamdī (Tīshīt), lines 3–7.

deliberate whether the caravaner should “be fined for what he claimed was lost because of his apparent betrayal, or is he to be believed because of his *trustworthiness* (*amānatihī*)?”⁴

In a brilliantly crafted fatwa discussing the obligations of legal service providers and the insurmountable challenge of bringing betrayers to justice, the muftī reasoned that the caravaner was innocent until proven guilty. Here he applied the dictum that the claimant produces the testimentary evidence while the defendant takes the oath (*al-bayyina ‘alā al-mudda‘ī wa al-yamīn ‘alā man ankar*). In accordance with the rules of contractual agreements, the agent was not responsible for the loss of the principal in the event of an accident, such as a runaway or stolen camel. The muftī concluded that it was up to the claimant, the local trader, to find proof of the wrongdoing or supposed betrayal of the defendant, the caravanning agent. Moreover, he warned that the former was hindering the law by rallying the public against the caravaner.

For most Saharans, engaging in trans-Saharan trade, directly or by proxy, was a matter of survival. It was the only channel through which to obtain basic needs, such as cereal and cloth, and to have access to cultural capital, in the form of books and paper. Because of their commitment to religious obligations and their desire to safeguard their reputations or symbolic capital, long-distance traders actively sought legal sanction for their transactions. Indeed, the caravanning world was governed by Islamic and customary norms of behavior that facilitated the conduct of long-distance trade. In principle, enforcement was self-regulating since most Muslims tended to possess a rudimentary understanding of the basic tenets of Islam and local rules of normative behavior. Moreover, despite the large distances between markets, the relatively low population density of the Sahara favored the accuracy and velocity of information circulation, thereby creating disincentives to misbehave or betray trade partners.

As seen in the previous chapters, organizing a camel caravan was complicated. It required the coordination of multiple transactions from multiple parties in multiple locations. It was rendered more efficient through traders’ reliance on literacy and an Islamic legal and institutional framework for drafting contracts and recording transactions. But as the above case shows, trustworthy trade partners who shared commercial risks were not always successful in overcoming fundamental problems of exchange such as the temptation to cheat or the hazards of the road. When disputes arose, long-distance traders had recourse to the services of a class

⁴ Ibid., lines 9–10 (emphasis added).

of what I call “legal service providers,” namely, qāḍīs and muftīs, who acted as arbitrators and provided guidance.

Muslim legal service providers who engaged in jurisprudence (*fiqh*) used their knowledge emanating from the Qur’ān, other sources of Islamic law, legal doctrine, and customary law to provide a semblance of social and economic order. In addition to upholding the law, legal experts also defined terms of trade, clarified standard valuations and equivalencies, and negotiated behavioral norms, including the commercial practices of merchants and traders. Their roles were paramount in the context of nineteenth-century western Sahara where no single state or overarching power ruled supreme. As Stewart demonstrates in his study of nineteenth-century southwestern Mauritania, the administration of Muslim justice in segmentary societies where political authority was diffused was especially vital to the maintenance of social stability.⁵ In this regard, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s opinion that the holy book of Muslims “turns the desert into an empire” contains more than a grain of truth. Judges engaged in arbitration by issuing rulings, while jurists wrote legal opinions (*fatāwā*) and shorter replies (*nawāzil* or *ajwiba*) supplying legal assistance. This “legal infrastructure” created institutions that, following Kuran, “not only constrained activities but [also] shape[d] the incentives to modify them.”⁶ By analyzing how legal service providers and Muslim scholars (or ‘*ulamā*’) defined these institutions, one gets closer to understanding the *praxis* of Islamic law than when simply reading the classic scriptures.

Legal practice, like religious practice, is embedded in cultural practice. By “legal culture” I mean to underscore, on the one hand, the pervasiveness of the law in the daily lives of many Muslims and, on the other, the embeddedness of culture in Islamic jurisprudence. What constituted normative behavior in the prevailing legal culture of nineteenth-century western Sahara was also influenced by cultural norms, for Islamic legal practice was, to some extent at least, culturally hybrid.⁷ Indeed, customary law (*urf*) and local tradition (*āda*) were legal determinants alongside the classic sources of the law, especially when legal manuals failed to provide answers or when the law of the land prevailed. Invariably, the judgments of qāḍīs or the opinions of muftīs were reached

⁵ Stewart, *Islam and Social Order*, 65–6.

⁶ Kuran, “Islamic Commercial Crisis,” 415.

⁷ O’Fahey (“The Office of *Qāḍī* in Dār Fūr: A Preliminary Inquiry,” 112–13, 124) represents a similar picture about the judicial practice in Dār Fūr (Sudan). Incidentally, this author recognized thirty years ago the need to investigate the “relation between the *sharī‘a* and custom.”

through independent reasoning or personal assessment and were not necessarily couched in legal jargon. In other words, often neither Islamic nor customary law was a determinant or even the reference point. Legal service providers and their constituents, therefore, drew on formal knowledge of Islamic legal codes, locally prescribed cultural norms, or a combination of both to resolve contentious issues. In the western Sahara, this legal culture is reflected in the high frequency of litigation as evidenced by the sheer volume of written records of a legal nature.

By relying on Arabic literacy and Islamic law as an institutional framework, Muslim trans-Saharan traders operated in what I have termed a “paper economy of faith,” an expression derived from the ideas of Goitein and Bourdieu, as noted in Chapter 1. Goitein coined the expression “paper economy” to describe the volume, variety, and financial nature of the Geniza records documenting early modern Jewish commerce based in North Africa.⁸ He was referring in particular to how banking was sustained by transactions on paper, which became a substitute for carrying cash by way of promissory notes, traveler’s checks, and money orders. I extend his meaning of “paper economy” to the use of paper as an informational support tool for all commercial transactions, including contracts and correspondence. Bourdieu discusses an “economy of faith and trust” in the Muslim Kabyle context of Algeria to illustrate the interactions prevailing between religious authorities and their constituents, while also showing the implicit link between the pursuit of economic and symbolic capital.⁹ Combining these two expressions neatly captures how trans-Saharan trade was organized in the nineteenth century, but this “paper economy of faith” was not unique. Similar environments existed in other parts of Africa, the Middle East, and Europe during the early modern period where either Jewish or Islamic legal traditions of learning and literacy prevailed.

A majority of nineteenth-century trans-Saharan merchants and their agents tended to be literate in Arabic, or at least literate enough to possess sufficient writing skills to produce rudimentary commercial records. They operated in a paper economy by drafting contracts, recording property rights, holding business correspondence, and keeping commercial records. Muslim traders depended on the use of paper for the purposes of accounting and accountability in the language and law of Islam and, therefore, in the eyes of God. In this regard, many trans-Saharan traders followed the

⁸ Goitein, *Mediterranean*, I, 240, 245.

⁹ Bourdieu, “Structures,” 168–9. See also his discussion of “the economy of good-faith” in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 173–4, 177–8.

Qur'ānic injunction to commit commercial transactions to writing. They also relied on legal literature and the opinions of jurists to organize their economic activities. At the same time, legal advice and contractual business agreements were carried out orally, or off the record. Yet the sheer volume of precious paper expended on recording or negotiating business affairs in nineteenth-century Sahara strongly suggests that economic agents were concerned about ensuring both the legality of their transactions and the commitment of their trade partners. During this time the volume of trans-Saharan traffic between North and West Africa increased significantly, and it is precisely in this period, as seen in [Chapter 2](#), that caravans transported ever larger amounts of writing paper into western Africa.

Paradoxically, while trans-Saharan traders placed great emphasis on recording business transactions, such records did not carry official legal weight, as noted by Ibn Khaldūn, quoted above. This is because in Islamic law, legal evidence could only be oral in nature, which meant that written documentation of any kind had no legal standing. Therefore, as discussed below, it was not lawful to introduce contracts or any written documentation as evidence in litigation without the oral testimony of at least two “credible” witnesses certifying authenticity. Similarly, written documents, including fatwas, were not legally binding, and while they influenced the decisions of qāḍīs, they could not be introduced in a court of law. As I have suggested elsewhere, the invalidity of documents in Islamic law constituted a fundamental constraint in the institutional development of Muslim societies.¹⁰

This chapter examines the legal culture of pre-colonial Saharan societies to explain how Islamic legal practice shaped commercial transactions and business behavior. First, based on the sources of Islamic law, starting with the Qur'ān, I discuss the relevance of religion and law to economic organization especially in reference to the conduct of trade. Second, I examine the roles of prominent legal service providers and their pivotal position in legal and local governance. In a third part, I review Saharan legal discourse on business and ethical norms, dating from the late seventeenth to the early twentieth century. Finally, in a last section, I pay particular attention to the nature of contracts between principal merchants and associate traders, that is to say, between established caravan financiers and their itinerant commercial agents who embarked on camel caravans to trade on their behalf. Because the majority of people in the western Sahara engaged in trans-Saharan trade, a sizeable

¹⁰ Lydon, “A Paper Economy of Faith without Faith in Paper.”

portion of the documentation found in local libraries deals with commercial activities. Most of the evidence for this chapter is gleaned from private trade records and the works of Saharan jurists who established guidelines for commercial exchange and prescriptions for business behavior.

RELIGION, LEGAL CULTURE, AND COMMERCE

The relevance of religious practice to the organization of early modern trade is self-evident to any historian examining the historical record. As Goitein pointed out years ago, based on his study of the Geniza records:

Religion was conducive not only to the formation of business relationships, but also to their proper conduct. Again and again, a man's piety and fear of God are involved when he is reminded to adhere to good business practices or when he is praised for his excellent handling of his friends' affairs. . . . *Religion was undoubtedly the strongest element in a merchant's mental makeup*, and religion meant membership in a specific religious community.¹¹

As noted in Chapter 2, Jews were among the early merchants to use literacy in commerce. They also relied on "Jewish law and lore, as is evident from the legal opinions written on the reverse sides of business letters."¹² Goitein likened this to the behavior of Muslim traders because "Islam . . . took a similar attitude toward learning and the learned."¹³ Indeed, to increase efficiencies in the organization of long-distance trade, Muslims depended on the power of the written word on paper, given added weight by their embedded religious and legal cultures.

Islam's Commercial Tradition

As Hunwick once observed, it is "a cliché to point out the symbiotic relationship of Islam and trade."¹⁴ After all, the founder of the Islamic faith and recipient of God's revelations, Prophet Muḥammad, was himself a long-distance trader, which made his a commendable profession. In the words of the second Caliph of Islam, 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, "Trading is the true test of man, and it is in the operations of trade that his piety and religious worth become known."¹⁵ Accordingly, the Qur'ān and the

¹¹ Goitein, *Letters*, 7–8 (emphasis added). ¹² *Ibid.*, 9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 9–10.

¹⁴ Hunwick, "Islamic Financial Institutions," 72. See also Cohen, "Cultural Strategies," 277.

¹⁵ Cited in Bovill, *Golden Trade*, 236.

prophetic sayings are filled with references to commerce, providing guidelines for business behavior.

Muslim traders belonged to a community of followers who shared in a common belief system and its associated faith-based institutions. Those with sufficient levels of knowledge could communicate in the Arabic language and script and used legal tools for economic organizing. In many parts of Muslim Africa considerable prestige was attached to commerce. Unlike many other world religions in which traders were subject to what Adam Smith called “the popular odium,” Muslims generally considered trading an honorable profession, although some were more cynical.¹⁶ For his part, Ibn Khaldūn opined that because trading involved cunning, rare were the merchants who practiced the profession honorably.¹⁷

Islamic Law and Practice

Islamic law is a “divine science” that “constitutes a miracle for the people,” as nineteenth-century Saharan jurists liked to impress upon their readers.¹⁸ In fact the law was arguably the central institutional framework of the religion and a quintessential part of being Muslim. Messick proposed that it is useful to think of Islamic law as a “total” discourse, wherein “all kinds of institutions find simultaneous expression: religious, legal, moral and economic.”¹⁹ As stated in the Qur’ān, “they will not – I swear – be true believers until they ask You to arbitrate in their disputes.”²⁰ The term *sharī‘a* means divine law, while the law as written and codified by legal traditions is what can best be termed *substantive* law.²¹

Like all Muslim legal scholars, Saharan jurists based their arguments on the sources of jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*). The fundamental sources are (1) the Qur’ān, representing the word of God (*Allah*) as revealed to Muḥammad; (2) the Sunna, or the “normative model of behavior of the Prophet” derived from his sayings (sing. *ḥadīth*, plur. *ahādīth*) as

¹⁶ Messick, *Calligraphic State*, citing Mauss, *The Gift*, 1, 3.

¹⁷ Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, cited in K. N. Chaudhuri, “Reflections on the Organizing Principle of Pre-modern Trade,” 432–3. Chaudhuri discussed the unfavorable image of traders (432–5).

¹⁸ Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqqadimah*, 343–4.

¹⁹ Fatwa issued by ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. al-Shaykh al-Māmī (Gibla) to ‘Abdallah b. Arwīlī, Wād Nūn Inheritance Case (1269/1853), Arwīlī Family Records, Archives of Shaykh Ḥammūnī (Shinqīti).

²⁰ Qur’ān (IV: 65) quoted in a fatwa issued by ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. al-Shaykh al-Māmī (discussed below).

²¹ W. B. Hallaq, *History of Islamic Legal Theories*, 153–66.

remembered by his companions and family members, including his learned widow ʿĀʾisha; (3) the consensus of opinions (*ijmāʿ*); and (4) analogical reasoning (*qiyās*).²² Secondary legal sources are public interest (*istiṣlāḥ*) and customary law (*ʿurf*). The four Sunni legal doctrines (*madhāhib*), including the Mālikī tradition practiced in northern and western Africa, shaped the law.

Since most of the sources of Islamic law were tailored to the context of seventh-century Arabia, and since practice and behavior needed to adjust to the passage of time, Muslim jurists applied themselves to interpreting the law to address current situations. Called *ijtihād* (individual legal reasoning), this movement advocated a rational approach to resolving contemporary legal questions based on the *uṣūl al-fiqh* and the exercise of logic.²³ By the thirteenth century, however, legal scholars supposedly closed the “gates of *ijtihād*,” putting a formal end to all further interpretations, and thereby setting legal codes for generations to come. Although not all Saharan jurists were in agreement, many actively exercised *ijtihād*, as discussed below, arguing that legal innovations were necessary because of the particular circumstances of Saharan societies.

Islamic legal practice in western Africa, as elsewhere, was defined by a combination of interpretations of the Mālikī codes, local Islamic discourse, and customary law.²⁴ Reliance on customary law, that is to say the law of the land that formed a body of culturally determined unwritten rules, was considered acceptable in the eyes of many jurists when it did not contradict the spirit of the Qurʾān. Despite the spread of Islam throughout northern and western Africa, customary law and traditions, or local legal codes, survived in certain jurisdictional domains and were incorporated into rulings. Mālikī law at times differed from other legal doctrines in its openness to accept customary law.

The Mālikī Doctrine in Africa

Throughout most of North and West Africa, Muslims followed the legal doctrine developed by Mālik b. Anas, a resident of eighth-century

²² For a discussion of *uṣūl al-fiqh*, see *ibid.*, 1–3, and M. H. Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*. Kamali’s treatise is primarily concerned with the Shāʿfi doctrine. For an examination of the Islamic legal system in medieval Morocco, see D. Powers, *Law, Society and Culture in the Maghrib, 1300–1500*, esp. 7–21, 88–90, and 226–9.

²³ Interview in Nouakchott with Hamdan Wuld al-Tāh (06/06/97); Schacht, *Introduction to Islamic Law*, 69–75.

²⁴ L. Benton, *Law and Colonial Cultures*, 52–6, 104–12.

Medina. The Mālikī tradition was one of four Sunni legal doctrines that included the Ḥanbālī, Shāʿfī, and Ḥanafī law schools. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the eleventh-century Almoravid reformers in large part were responsible for disseminating Mālikī law into western Africa. One of its emphases was on the use of the law for the benefit (*maṣlaḥa*) of society and the improvement of public welfare.²⁵ Moreover, Mālikī jurists insisted that Muslims abide by the rules and ways of the original Muslims of Medina (*ʿamal al-madīna*).²⁶

Mālik's legal tradition, collected orally during his life, was compiled in a reference work entitled *al-Muwatṭaʾ* ("The Well-Trodden Path"). Composed as a series of answers provided by Mālik to practical legal questions in sixty-one chapters citing 1,720 ḥadīth, this manual also contains an extensive legal bibliography. Chapter 31, devoted to questions about sales (*al-buyūʿ*), tellingly begins with a lengthy discussion of slaves and transactions related to them, an indication of the terms of trade, wealth, and property rights in eighth-century Medina that would prevail throughout the Muslim world for the next millennium. The first six subject-entries cover a range of rules pertaining to the slave trade, including guarantees against defects.²⁷ This is followed by an examination of transactions in agricultural produce and services, from the sale of animals and the fruits of the earth to the renting of land. Then there is a lengthy discussion of financial transactions, including loans, debts, and usury. Mālik discussed various sales agreements, such as advance or forward sales, currency exchange, and return policies. Interestingly, Mālik cites a ḥadīth forbidding that Muslims go forward to meet incoming mounted (*rukbān*) merchants in order to outbid other buyers, which is reminiscent of the procedures discussed in the [previous chapter](#) about Saharan caravan market-entries.²⁸ Chapter 32 focuses on partnership agreements (*qirāḍ*) between principal investor and traveling agent of the kind examined below.²⁹ It provides a detailed discussion of the forms of arrangements, such as expense allocation and profit sharing, that are permissible in Mālikī law.

An oral tradition claims that there was a time when forty women of the Tajakānit clan in the town of Tinīgi could recite the *Muwatṭaʾ*.³⁰ However, this was not the most commonly used Mālikī manual in

²⁵ Kamali, *Principles*, 14; Schacht, *Introduction*, 61–2.

²⁶ Schacht, *Introduction*, 64–5.

²⁷ See Brockopp, *Early Maliki Law*, especially his discussion of Islamic law and slavery in the eighth century, 115–205.

²⁸ Mālik, *al-Muwatṭaʾ* (31:45), 398.

²⁹ Mālik, *al-Muwatṭaʾ* (32:1–10), 400–8.

³⁰ Lydon, "Inkwells," 48; see also Ould Cheikh, "Nomadisme," 60–81.

nineteenth-century western Africa. The voluminous *al-Mudawwana al-Kubrā* ("The Large Body of Laws") known simply as the *Mudawwana*, compiled by Saḥnūn, was the other major Mālikī reference.³¹ It comprises conversations with Saḥnūn's professor, Ibn al-Qāsim, who was Mālik's student. Another commonly used Mālikī work was *al-Risāla al-fiqhīya* ("Treatise on (Mālikī) Jurisprudence") by Muḥammad 'Abdallah b. Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī, who lived in tenth-century Tunisia.³² The most popular abridgment of Mālikī law was *al-Mukhtaṣar fī al-fiqh 'alā madhhab al-imām Mālik* ("Compendium of Jurisprudence of Imam Mālik's Doctrine") written by the fourteenth-century Egyptian scholar Khalīl b. Iṣḥāq al-Jundī.³³ The *Mukhtaṣar* was the most frequently cited, perhaps because it was written later, is relatively short, and was designed to be memorized and passed down orally.

In addition to the *Muwatṭa*, the *Mudawwana*, the *Risāla*, and the *Mukhtaṣar*, western African legal specialists based their judgments and opinions on other works. As one nineteenth-century Saharan muftī expressed by way of a metaphor: "the qāḍī needs his references and the muftī needs his commentaries, like the cat needs his claws."³⁴ The works of Ibn Rushd, al-Suyūṭī, and Ibn Farḥūn further shaped Saharan legal discourse. These also were typically cited by qāḍīs of the Muslim tribunal of Ndar in Senegal that operated from the mid-nineteenth century onward.³⁵ Aside from this colonial-cum-Muslim legal institution, there were no other local courthouses in this region of Africa.

³¹ Like Ibn Abī Zayd, author of the *Risāla*, Saḥnūn was from the city of Qayrawān in Tunisia. While this work was well known, it may have been harder to access in nineteenth-century western Africa perhaps because few could afford to purchase its sixteen volumes. More than Mālik's work, the *Mudawwana* was extremely detailed on the rules of commercial exchange and the question of sales. Al-Ṣadiq 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Gharyānī, *Mudawwana*, 173–65. This work was so influential in northern Africa that it is now synonymous with Moroccan family and personal status law. There are numerous categories of sales recognized in Islamic law, from forward purchases (*ba'i al-salam*) to the sale of currency (*al-ṣarf*). Also see Ould Bah, *Littérature juridique et l'évolution du malikisme*, 37–8.

³² Ibn Abī Zayd, Léon Bercher (ed.), *La Risāla*. This bilingual edition is hereafter referred to as Ibn Abī Zayd. For a list of other works of jurisprudence found in western African libraries (Mali and Mauritania), see Ould Cheikh, "Nomadisme," 387–395; Ould Hamidoun and Heymovski, *Catalogue provisoire des manuscrits mauritaniens en langue arabe*; Wuld Muhammad Yahyā, *Fihrs Makhtūtāt Shinqīt wa Wādān*; and Rebstock, *Sammlung arabischer Handschriften in Mauretanien*.

³³ For convenience I used the following Arabic text, which includes an unreliable translation: Seignette, *Code musulman par Khalil*.

³⁴ Fatwa discussed at the beginning of the chapter (see note 3).

³⁵ Lydon, "Droit islamique et droit de la femme."

ISLAM, MĀLIKĪ LAW, AND CONTRACTS

Because of its legal structure, which dictates, among other things, the ethical norms of business behavior, Islam distinguishes itself from other religions.³⁶ As noted earlier, the Qur'ān provides spiritual and practical guidelines for conduct in trade. Cooperative behavior, mutual trustworthiness, and integrity are embedded in the social justice message conveyed in the Qur'ān and the Sunna. It is important, however, to recognize to what extent Islamic laws promoting social justice may be “overly optimistic assessments of human nature and capabilities.”³⁷

Social Justice and Honesty in Trade

According to proponents of Islamic economics, Muslims followed four ethical axioms promoting cooperative behavior between members of a “community of believers” (*umma*): unity, justice, free will, and responsibility.³⁸ The obligation of all Muslims to “give just weight and full measure” or otherwise be fair, especially in trade, is stressed throughout the Qur'ān.³⁹ Another verse, from the chapter entitled “The Unjust,” expresses this idea more forcefully: “Woe to the unjust who, when others measure for them, exact in full, but when they measure or weigh for others, defraud them!”⁴⁰ This sentiment is communicated in the poem of a nineteenth-century Saharan who wrote, “if an unjust person practices injustice as a rule . . . Allah will inflict His torture upon him.”⁴¹ In other words, good Muslims will reap the rewards of their actions, while unethical, unbridled individualism and greed will have negative consequences.

Aside from being fair, the Sunna encourages Muslim traders to be honest, trustworthy, and generous. As one ḥadīth makes clear, honesty in business is considered the surest pathway to heaven: “The *truthful*

³⁶ Naqwi, *Ethics and Economics*, 18.

³⁷ Kuran, “On the Notion of Economic Justice,” 177.

³⁸ Naqwi, *Ethics*, 37–69. For additional parameters, see El-Ashker and Wilson, *Islamic Economics*, 37–45. For a critical review of the literature on Islamic economics, see Kuran, “Economic Justice” and “Behavioral Norms,” 353–79.

³⁹ Qur'ān 6:152; 11:84; 17:34; 26:180; 55:5; 83:1–2 (translations of the Qur'ān are primarily based on A. Yusuf Ali, ed., *Holy Qur'ān*).

⁴⁰ Qur'ān, 83:1–2.

⁴¹ Written on the verso of an excerpt of a text on pledges of allegiance by Shaykh Sidi al-Mukhtār Wuld Shaykh Sidi Muḥammad copied by Muḥammad Wuld al-Tālib Muḥammad Wuld al-Tālib 'Uthmān al-Ḥusaynī, Family Archives Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr (Tishīt).

merchant [is rewarded by being ranked] on the Day of Resurrection together with the Prophet, the truthful ones, the martyrs and the pious people.”⁴² Trustworthiness and cooperative behavior must be understood in terms of the principle of social justice that stresses Muslims’ social obligation to fellow Muslims, including their duty to redistribute their wealth to those in need.⁴³ Wealth redistribution is prescribed for all Muslims, among whom “in their wealth, the beggar and the destitute have due share.”⁴⁴ In principle, the redistribution of wealth is to be carried out not only through individual acts of charity and almsgiving but also by institutions, including the annual Islamic tithe (*zakāt*).

Trade or Usury?

Qur’anic verses contained in *Sūrat* II (“The Cow”) discuss the status of usury (*ribā*):

They claim that trading is no different from usury. But God has permitted trading and made usury unlawful. . . . God has laid His curse on usury and blessed almsgiving with increase.⁴⁵

The rationale for prohibiting usury relates to Islam’s message of social equity. Put simply, usury is the illicit gain of the haves by their unlawful exploitation of the have-nots.⁴⁶ Whereas in trade, a single purchase is paid for only once, a loan with interest is repaid in multiple installments that, added together, may exceed the actual value of the original loan. This over-payment is what is deemed exploitative.⁴⁷ The Qur’ān warns: “Believers, do not live on usury, doubling your wealth many times over. Have fear in God that you may prosper.”⁴⁸ Yet usury, or lending capital for profit, and the act of trading, or selling a good for profit, were so similar that it was typically a contentious issue among jurists.

⁴² A. Alawi Haji Hassan, *Sales and Contracts*, 16, citing Abū Hanīfa, founder of the Ḥanafī doctrine of Sunni law (emphasis added).

⁴³ Another verse commands: “Wealth becomes not a commodity between the rich among you” (Qur’ān, 43:7). In his critique of the literature on Islamic economics, Kuran (“Economic,” 177) notes that “on the subject of those in need, the Islamic economists have a tendency to write as if it were perfectly obvious what ‘need’ is.”

⁴⁴ Qur’ān, 83:1–2.

⁴⁵ Qur’ān, 2:275–6. El-Ashker and Wilson (*Islamic Economics*, 50–1; see also 50–5) suggest caution when translating as “usury” the term *ribā* (meaning “increase”) since it concerns a variety of transactions involving interest.

⁴⁶ Qur’ān, 2:271–85. For a detailed explanation, see Kamali, *Principles*, 402–4.

⁴⁷ Benmansour, *L’ économie musulmane*, 62–3.

⁴⁸ Qur’ān, 3:130.

While both trading and usury generate an increase in capital, the difference between them lies in the ethical quality of the exchange. A transaction is unfair if a trader takes advantage of a customer's misfortune by exacting excessive, abusive, and unreasonable interest.⁴⁹ Such behavior is considered usurious and therefore a reprehensible act. All other transactions, such as the payment of monthly rent or the net profit from a transaction, qualify as trade, pure and simple. It is worth noting that until the mid-eighteenth century, for example, the Catholic Church prohibited usury. The Bible, the New Testament, and Jewish Talmudic law considered usury inadvisable. Even Aristotle saw usury as "unnatural" because he argued that money should be used as a means of exchange, not to generate more money.⁵⁰ Therefore, the question of usury was not about constraining economic activity but rather about curtailing social injustice.

To transact lawfully and therefore avoid usury, a well-known ḥadīth paraphrased in Mālik's *al-Muwatṭa'* recommends: "do not sell gold for gold except when it is like for like and do not increase one over the other, and do not sell paper for paper except when it is like for like and do not increase one over the other."⁵¹ In other words loans in cash or in debt contracts—which presumably is what is meant here by "paper" (unless what is implied is the sale of writing paper)—have to be repaid in the same "kind" and the original amount must not be increased. Loans, therefore, must be repaid in full and in the same currency in which they were contracted. Moreover, to be lawful commercial exchange must be simultaneous, that is, an immediate transaction. Selling a good with a delay is considered usurious because that delay has value for the seller. For this reason, the rules on usury and simultaneous exchange are plainly linked. Also prohibited is the sale of an absent good, a good not seen by the buyer at the time of purchase, because it is "like selling a bird in flight or a fish in the sea," as stated in another well-known ḥadīth. However, Mālikī scholars considered lawful a sale with anticipated payment or a forward sale, a practice known as *bai' al-salam*, for slaves and animals as well as for real estate and land.⁵²

⁴⁹ See El-Ashker and Wilson (*Islamic*, 51) who offer another explanation. They argue that the difference between the two is that one involves risk but not the other. But arguably lending is as risky a business as trade.

⁵⁰ El-Ashker and Wilson, *Islamic*, 52–3. See also Kuran, "The Logic of Financial Westernization in the Middle East."

⁵¹ Mālik, *al-Muwatṭa'* (31:16), 369.

⁵² Ibn Abi Zayd, 210–11. See Kamali, *Islamic Commercial Law*, 110–23.

Faith and Written Contracts

Islamic injunctions shaped, to some extent at least, the business conduct of Muslims in western Africa. This is because there, as elsewhere in the Muslim world, the verses of the Qur'ān were internalized by Muslims through mnemonic traditions of Islamic learning. The holy book instructs believers to write down their contracts in the presence of witnesses, worth citing here *in extenso*:

Believers, when you contract a debt for a fixed period, put it in writing. Let a scribe write it down for you in fairness; no scribe should refuse to write as God has taught him. Therefore let him write; and let the debtor dictate, fearing God his Lord and not diminishing the sum he owes. . . . *So do not fail to put your debts in writing, be they small or big, together with the date of payment.* This is more just in the sight of God; it ensures accuracy in testifying and is the best way to remove all doubt. But if the transaction in hand is a bargain concluded on the spot, it shall be no offence for you if you do not commit it to writing. . . . Call in two male witnesses from among you, but if two men cannot be found, then one man and two women whom you judge fit to act as witnesses; so that if either of them commits an error, the other will remember. Witnesses must not refuse to give evidence if called upon to do so.⁵³

The Qur'ān emphasizes that all transactions require testamentary evidence through the use of at least two male witnesses who are held accountable to testify in the eventuality of a dispute. Not only are Muslims directed to write contracts, but they also are to abide by their terms. Verses such as “O you who believe, commit to your contracts” (*Yā' ayyuhā al-ladhīna āmanū awāfū bil-‘uqūd*) enjoin Muslims to commit to fulfilling their contractual obligations.⁵⁴

Nineteenth-century trans-Saharan traders took these religious obligations seriously, and thankfully for historians, many of their descendants have preserved their documents, including canceled debt receipts. The volume of commercial records of prominent and not-so-prominent nineteenth-century trans-Saharan traders is a clear indication of the extent to which they depended on the paper economy for running their businesses. Saharan family archives, therefore, often contain bundles of *‘uqūd* (sing. *‘aqd*), a term meaning “contracts” used generically for commercial agreements. Sometimes such records were referred to with the general term for legal documentation (*wathā‘iq*), which was also used to designate the models for formatting contracts.

⁵³ Qur'ān 2:282–3 (emphasis added).

⁵⁴ Qur'ān 5:1.

The well-known eleventh-century Ḥānafi jurist Shams al-Dīn al-Sarakhsī described best the advantages for contracting parties to make use of such written agreements:

The purpose then of a document is reliance and precaution. . . . Partnership is a contract that extends (into the future). The recording of a deed is, thus, recommended in such a contract so that it becomes a decisive proof between them in case of dispute.⁵⁵

By clearly defining contracts in writing and making multiple copies of such documents partners avoided ambiguity in business deals. They also eliminated the risk of potential disagreements among their business partners or their inheritors after their passing. Indeed, the need to document transactions in writing was a means for an individual to protect her property not only during her lifetime, but also after her death, since such records constituted proof of transactions when assessing the estates of the deceased, a point developed further in Chapter 7. By drawing up contracts of various forms, as examined below, traders could engage in long-distance commerce and complex finance.

However, because of the Islamic interdict on usury, many of these contractual arrangements contained subterfuges to mask interest rates. In fact, Muslims devised all kinds of stratagems, known in the Islamic legal literature as *ḥiyāl*, to create “legal fictions” masking illicit gain such as the charging of interest on loans.⁵⁶ As Kuran has argued, Muslims historically have circumvented the ban on interest through either compartmentalization or casuistry to the point that “no Muslim polity has had a genuinely interest-free economy.”⁵⁷ The records of western Africa’s paper economy point to several legal stratagems typically designed in contractual formula, discussed below.

To draft contracts, Saharan traders made use of standard contractual models. These are described in a specific branch of Islamic literature that, according to Joseph Schacht, represents “one of the most distinctive technical features of Islamic law.”⁵⁸ These contractual formulas are known as *wathā’iq* (documents, deeds) in the Mālikī tradition or *shurūt* (provisos, stipulations) in other Islamic schools of law.⁵⁹ They contain

⁵⁵ Nyazee Imran, *Islamic Law of Business*, 31, citing al-Sarakhsī’s *al-Mabsūt*, 155.

⁵⁶ Schacht, *Introduction*, 78–85; Udovitch, *Partnership and Profit*, 11–12.

⁵⁷ Kuran, “Logic of Financial Westernization,” 597–9.

⁵⁸ Schacht, *Introduction*, 22.

⁵⁹ J. Wakin, *Function of Documents in Islamic Law*; Hallaq, “Model *Shurūt* Works and the Dialectic of Doctrine and Practice.”

standard clauses for drafting various agreements that were legally watertight. Saharan private libraries regularly hold copies of contractual models written in Arabic and typically including vowel marks (*tashkīl*), pointing to their use as pedagogical devices. One such model, entitled “shipment via agency” (*risāla bil-wakāla*), states:

This is to inform the observer of the document and whomever reads it attentively that so and so (*fulān b. fulān*), May God facilitate his affairs, commissioned as his representative his brother,⁶⁰ the industrious so and so, the helper of God. And he was entrusted with his property in the proper manner, and he abides by the agreed upon entrustment of such and such by the strength of the agency (*al-wakāla*) and the representation (*al-niyāba*), in principle and in practice (*‘aṣlan wa far’an*), by force and by law, and so on this day of this year this was witnessed by so and so, and so on.⁶¹

Not all contractual agreements followed this model. Often key information went unrecorded, seemingly taken for granted, including specific responsibilities and conditions. Another peculiarity is that contracts rarely disclosed profit-sharing arrangements, commissions, or wages. These omissions probably were due to the fact that there were set commission rates for certain routes and trade goods and established wages or interest rates that required no mention on paper.

Contracts, properly witnessed and dated, were decisive commercial tools. While they could not be used in court in accordance with Islamic rules of evidence, contracts did carry weight as decisive informational instruments, proof of transactions between partners, and a record witnessed by third parties who were members of the community. Importantly, contracting parties, and sometimes legal experts such as qāḍīs, relied on their knowledge of individual handwriting (*khaṭ*) to certify the origin and authenticity of written agreements. At times contracts were so specifically drawn up that small slips of the pen, crossings-out, or deletions were acknowledged in the text to ensure authenticity.⁶² Whether written in person or by a scribe serving as notary and witness, contracts contained stipulations about purposes and due dates. A copy would remain in the hands of the principal contracting party and another traveled with the

⁶⁰ Here the term “brother” could refer to both kin and co-religionary.

⁶¹ Agency Contract Formulary (AM 9), Family Archives of ‘Abd al-Mu’min (Tishīt). For a contract formula describing a joint-liability contract (*mufāwada*), see Udovitch, “Credit as a Means of Investment.”

⁶² Typically, an inadvertent scribble on a contract was cause for a special explanatory note such as “and what is on the second sentence is not of consequence.” Sales contract (1864), IK3-Family Records of Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl (Tishīt).

itinerant trade partner, which is why several such contracts bear the signs of having been carried for long periods of time, stained by the indigo dye of cotton clothes. Other times, contracts were embedded in multipurpose commercial letters dispatched via agents to partners in trade.

However, not every contract or partnership agreement was recorded in writing, as evidenced by many nineteenth-century fatwas that dealt with disputes concerning oral agreements. Furthermore, not everyone possessed sufficient levels of literacy nor the resources to operate fully in a paper economy. Yet from the Saharan evidence, examined below, it is clear that written agreements were preferred especially for drafting contracts. As noted above, the Qur'ān advises illiterate traders to make use of scribes. As instructed in the following verse, itinerant Muslim traders also could rely on oath taking to ensure contractual transparency:

If you are traveling on the road and a scribe cannot be found, then let oaths be taken. If you *trust* one another (*In āmina ba'adukum ba'adan*) with an oath, let the trustee restore the pledge to its owner; and let him fear God, his Lord. . . . If your debtor is in straits, grant him a delay until he can discharge his debt; but if you waive the sum as alms it will be better for you.⁶³

The emphasis on trust and the recommendation to be lenient with debtors are noteworthy in light of reputation mechanisms, partnerships, and other parameters influencing business decisions, discussed in the [next chapter](#). Trust is implicit in laws governing partnerships and overseas trade contracts, such as the one negotiated between the caravaner and the man from Tīshīt cited at the beginning of this chapter. Saharan partnership agreements, including the use of wakīls and the organization of trade companies (*mushāraka*), belong to a distinct area of Islamic law.

Islamic Partnerships

Economic historians have long recognized the extent to which partnership agreements facilitated long-distance trade. A partnership is a contract “whereby two or more persons consent to combine assets or labor to realize common profits.”⁶⁴ Dean Williamson argues for the case of early modern maritime trade, which is applicable to trans-Saharan trade, that contracting agents enabled investors to operate in geographically dispersed markets so as to “manage risk by diversifying their investments across a portfolio of ventures.”⁶⁵ What Naomi Lamoreaux explains for

⁶³ Qur'ān 2:282–3 (emphasis added).

⁶⁴ Hickson and Turner, “Partnership.”

⁶⁵ Williamson, “Transparency, Contract Selection and Maritime Trade.”

the case of nineteenth-century American business history is equally valid in the Saharan context, namely, that contracts enabled entrepreneurs to raise capital, although mainly with a “short-term horizon.”⁶⁶

Greif made important contributions to our understanding of agency relations based on his case study of Maghribi Jewish traders in the medieval period.⁶⁷ He argued that partnerships and other trade relations were most efficient among members of a commercial coalition or trade network. It provided the necessary institutional support for multilateral reputation mechanisms to restrain opportunistic behavior. Discussing the advantages of various partnership formulas negotiated between Muslim investors and traders, or “Islamic partnerships,” Timur Kuran recognized that they not only reduced transaction costs, but also “were designed to strengthen, if not to create, *mutual trust* among individuals who could not necessarily rely on pre-existing trust grounded in kinship.”⁶⁸ The observations of both Greif and Kuran are especially relevant when considering that many of the Saharan partnership agreements discussed below were negotiated among family members and also among members of the Wād Nūn trade network. Abraham Udovitch’s remarkable scholarship, based primarily on the Hanafī legal doctrine, best documents the patterns and rules governing Islamic partnerships.⁶⁹ But while the modalities are known, few have consulted the archival record to assess how Muslims applied partnership rules in any given historical setting.⁷⁰

Since at least the beginning of the Muslim era, partnership agreements for investment opportunities and access to credit became prime institutional tools for organizing overseas trade. As previously noted, the Mālikī legal doctrine, enforced in North and West Africa, provides an elaborate discussion of Islamic partnerships, including limited-liability

⁶⁶ Lamoreaux, “Constructing Firms,” 47.

⁶⁷ Greif, “Contract,” 525–48; “Fundamental,” 265–9; *Institutions*, 273–8.

⁶⁸ Kuran, “Islamic Commercial Crisis,” 418, 420 (emphasis added).

⁶⁹ Udovitch, “Credit”; “Labor Partnerships in Early Islamic Law”; “At the Origins of the Western Commenda”; *Partnership and Profit in Medieval Islam*.

⁷⁰ Goitein (*Mediterranean*, I, 169–92) provides a discussion of a variety of Jewish–Muslim partnerships; Udovitch (“Theory and Practice of Islamic Law,” 289–303) did attempt to examine fragments of Jewish partnership agreements drawn from the Geniza records; Lopez and Raymond (*Medieval Trade*) provide translations of several partnership agreements; Remie Constable (*Trade and Traders in Muslim Spain*, 72–7) examined a variety of contracts in Andalusia and North Africa; Greif (*Institutions*, 285–7) makes important remarks about agency relations; Markovits (*Global World*, Table 5-1, 162) drew many conclusions from four twentieth-century South Asian partnerships; Diadié Haïdara (*Juifs*, 34–5) discusses Jewish partnerships and debt contracts in nineteenth-century Timbuktu.

and joint-liability arrangements. The first is the classic *qirād* partnership, defined as “when a man takes money from his colleague in order to work with it without liability to himself.”⁷¹ Stemming from the word for “loan” (*qard*), this partnership, also known as silent partnership loan, was occasionally referred to as *qirād al-muḍāraba*, derived from an expression found in the Qur’ān to describe the act of “traveling about the land” (*darb fi al-ard*).⁷² The *qirād*, or *muḍāraba*, is thought to be the origin of the *com-menda* prevalent in Western Europe from the tenth century onward, which was a limited-liability contract negotiated between a sedentary merchant who extended capital to a traveling trade associate on a profit-sharing basis.⁷³ The first risked his or her capital, while the second, who faced the perils of the journey, theoretically was not liable for any losses.⁷⁴ According to the Prophetic sayings, it was on such a basis that Khadija contracted agents, including her husband-to-be Muḥammad, to conduct her caravaning business.⁷⁵ As Markovits pointed out in his study of Indian merchants, the *muḍāraba* was particularly well suited for the needs of trade networks.⁷⁶

The second type of partnership, discussed in the literature, which like the *qirād* was commonly used in trans-Saharan trade, was the *mufāwāḍa*. This was an arrangement whereby partners pooled their investments, and one partner was commissioned with the “discretionary authority to conduct trade with each other’s capital.”⁷⁷ Profits and losses were commensurate with investments on the basis of the “proportional shares of the capital, labor and equipment a partner contributes.”⁷⁸ The rules governing *mufāwāḍa* partnerships were more flexible in the Mālikī versus other Islamic legal schools, since partners could have varying financial contributions in cash or in kind. For example, one partner could supply the camels, equipment, travel supplies, and labor, while the other contributed the salt bars for sale.

Because of the hazardous nature of long-distance trade, namely, the high risk of losing partners to death and having to recover capital in foreign markets, contracts tended to be short-term and typically were drawn for

⁷¹ Mālik ibn Anas, *al-Muwatṭa’*, cited in Udovitch, “Origins,” 196.

⁷² Qur’ān (73:20; 62:10). This *commenda* contract (discussed shortly) was called the *muḍāraba* in all Sunni legal doctrines except in the Mālikī tradition where it was simply known as the *qirād*. See Udovitch, *Partnership*, 174–5; Kuran, “Islamic Commercial Crisis.”

⁷³ Udovitch, “Origins,” 198–9.

⁷⁴ Hickson and Turner, “Partnership”; Udovitch, “Origins.”

⁷⁵ Udovitch, *Partnership*, 172. ⁷⁶ Markovits, *Global World*, 157–8.

⁷⁷ Udovitch, *Partnership*, 172. Khadija is discussed in Chapter 5.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 147. This proportionality question for inputs and shares was known as the *takāfu* and it stressed equilibrium and fairness.

single ventures. But, as Goitein recognizes, “the relationship of partners could be maintained during a lifetime or even through generations.”⁷⁹ The obligations and responsibilities of principals and agents, as well as the mandate rules, were very detailed in Mālikī legal manuals.⁸⁰ They preempted myriad problems that could arise in such partnerships, from assessing losses incurred because of market trends to dealing with the deceptive actions of agents.⁸¹ One rule stipulated that the contract was canceled on the death of a principal merchant. If the agent died, then it could be either canceled immediately from the time of death or upon receiving the news. The fact that the Mālikī tradition recognized “the validity of a partnership investment in the form of goods,” and not simply cash investments, sets it apart from other Islamic legal traditions.⁸² Moreover, partnerships involving labor were treated in the same way as those involving goods or cash.⁸³

The flexibility of Mālikī law made it very adaptable to the long-distance trading environment of western Africa. Still, it is important to note that when it came to matters pertaining to interfaith relations, it was more intransigent than other legal schools. If it allowed for on-the-spot exchanges between traders of different religions, Mālikī law considered interfaith partnerships to be potentially usurious and therefore reprehensible. Other Sunni legal doctrines, on the other hand, fully endorsed partnerships between Muslims and non-Muslims.⁸⁴ Yet in the Saharan context, where Jews and Muslims had enduring commercial relations, trans-Saharan traders ignored Mālikī prescriptions. Both Muslims and Jews obviously found such partnerships profitable because they could bypass interdicts on usury by lending to one another. Such interfaith partnerships prevailed in the western caravans as well as in the central caravans circulating between Tripoli and the central Sudan.⁸⁵

Function of Documents in Islam

While the Qur’ān places great emphasis on the importance of writing and recording contracts, documents such as contracts were not considered official legal instruments in Islamic law. The reasoning was that

⁷⁹ Goitein, *Letters*, 12.

⁸⁰ Seignette, *Code*, 211–24; Kamali, *Islamic Commercial Law*, 176–7.

⁸¹ Udovitch, “Origins,” 196–202.

⁸² Udovitch, *Partnership*, 155; and “Labor Partnerships,” 64, n. 2.

⁸³ Udovitch, *Partnership*, 76.

⁸⁴ Kuran, “Islamic,” 420–1.

⁸⁵ Diadié Haidara, *Juifs*; Al-Ḥandīrī, “Taṭāwar tijāra al-qawāfil,” 67–8.

documents functioned as transcripts of witnessed oral agreements and therefore were only descriptions and not representations of actual contracts. This attitude presumably stems from a concern about the possibility of document tampering and forgery. The premise was that the oral testimony and sworn oath of faithful Muslims were more reliable.

Contracts between sedentary investors and traveling associates, merchants and trade agents, were always drafted in the presence of witnesses who were known and therefore trustworthy members of the community. In principle, all literate Muslims could draft contracts as long as they were witnessed by either two men, or two women and one man, following the Qur'ān. They were written "in sight of God" and therefore were considered to be *personal* agreements between contracting parties as opposed to *public* records. As such, written contracts were informational tools representing proof of transaction, and arguably their recording *enabled trust* between traders (an argument developed further in the next two chapters). In the case of a dispute, however, a written contract, in and of itself, could not be used as free-standing evidence in a court of law, in accordance with Islamic legal practice which placed value on testamentary evidence. In Mālikī law a contract had a legal value only when all those involved in its drafting – the contracting parties and their witnesses – could testify to the authenticity of the document. In other words, the written document was simply a record of an oral agreement.

The function of documents in Islamic law is critical to understanding the inherent inefficiency of Islamic institutions. Émile Tyan was the first to draw attention to this particularity, but aside from his work, that of Joseph Schacht, Jeannette Wakin, Baber Johansen and the original contributions by anthropologist Messick, this institutional flaw has hardly attracted the attention of historians of Muslim societies.⁸⁶ Despite the emphasis in Islam on recording transactions, documents such as debt contracts had no legal standing in and of themselves, with some exceptions. Tyan explained the rationale as follows: "in principle, from the point of view of legal proof, there was no difference between the written and the non-written agreement: in both cases, the element that constituted the proof was exclusively the witnesses' testimony."⁸⁷ The underlying

⁸⁶ Tyan, *Histoire de l'organisation judiciaire* and "Notariat"; Schacht, *Introduction*, 80–1; Johansen, "Formes de langage et fonctions publiques"; Wakin, *Function of Documents in Islamic Law*; and Messick, *Calligraphic*. Only passing reference to the problematic function of documents in Islamic legal practice was made by M. Khalid Masud, R. Peters, and D. Powers, "Qāḍīs and Their Courts," 28.

⁸⁷ Tyan, "Notariat," 10.

principle in Islamic legal theory was the belief that the spoken word was the most “authentic” form of proof.⁸⁸

Yet it is important to realize that there were marked differences in the function of documents across the four Sunni doctrines of Islamic law. The Ḥanafī legal school held the most conservative position by prohibiting the introduction of documents in a court of law.⁸⁹ Mālikī tradition, on the other hand, recognized certain special circumstances under which written documents, after proper authentication by qualified witnesses, could be used.⁹⁰ In practice, therefore, Malikī law was more flexible when it came to using documentary evidence.⁹¹ This is perhaps a distinct feature of Mālikī law which recognizes the need to consider local customs (*‘āda* and *‘urf*) in certain legal circumstances. This judicial practice, known as *‘amal*, which was especially well developed in the Moroccan legal literature, recognized that Islamic legal rules could not be strictly applied in all cases where consideration had to be given to what was in the best interests of the public (*maṣlaḥa*).⁹²

Orality was therefore central to the legal process of Muslims that hinged on human memory despite the emphasis on writing. Indeed, the paper economy stands in sharp contrast to the lack of faith in paper in Islam. That Islamic legal systems did not experience the transition from reliance on oral testimony to written evidence as legal proof, or the transition from *ars dictaminis* to *ars notaria*, goes a long way toward explaining their inherent institutional constraints. The fact that written documents, such as contracts, had no legal standing in and of themselves, without the oral testimony of those who had witnessed the transaction and could swear to its authenticity, reduced the size, scope, and endurance of Muslim capital accumulation in the long run. But this does not detract from the importance of literacy for promoting entrepreneurship and complex finance, as well as for supplying informal enforcement mechanisms.

⁸⁸ Johansen, “Formes de langage,” 337. ⁸⁹ Ibid., 82–4.

⁹⁰ Wakin, *Function*, 9. If properly witnessed, they could be used as informational devices. As Tyan explained, many Malikī scholars, starting with the eleventh-century Ibn Farḥun, were quite outspoken about their opinion that anything that allowed for the truth to be known was a valid source of evidence. See Tyan, “Notariat,” 6–7.

⁹¹ This is made clear in a nineteenth-century inheritance report documenting the efforts of debtors and creditors at the death of their trade partners to make due on their contractual obligations. The qāḍī examined contracts and executed procedures based on the good faith of the contracting parties, as seen in Chapter 7.

⁹² Schacht, *Introduction*, 30, 61–2; Stewart, *Islam*, 69–70.

SAHARAN QĀḌĪ JUSTICE

Knowledge of Mālikī law conferred tremendous power upon Saharan qāḍīs, who performed as both judges and lawyers. While these providers of legal services did not have coercive powers, they stood as recognized authorities with the power to make or break reputations, to ensure legal enforcement, and to carry out public sanctions. To legislate their affairs, each Saharan clan generally designated a qāḍī to serve as the clan judge and lawyer. In oasis towns, the local imam or leader of the congregation, in consultation with the town council (*jamāʿa*), appointed a qāḍī whose services were paid from both the public treasury (*baīt al-māl*) and individual donations. Tellingly, town councils in this part of the Sahara were nicknamed the council that binds and dissolves deeds (*jamāʿa al-ḥāl wa al-ʿaqd*).⁹³

As overseer of the community, and representative of the law, the qāḍī's authority was paramount in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century western Sahara. As Elias Saad explains for the case of Timbuktu – applicable to other oasis towns – “the judge enjoyed an acknowledged ascendancy over the entire civilian population of the city.”⁹⁴ In the context of nineteenth-century Mauritania, Stewart examined to what extent a qāḍī's authority rested on his “personality” and his reputation within the clan or “jural unit.”⁹⁵ Head qāḍīs ruled alongside several working qāḍīs and in consultation with muftīs – the specialists of jurisprudence who issued legal opinions or fatwas. In this manner the regional community of jurists read and scrutinized each other's rulings, especially on contested matters, to keep each other in check. The qāḍī's authority rested on his reputation and scholarly credentials, and usually the profession was passed down from father to son, together with inherited reference libraries. Invariably, Saharan qāḍīs also performed as educators dispensing learning as well as justice.

Qāḍīs as Regional Rulers

The French colonial ethnographer Dubié, who wrote extensively on Mauritanian society, recognized the esteem enjoyed by the Saharan qāḍī:

Because of custom in the land of the Moors, *the position of the cadi is akin to that of a chief*. He often is from a wealthy family. His expenses include holding important receptions since the litigants come to his home [or to his tent].

⁹³ I thank Yahya Ould El-Bara for this information, personal communication (10/22/06).

⁹⁴ Saad, *Social History*, 95.

⁹⁵ Stewart, *Islam*, 70–2.

However, he receives gifts as compensation, not only from the claimants, but also from the notables and the chiefs of tribes. As with the case of the schoolmaster, all wealthy families are obligated to give to the caḍi since he provides a public service. The members of his encampment provide camel milk, transportation as well as water service.⁹⁶

The qāḍī's authority was described in a mid-nineteenth-century fatwa (discussed further in the [next chapter](#)) that addressed the functions of the qāḍī. The muftī, asked to evaluate the actions of the qāḍī of Tīshīt, wrote:

The qāḍī issues judgments based on [all the available information] . . . because he is in charge of writing judgments on quarrels, disputes and discord between people. He is *the ruler (al-ḥākim)* of this location *de facto* and *de jure*. . . . And the rulers are charged with reprimanding oppressors, to bring to heel evildoers and corrupt men (*ahl al-sharr wa al-mafsada*).⁹⁷

The role of qāḍīs is often associated with that of local administrators of the rule of law. In Yemen, the terms qāḍī and ḥākim were once used interchangeably.⁹⁸ As Messick notes, in medieval Europe the court was held by both kings and judges, so it stands to reason that temporal and political powers were similarly blurred in the Islamic context.⁹⁹ In the case of the qāḍī of Timbuktu, who in the past was appointed by the Songhay Emperor and centuries later by the ruler of Masina, he was “representative of the state authority in the city and spokesman for the whole city.”¹⁰⁰ However, these Saharan representatives of the law were not accountable to a higher justice or a “qāḍī of qāḍīs,” as in the Ottoman context. This was a legal system different from that prevailing in pre-colonial Sudan, described by Jay Spaulding for the Sinnar region and O’Fahey for Dārfūr, where the judiciary followed political determinants with a “great *qāḍī*” appointed by the sultan who oversaw the work of “small *qāḍīs*.”¹⁰¹

The Business of Justice

Far from the Weberian notion of the arbitrariness of Islamic justice, Mālikī qāḍīs based their decisions on personal opinion, testamentary evidence, local precedence, and law books. They researched their cases thoroughly, conducting extensive inquiries and interviews with

⁹⁶ Dubié, “Droit pénal maure et la justice des cadis,” 15 (emphasis added).

⁹⁷ Wād Nūn Inheritance Case (1269/1853). See Chapter 7.

⁹⁸ Messick, *Calligraphic*, 168–9.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Saad, *Social History*, 96.

¹⁰¹ Spaulding, “Evolution of the Islamic Judiciary in Sinnar,” 408–26; see also O’Fahey, “The Office of Qāḍī,” 119–21.

witnesses, as well as consulting with muftīs and other qāḍīs, in order to “to distinguish between competing versions of the ‘truth’ in an effort to reach a judgment.”¹⁰² Consulting other jurists was not only common practice, it was recommended and explicitly stated in Khalīl’s *al-Mukhtaṣar*. As David Powers explains, “the relationship between *qāḍīs* and *muftīs* was one of mutual dependency. . . . [T]he *muftī* conferred religious authority on the judgment of the *qāḍī*, but the *muftī*’s judgment was not binding and required the power of the *qāḍī* and the ruler for execution.”¹⁰³ In other words, the qāḍī assessed the facts, while the muftī assessed the legal doctrine.¹⁰⁴ When he reached a verdict, the qāḍī in theory committed his judgment to writing.

As legal service providers in civil and commercial matters, qāḍīs played another noteworthy role as financial intermediaries. They served as legal guardians of the property of orphans and inheritance estates. They also were entrusted with sums of money to be transferred between trade partners, or even husbands and wives. Qāḍīs frequently mediated in debt collection disputes by finding and pressuring defaulting parties. In a nineteenth-century letter asking for a qāḍī’s assistance in a debt recovery, the writer praises God for the presence of legal representatives and especially the qāḍī:

Help us recover our debts and help us in our problems to uplift our stress and alleviate our sorrow, and that which takes our joy away, and that He guide us toward our ideals. Our witty fellow (*ẓarīfna*), our helper and the *qāḍī of our debts* (*qāḍī duyūninā*). . . and of our injustice (*sharrinā*), of the integrity of our conduct (*li-rashādīnā*). . . [from the one] who is in need of your assistance, he informs you that he needs your help to collect his property, of the share of silver . . . and to extract it from the beholder in order to help us with the legal termination of the debt.¹⁰⁵

The financial services provided by qāḍīs reinforced their positions as legal authorities in Muslim societies, yet these have rarely been recognized in the literature on Islamic legal practice.

As representatives of the community, judges were expected to defend people’s rights in fairness. Typically, possessing formal weights and local measurements, they were called upon as authorities of last resort in disagreements concerning the weighing of commodities, such as millet and gold. A qāḍī introduced his report on the disputed inheritance case

¹⁰² Powers, *Law*, 88.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 89.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 207 and 226.

¹⁰⁵ Debt Recovery Plea (BA15), Family Archives Bū ‘Asrīyya Library (Tīshīt).

discussed in the [next chapter](#), with “praise be to the one who gave a judge to the two disputants who can rule between them on these disagreements.”¹⁰⁶ He concluded with the phrase “it was written by the one who wants only the truth and who does not want bad deeds to reign.” In an early-nineteenth-century case, a caravaner from Shinqīṭi physically abused an enslaved worker belonging to his uncle after arriving with his caravan in the market of Tīshīt. The local community, starting with the qādīs, protected the slave, demonstrating the extent to which some legal service providers were disposed to defend the rights of all, including those with the least of rights.¹⁰⁷

As in any profession, there were good and bad practitioners among Saharan judges. The fourteenth-century jurist Ibn Farḥūn sometimes was cited by Saharans called upon to discuss the corrupt practices of qādīs who commit injustices and “eat the wealth of the people” (*yawkkal amuwāl al-nās*).¹⁰⁸ Dubié reported a popular story that relates, with sarcasm, the cunning of qādīs and their collaborative relationships.¹⁰⁹ One qādī offered to pay another qādī a pouch of butter to assist him in resolving his case. Meanwhile, a third qādī, representing the opposing party, bribed the second qādī with a cow. When the first qādī complained to the second, the latter replied: “What do you want me to do? The cow’s horns tore the butter pouch!” In other words, the cow of the competing qādī was more enticing and worth his legal expertise. In a reverse anecdote, involving a similar payment, a celebrated eighteenth-century scholar and muftī, al-Bartaylī, is said to have flatly refused a cow from a supposed friend seeking a favorable legal opinion.¹¹⁰

Sanctions, Enforcement, and Community Pressure

Among Muslims, the application of penal sanctions generally was ensured by a temporal power. In nineteenth-century Sahara, however, the sovereignty of emirs or rulers, such as Aḥmad Lobbo of Masina, was never absolute. In fact it was weakened by their mobility and engagements in the

¹⁰⁶ Ruling on Ibn Miyāba Inheritance by Abū Bakr b. Mukhtār al-Sharīf (FS22), Family Archive of Fādīl al-Sharīf (Tīshīt).

¹⁰⁷ Ruling by ‘Umar b. ‘Abdallah b. Abū Bakr nicknamed “Ankāk,” 1249/1833–4 (SS28), Family Archive of Sharīfnā Wuld Shaykhnā (Tīshīt). See Lydon, “Islamic Legal Culture.”

¹⁰⁸ See, e.g., the lengthy discussion about Ibn Farḥūn’s opinion in the fatwa issued by Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Sbā‘ī discussed at the beginning of the chapter (see note 3).

¹⁰⁹ Dubié, “Droit,” 19, 15.

¹¹⁰ C. El Hamel, *La vie intellectuelle islamique*, 31–2.

battlefield.¹¹¹ In the absence of a regional authority and political order, clan chiefs, town councils, and religious authorities, including prominent legal service providers, took responsibility for policing and enforcement. This explains why, as “*de facto* and *de jure* ruler of his community,” the qāḍī was in charge of ensuring that rulings were enforced within his jurisdiction.

Enforcement of sanctions in Saharan oases often was carried out in public in the presence of legal scholars, prominent personalities, and the community at large. By way of illustration, a property rights dispute between caravaners was terminated after the qāḍī issued a verdict and those involved in the case acknowledged it publicly. The judgment was “to repair the damage that was inflicted on the people of the caravan from their losses . . . after their swearing on the book (*ḥalafihim fī al-muṣḥaf*) in the presence of a large crowd (*biḥaḍrat jamʿ ghafir*).”¹¹² The names of all the notables present at the event were dutifully recorded to ensure that the verdict was widely acknowledged, disseminated, and enforced. The involvement of the public in the deliberations created community pressure to enforce legal rulings. The reputations of notables witnessing such verdicts ensured the high visibility of sanctions. Communal involvement in legal action, however, was not always acceptable or positive. The case of the caravaner accused of betraying his trade partner, with which I began this chapter, is revealing in this regard. Here, the Tishīt community appears to have rallied behind the man who claimed to have been betrayed in accusing his trade agent, the caravaner, of lying. The muftī complained that the community “unjustly” sided with the local claimant without giving the caravaner the benefit of a fair trial. This was so much so that the muftī warned against “the malicious intent of the people,” who often took the law in their own hands.¹¹³

Criminal matters generally were dealt with directly by clans or lineage chiefs. The victim’s families could choose to inflict wounds on an accused criminal comparable to those inflicted on the relative, to receive financial compensation, to have a murderer killed, or to request

¹¹¹ Ould El-Bara, *Al-Fiqh*, 19–25; Dubié, “Droit,” 9–10.

¹¹² Legal attestation ending caravan dispute (SS22), Family Archive of Sharīfnā Wuld Shaykhnā (Tishīt). The subject of the dispute is not detailed in the source, but apparently the caravan was raided and the caravaners disagreed about the ownership of the remaining camel-loads. See also Lydon, “Islamic Legal Culture,” for a discussion of another case involving community enforcement.

¹¹³ Fatwa issued by Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Sbāʿī on entrusted trade goods (MA1), Family Archives of Muḥammad Wuld Aḥamdī (Tishīt), lines 14–26.

payment of “blood money” (*diya*).¹¹⁴ For murder cases, the price of the *diya* appears to have remained constant at one hundred camels in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹¹⁵ Such an amount perhaps was symbolic of a total value to be negotiated between families according to circumstance. Other penalties included whipping, the wearing of chains for a specified period, extensive exposure to the sun, banishment, or confiscation of wealth.¹¹⁶ The amputation of limbs or stoning was apparently uncommon in this region. However, there is evidence that local customary law sanctioned the slitting and piercing of ears and trial by fire.¹¹⁷

OVERVIEW OF SAHARAN JURISPRUDENCE

Although Muslim scholars have for centuries engaged in jurisprudence and produced legal scholarship in western Africa, providing their constituents with legal advice both orally and in writing, African legal history remains poorly understood. This is especially true for the pre-colonial period for which the paucity of research is most pronounced. Fortunately, a number of important Mauritanian studies have recently been published. These include Mohamed Mokhtar Ould Bah’s dissertation on legal literature, Wuld al-Sa’ad’s study of fatwa literature written between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries, and Yaḥya Ould El-Bara’s important work on the nineteenth-century political discourse of Saharan jurists from the southwestern Gbila region of present-day Mauritania (Map 1).¹¹⁸ Ould El-Bara also has compiled a monumental collection of over 5,000 fatwas issued in North and West Africa between the fifteenth and the twentieth centuries.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴ Leriche, “Des châtiments prévus par la loi musulmane,” 453, and Dubié, “Droit,” 10–13.

¹¹⁵ Beslay, “Aperçu”; and Dubié, “Droit,” 12. Camels were equally divided among five different age groups, but payment could be made with other animals and/or goods of an equal value. For a discussion of the *diya* in nineteenth-century Mauritania, see Taylor, “Warriors, Tributaries, Blood Money.”

¹¹⁶ Dubié, “Droit,” 14, 16. There is also evidence of the punishment of being buried in the sand for periods of time, as was the case of the French captain Henri Vincent and his crew when they ventured into the western Sahara in the 1860s (“Voyage dans l’Adrar et retour à St. Louis”).

¹¹⁷ Dubié, “Droit,” 9, 18. According to local custom, slaves had a right to slit the ears of slave-masters in order to change their circumstances. See also Lydon, “Islamic Legal Culture.”

¹¹⁸ Ould Bah, *Littérature*; Wuld Sa’ad, *Al-Fatāwā*; and Ould El-Bara, *Al-Fiqh*.

¹¹⁹ Ould El-Bara, *Al-Majmū’a al-Kubrā fī Fatāwī wa Nawāzil Abl ‘Arb wa Janūb ‘Arb al-Ṣaḥrā’*.

Commentaries on Mālikī Texts

Saharans were prolific writers of commentaries and super-commentaries on authoritative Mālikī texts. In the late sixteenth century, a scholar of Wādān wrote the earliest known Saharan commentary on Khalīl b. Ishāq's *al-Mukhtaṣar*.¹²⁰ But most commentaries date from later centuries, such as the popular work on Khalīl written by the nineteenth-century scholar Muḥammad Wālid b. Khawunah of the Gibla region.¹²¹ Another esteemed commentary was composed by Māḥand Bābā Wuld 'Ubāyd, one of Mauritania's most celebrated nineteenth-century jurists known as "the qāḍī of qāḍīs" (*qāḍī al-qūḍāh*). This was a purely honorific title, for, as already noted, there was no politically appointed legal hierarchy in the Sahara. As for the earliest records of local Mālikī jurisprudence, they date from the seventeenth century, according to Mauritanian legal scholar Wuld al-Tāh.¹²²

Influential Muftīs

From at least the late sixteenth century, Saharan Muslim jurists have played a decisive role in arbitration and mediation.¹²³ The best known scholar of Timbuktu, Aḥmad Bābā al-Timbūktī (d. 1036–7/1627), wrote a series of legal works on the merits of the 'ulamā', but he is best known for his fatwa on the subject of slavery.¹²⁴ Nineteenth-century muftīs were especially prolific, as Ould El-Bara has demonstrated in his exhaustive collection of fatwas from Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, and Senegal. For this century, he tallied no less than 285 muftīs, of which more than half – 174 – resided in the Saharan region of present-day Mauritania.¹²⁵ Such productivity is clearly a reflection of the extraordinary scholarly environment of the western Sahara. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, this period saw an increase in the availability of writing paper together with

¹²⁰ Ould Bah, *Littérature*, 46.

¹²¹ The earliest known copy of this commentary, which was found in Shaykh 'Umār Tāl's library in Segu and was seized by the French during the French conquest, is now located in the Fonds Archinard section of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Ould El-Bara, personal communication 10/06).

¹²² Interview in Nouakchott with Hamdan Wuld al-Tāh (06/02/97).

¹²³ Stewart, *Islam and Social Order in Mauritania*, 65.

¹²⁴ Aḥmad Bābā ibn Aḥmad ibn 'Umar ibn Muḥammad 'Aqīt al-Timbūktī's *Mī'rāj al-Su'ud ila nayl ḥukm mujallab al-Sūd* (*Ahmed Baba's Replies on Slavery*) in Hunwick and Harrak. See Hunwick, *Arabic Literature of Africa*, IV, 17–31.

¹²⁵ Ould El-Bara, *Al-Majmū'a al-Kubrā*.

the intensification of trans-Saharan and Atlantic exchange that brought about new concerns, new consumer goods, and associated behaviors.

Saharan legal sources offer an exceptional window into the social and economic questions of the day. Fatwas dealt with a wide variety of commercial matters, including exchange rates between currency zones, trade with Europeans, and revocations of slave sales. Questions were posed by fellow muftīs, qāḍīs, legal scholars (faqīhs), wealthy and curious merchants, and notables eager to uphold their reputations as law-abiding Muslims. To provide guidance to the average man or woman, and a general public concerned with engaging in lawful behavior, muftīs produced shorter legal responses (*nawāzil* or *ajwiba*).

The earliest known collection of *nawāzil* is that of Muḥammad b. al-Mukhtār b. al-A'mish, known as Bila'mish (d. 1107/1695–6), arguably the first faqīh of Mauritania.¹²⁶ Written at the end of the seventeenth century, his *nawāzil* contain numerous queries posed by traders about economic valuation and equivalencies.¹²⁷ Setting the tone and course of Saharan legal discourse, Bila'mish became a model carefully studied and emulated by generations of Saharan jurists. He was from Shinqīti and, like several important Saharan scholars, including Sīdī 'Abdallāh b. al-Ḥājj Ibrāhīm discussed next, was from the Idaw 'Aly clan.¹²⁸ He prescribed, recommended, permitted, or prohibited social and economic transactions based on both Mālikī law and local custom. Not surprisingly, he deliberated extensively on economic exchange, from simple questions about measurements to the more controversial subject of usury.

Sīdī 'Abdallāh b. al-Ḥājj Ibrāhīm (d. 1232/1816), from the Tagānit region, is considered among the finest scholars of his time. He undertook the pilgrimage to Mecca, sojourning along the way in Egypt and Morocco.¹²⁹ Dealing with similar questions to Bila'mish's *nawāzil*, he addressed the socio-economic circumstances of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Sīdī 'Abdallāh, along with Shaykh Muḥammad al-Māmī,

¹²⁶ Interview with Ḥamdan Wuld al-Tāh in Nouakchott (06/02/97). For other works by Bila'mish, see al-Bartaylī, *Faṭḥa al-Shukūr*, 40, 75, 79, 91, 114–17, 160–1, 171–2, 181, 193.

¹²⁷ M. b. al-Mukhtār b. al-A'mish (pronounced Bila'mish, hereafter as such), *Nawāzil* (manuscript copied from the original copy of K. M. b. al-Shaykh Muḥammad Yaḥdhih b. 'Abbās al-Mālikī by 'Abdallāh al-Salām b. Yaḥdhih b. 'Abd al-Wadūd (1394). Original copy owned by Muḥammad 'Abd al-Wahāb b. Muḥammad al-Amīn, Imam of the 'Abbās Mosque and director of its manuscript collection (Nouakchott).

¹²⁸ For brief biographies of Muḥammad b. al-Mukhtār al-A'mish and Sīdī 'Abdallāh b. al-Ḥājj Ibrāhīm, see al-Shinqīti, *Wasīṭ*, 37–40; Ould Khalifa, *Aspects économiques*, 150–60.

¹²⁹ In Morocco, he met the Sultan Sīdī Muḥammad b. 'Abdallāh with whom he enjoyed a famous intellectual exchange. Al-Shinqīti, *Wasīṭ*, 38.

Muḥammad b. al-Bāba, and Mukhtār b. Būnā and others, formed a new movement in Saharan jurisprudence focused on reinterpreting the law.

Shaykh Muḥammad al-Māmī, from the Ahl Barikallah of the Giblea region, wrote an influential work known as *The Book of the Desert* (*Kitāb al-bādiya*). The nineteenth-century author explained that in the Saharan context the “strange science” of legal reasoning (*ijtihād*) was necessary because of the large number of legal questions posed to scholars and the specific circumstances of nomadic peoples.¹³⁰ Elsewhere, he explains in rhyme the need for flexibility in the law when declaring that “the nawāzil [deal with particular] circumstances and periods, and they are as varied as are circumstances and periods.”¹³¹ He set a new trend in Saharan jurisprudence by arguing that the law needed to be adapted to a social reality that was perpetually changing. Consequently, he and his followers promoted a moderate interpretation of Mālikī doctrine while criticizing those who sought to justify its strict application.¹³² Shaykh al-Māmī was also an illustrious poet and his verses are now part of everyday language in Mauritania. He was a prolific writer who reportedly composed 100 treatises on Qur’ānic exegesis and 400 volumes on jurisprudence, including a 10,000-verse commentary, allegedly composed in a single night, on Khalīl’s *Mukhtaṣar*.¹³³ It is said of this legendary jurist that he consulted all the books available in the Sahara during his time, except for two.¹³⁴ Like most Saharan jurists, he wrote many pages deliberating the legality of economic transactions, from credit and loans to sales revocations and rules on defects.

RETURN POLICIES AND THE LAW ON DEFECTS

Saharan jurists wrote extensively on the rules governing sales revocations. One such procedure known as the *iqāla* is a voluntary act to cancel or revoke a sale or purchase contract by the mutual consent of both buyer

¹³⁰ For a discussion of Shaykh Muḥammad al-Māmī’s reformist approach to Islamic jurisprudence, see Ould Cheikh, “Nomadisme,” 799–808. See also Norris, *Shinqiti Folk Literature*, 92–101.

¹³¹ Quote from his poem entitled *Al-Delfmrya*, cited in Wuld al-Sa’ad, *Al-Fatāwā*, 5.

¹³² As Stewart has argued, the great majority of Saharan jurists tended to abide by a more strict application of Mālikī law (*Islam*, 67–9).

¹³³ Ould Bah, *Littérature*, 87–90.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 83. The two works that al-Māmī did not consult are not mentioned, but this is simply a way of saying that this scholar was the most learned of his time.

and seller. This type of revocation is detailed in the Mālikī texts and local evidence reveals that it was common practice. The iqāla typically was granted when “defects” (‘*ayb*; plur. ‘*uyūb*) undisclosed at the time of sale were discovered after the fact, as in the case of a sales revocation granted to a woman who had discovered ghosts in a recently purchased house.¹³⁵ Arguably, defects were the most common source of revocations, especially for sales of slaves and livestock, and were particularly well described in the Mālikī legal codes.

The Revocation of Sales

Judging from Saharan sources, it appears that the iqāla typically was invoked in transactions involving slaves. The following case, discussed in Bila‘mish’s *Nawāzil*, sheds light on fractional transactions in slaves and animals, on the one hand, and laws regulating revocations of sales based on the rules on defects, on the other. A man sold an unspecified “portion of a horse” in exchange for a female slave who was ill and whose condition was disclosed at the time of the sale. Four days after the sale the woman died. So the buyer asked the muftī to rule whether or not he could either revoke the sale based on the rules governing the sale of slaves with “defects” and be reimbursed for the expense of providing for the slave during the four days she was in his custody. Citing many legal sources, including Mālik’s *Muwatṭaʿ*, Ṣaḥnūn’s *Mudawwana*, and Khalīl’s *Mukhtaṣar*, the jurist ruled:

Whoever purchases a sick slave, is informed about his illness, and consents to the transaction [is fully responsible. And if] the slave dies . . . it is the purchaser’s misfortune if he knew about [the illness], as [with sales in] the cow and the sheep . . . [And if] the seller knows [about the illness] but does not disclose it to the purchaser, then he can return [the slave], according to Khalīl.

Therefore the man who purchased the slave had to bear all the costs, including the loss of the ailing slave, since he had agreed to the sale. The Mālikī rule about the three-day guarantee regulating such exchanges did not apply because the “defect” in question had been disclosed at the time of purchase, and, besides, the slave died on the fourth day.¹³⁶

Sīdī ‘Abdallāh was asked to deliberate a variety of questions related to the law on defects. Applying Mālikī codes, he ruled that a person who purchased a cow or a camel only to discover that it was sterile had a right

¹³⁵ Sīdī ‘Abdallāh b. al-Ḥājī Ibrāhīm (hereafter Sīdī ‘Abdallāh), *Nawāzil*.

¹³⁶ For a discussion of Mālikī laws regulating transactions in slaves, see Lydon, “Slavery.”

to return the object of sale on the grounds of *‘ayb* (defect).¹³⁷ In his section on sales, Sīdī ‘Abdallāh laid down an intriguing return policy rule for defective goods that was based on the identity of the seller. He declared that defective goods may be returned after ten years if purchased from a foreigner and after forty years if sold by a local trader. While such time-limits seem inordinately lengthy, this discussion – the only such one encountered – sheds light on the attempts to discriminate in Saharan oasis towns between local and stranger traders, such as the Tikna and Awlād Bū al-Sibā‘. Discrimination through differential tax and tariff rates apparently was the norm in western African markets. As previously discussed, with regard to Jewish traders, which is confirmed for Jenne, Timbuktu, and elsewhere, strangers were subject to higher taxes. They also were more likely to be victims of attacks or raids since strangers far from their homeland and clan were easy targets.

The revocation of sales was a common subject in the records of trans-Saharan traders. For example, in 1312/1894 Muḥammad b. ‘Abdallāh b. Arwīlī (the son of the Tikna trader discussed in Chapter 7) demanded the iqāla for a horse that he purchased from the son of its original owner. Since the son had made the sale without his father’s knowledge or consent, the purchaser returned the horse to the father and the revocation of the sale was accepted on the grounds that Muḥammad did “not want to go against the divine law (*ḥukm al-shar‘ī*), [even if he] had to eat his loss.”¹³⁸ Such strong language indicates to what extent individuals were concerned about the lawfulness of their business behavior in the eyes of Islam.

Illegal Sale of Seized Goods

Given the violence and insecurity characteristic of nineteenth-century Sahara, it is not surprising that jurists such as Sīdī ‘Abdallāh wrote on the lawfulness of purchasing goods illegally seized or pillaged from the people (*bi al-ghasb min amwāl al-nās*).¹³⁹ He argued that if the buyer was not aware that the purchased goods had been illegally appropriated, then the

¹³⁷ Sīdī ‘Abdallāh, *Nawāzil*. It is interesting to note that unlike his mentor Bila‘mish, Sīdī ‘Abdallāh was asked many questions regarding the sales and purchases of animals. This might reflect the different regions where the two jurists resided. Bila‘mish was in Shinqīti, the oasis in the northern desert region of the Ādrār where animals were fewer. Sīdī ‘Abdallāh, on the other hand, was in the Tagānit (meaning “forest” in Znāga) region north of the Senegal River where animal husbandry was more prevalent.

¹³⁸ Arwīlī Family Records (LA8), Archives of Shaykh Ḥamunny (Shinqīti).

¹³⁹ Sīdī ‘Abdallāh, *Nawāzil*.

purchase was considered lawful. On a related matter, he discussed the following question: if someone went to the encampment of raiders to recover stolen goods, and he was given goods that were not the original goods, could this retrieval be considered legal? He opined that since all the goods held by the raiders were loot, they were considered qualitatively equal.¹⁴⁰ The nineteenth-century Shaykh Sīdī Muḥammad b. Sīdī al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī, one of the most influential religious leaders of his time mentioned in previous chapters, was asked to debate a similar question. He opined that the purchase of previously stolen goods was illegal if the origin of the goods was known to the buyer.¹⁴¹ This fatwa inspired his son in mid-nineteenth-century Timbuktu to take a similar position with regard to the stolen property of the Jewish trader Aby Serour (Chapter 3).

A majority of Saharan legal experts seem to have shared in this opinion.¹⁴² An oral tradition describes how Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr, the legal scholar of nineteenth-century Tishīt, negotiated the recovery of stolen camels and slaves at the hands of Saharan pirates.¹⁴³ The mufti is said to have performed a miracle, discussed in the [preceding chapter](#), and later returned with loaded camels, much to the delight of the people of Tishīt. The source, however, does not specify whether the goods he brought back were the original ones or substitutes.

Other Transactions

Saharan jurists provided legal counsel to the general public on matters concerning micro-economic exchange. For instance, Bila'mish was asked whether it was lawful to sell the hides of an animal before it was slaughtered. He answered that this was not recommended since there was no way of knowing whether the person in charge of skinning the animal would accidentally tear the leather and therefore change its value. Another question posed to Bila'mish concerned the legality of selling infant camels without their mother, to which he responded affirmatively. For his part Sīdī 'Abdallah examined whether it was lawful in commercial transactions to shake the mudd container filled with grain so as to pack

¹⁴⁰ Fatwa on the ghazzī by Sīdī 'Abdallah b. al-Hājj Ibrāhīm. Family Archive of Bū 'Asariya family (Tishīt).

¹⁴¹ "Fātwa al-Shaykh Sīdī al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī 'an ḥukm amwāl al-ma'khūtha min al-muḥāribīn wa al-luṣūṣ" (IMRS no. 697) reproduced in Wuld al-Sa'ad, *Al-Fatāwā*, 154–62.

¹⁴² See, for example, the fatwa on raided goods by Shaykh Sidiyya al-Kabīr cited in Stewart (*Islam*, 66).

¹⁴³ Tishīt interviews with Mariam Mint Limām (04/28/97) and Dāddah b. Idda (04/26/97).

down more grain, to which he replied that it had to be filled normally without applying pressure.¹⁴⁴ Another question discussed at length by Sīdī ‘Abdallah was the sale of “impure” products. The question was “is it permissible to sell milk, honey, or oil that have been spoiled by a drop of an impure substance (*najis*), such as blood or urine, in exchange for animal feed?” Unlike some jurists, he ruled that such spoiled goods could not be sold for any purpose whatsoever.¹⁴⁵

The Wangāla, or Rotating Labor Association

Bila‘mish deliberated on the modalities of the *wangāla*, a rotating lunch association led by groups of close friends or relatives. Each wangāla member took turns cooking for the other members of the group and their families. This social institution relieved women of cooking duties for as many days as there were members in the wangāla, minus the day when it was her turn to cook. Since participation in a wangāla involved exchanging one type of unknown food for another, and meals were not necessarily equal in value, the people of Shinqīti wondered about its legality. Bila‘mish ruled that because the wangāla was an association organized among friends, it was acceptable and variation in meals was unavoidable.¹⁴⁶

The wangāla was very similar to the rotating savings and credit associations (known as ROSCAs) that became prevalent in twentieth-century African informal finance. To my knowledge, this is the earliest reference in the African historical record to a rotating service association. These associations later came to include all kinds of exchanges involving goods, labor, and cash. This institution is likely related to the so-called tontine or “tour” of present-day Senegal.

RULES OF CROSS-CULTURAL EXCHANGE

Since long-distance trade is necessarily cross-cultural, rules about exchange, business ethics, and political entente among competing groups

¹⁴⁴ Sīdī ‘Abdallah, *Nawāzil*.

¹⁴⁵ See, e.g., Bila‘mish, *Nawāzil*. This was yet another popular subject of legal debate. Interview in Nouakchott with Ḥamdan Wuld al-Tāh (06/03/97).

¹⁴⁶ The wangāla reportedly was discussed by nineteenth-century jurist Muḥammad Fāl b. Mu‘tālī. He identified two types: one where participants slaughtered an animal during their turn and the other when participants purchased a set of animals (goats, for example) and from that pool of common property they each slaughtered an animal. Mu‘tālī ruled that only the second type of wangāla was lawful. Interview in Nouakchott with Ḥamdan Wuld al-Tāh (06/06/97).

were a common concern of Saharan jurists and their constituents. This was especially the case in times of war or scarcity, which caused competition over resources and groups. At the same time, interfaith trade with Jews, while frowned upon by Muslims, was an important aspect of trans-Saharan caravanning, as was trade with Christians.

A Question of Race

The aforementioned Kunta scholar Shaykh Sīdī Muḥammad b. Shaykh Sīdī al-Mukhtār was asked to provide a fatwa on a question pertaining to interracial relations, worth examining here. I am not aware of the circumstances that prompted the muftī to deliberate on racial terms whether they, as Muslims and presumably Bīḍān, should pay allegiance to a “black” (Sūdān) ruler. He argued that:

The political allegiance of blacks (*baī'a al-sūdān*) is just like the political allegiance of whites (*ka baī'a al-bīḍān*). If it is done well, it is binding, like all transactions [between Muslims]. But it is considered a reprehensible act (*makruh*) if it is done under compulsion. So one must act according to what most protects the faith and the universe.¹⁴⁷

The Kunta scholar underscored that such allegiance should not be carried out by force. He added that peace in religion fostered agreement and continuance of exchanges, and that in the eventuality of disputes, these should be settled in accordance with the rules of the regional majority. He conceded that the legal rules of “the blacks” were fair (*la ba's bihā*) and disputes could be resolved amicably.

Bruce Hall provides a compelling discussion on the question of race in southern Saharan discourse that sheds light on the above position. He argues that in the writings of many Saharan scholars “the label of ‘Blacks’ (*sūdān*) appears in opposition to the word for ‘Muslims’ (*muslīmīn*).”¹⁴⁸ The logic here, as Hall explains, was part and parcel of a rhetoric that opposed “Blacks” to “Whites” who supposedly were the “bearer[s] of ‘true’ Islam.”¹⁴⁹ Shaykh Sīdī Muḥammad’s position, therefore, stands in sharp contrast to the prevailing discourse by arguing not only that “Blacks” could be “good Muslims,” but also that “Black” Muslim leaders

¹⁴⁷ Fatwa of Shaykh Sīdī Muḥammad Wuld Shaykh Sīdī al-Mukhtār al-Bakkay (SBA 4), Bū ‘Asriyya Family Archives (Tishīt). See also excerpt of the fatwa copied by Muḥammad Wuld al-Tālib Muḥammad Wuld al-Tālib ‘Uthmān al-Ḥusaynī (AS 1), Aḥmad al-Saghīr Family Archives (Tishīt).

¹⁴⁸ Hall, “Question of Race,” 355.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

were to be followed the same as “Whites.” Sīdī Muḥammad was therefore advocating that harmony prevail among all Muslims. It is worth noting that one of his father’s (Shaykh Sīdī al-Mukhtār) keenest students, Shaykh Sidiyya al-Kabīr of the Gibla region, held similar views about the equality of Muslims irrespective of race.¹⁵⁰

Trade with Christians and Jews

On another aspect of cross-cultural exchange, Sīdī ‘Abdallah was asked to write an opinion concerning the slave trade: “is it lawful to sell slaves to another trader knowing that in turn this trader is going to sell the slave to the *Naṣāra* [Christians/Europeans]?”¹⁵¹ He answered in the negative that it was forbidden to sell slaves to a trader who engaged in slave trafficking with Christians. His brief legal response reveals something of the mounting concern at the turn of the nineteenth century with cross-cultural trade among traders of different faiths, and presumably with entirely different business ethics. While not stated, the reasoning behind this position may have something to do with the obligations of Muslim slave-masters to initiate the enslaved into the religion of Islam.

Still on the subject of interfaith exchange, something must be said about the nature of exchanges between Muslims and Jews. While the former often publicly admonished their Jewish associates, they respected them above non-believers because they too were “people of the book.” Nevertheless it is clear that the rare Jews to venture into western African markets suffered at the hands of discriminating Muslims in the nineteenth century. As noted in Chapter 3, the traders of the Wād Nūn network included Jews of Guelmīm who invested in common caravan ventures. One was the trader named Shalūm, who is featured in a legal report examined in the [next chapter](#). After each mention of his name the following exclamation was repeated: “May God damn his sect!”¹⁵² Crossing the western Sahara desert in 1266/1850 Panet remarked on the sometimes violent treatment of Jews by Muslims in the area. He noted that his Jewish colleague Yaouda was constantly harassed by caravaners “because he was a Jew, and the degree of degradation and servitude to which Jews are subjected to by Arabs is well known.”¹⁵³ The violent attacks suffered by

¹⁵⁰ Stewart, *Islam*, 66.

¹⁵¹ Sīdī ‘Abdallah, *Nawāzil*.

¹⁵² Wād Nūn Inheritance Case (1269/1853), Arwīlī Family Records, Archives of Shaykh Hammuny (Shinqīti). See Chapter 7.

¹⁵³ Panet, *Première établissement*, 45.

Jews such as Aby Serour and Eliahu b. al-Hazzan Ya'qūb in nineteenth-century Timbuktu, recounted in Chapter 3, are cases in point.

But beyond such prejudicial actions, Jews and Muslims in the nineteenth century, as in the past, continued to collaborate in trade even though interfaith commerce was not recommended in Mālikī law. Wād Nūn traders depended on their Jewish partners for goods from Al-Ṣawīra, while many relied on their capital to finance caravans. Trade between Jews and Muslims in Guelmīm was regulated by the Bayrūk family, who collected a premium on transactions involving the Jews under their protection. Those “who purchase from Jews secretly” were fined if discovered.¹⁵⁴ In fact, Muslims and Jews had every advantage in engaging in cross-cultural exchange because, as Goitein explains, Jews “taking loans on interest from Muslims and vice versa was regarded as legal.”¹⁵⁵ Nineteenth-century contracts between Jews and Muslims, examined below, for example, were drawn based on standard contractual models.

Cross-Cultural Barter

Bila'mish was asked to provide a legal opinion on how trade should be conducted in regions where there was no unified currency or an agreed-on medium of exchange. He replied that in such circumstances, both parties should find an intermediate good, the value of which they both could agree on, to use as a basis for their purchases and sales.¹⁵⁶ In other words, Bila'mish recommended that both trading parties find a common currency so that they would not directly exchange apples for oranges. This question touches on the issue of barter, typically defined as the direct exchange of one good or service for another without the intermediary of money, usually defined in the limited Western sense as coins and bills. The distinction is important, for it sets this type of barter transaction within a context of exchange valuation in which everything had a price. Despite his narrow definition of money, Tayeb Chentouf makes a similar argument when describing the nineteenth-century southern Algerian economy. There, even though coins and bills were rarely exchanged, they allowed for “the fixing of prices [which] is always monetary.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ Jizya for the sons of Shaykh Bayrūk (1 Rabi' al-Thānī, 1291/May 17, 1874), Family Archives of Bashīr al-Ghazāwī (Guelmīm). See Chapter 4.

¹⁵⁵ Goitein, *Mediterranean*, I, 256. ¹⁵⁶ Bila'mash, *Nawāzil*.

¹⁵⁷ Chentouf, “Monnaies dans le Gourara,” 81.

Cross-cultural exchange in western Africa is difficult to document because so few sources describe how business ethics were carried out between diverse groups. A well-known Wolof proverb conveys that one should be thankful toward the Bīḍān who provides loans: “You did not pay the salt to the Bīḍān” (*Fayo Nār bi khoromom*), which conveys a person’s ingratitude.¹⁵⁸ Oral evidence and proverbs from the towns of Niuro, Podor, and Louga (Map 5), which often depict Saharan traders in quite negative terms, suggest that the Islamic ideals of social justice among Muslims and between Muslims and non-Muslims were not always followed across religious and cultural frontiers.

NAWĀZIL AL-QARD, OR THE VALUE OF CREDIT

Long-distance trade was made possible through the availability of credit in vibrant, flexible, and highly personalized financial markets. Credit was the fuel of commerce, as seen in the [next chapter](#). But fundamental problems of exchange existed for trans-Saharan traders and Saharan residents alike because it was not always possible to avoid engaging in usurious transactions. Consequently, the subject of usury, alongside that of defining the quality of currencies, was a major concern in Saharan legal literature. The *nawāzil* of Bila’mish and Sīdī ‘Abdallāh contain sections entitled *nawāzil al-qard*, or loan cases, that bear witness to both the vitality and the contested nature of credit operations.¹⁵⁹ Given the multiplicity of currencies and measures prevailing across western Africa, and the concern of Muslims to engage in lawful exchange, it is not surprising that Saharan jurists would expend much time and paper debating financial transactions.

Debating Currencies and Equivalencies

Naturally, the most debated of legal topics was the nature of the salt bar, or ‘adīla, as it was the primary currency in the western Sahara. For many nineteenth-century Saharan jurists this topic was as important as the valuation of gum arabic.¹⁶⁰ Legal experts discussed extensively whether

¹⁵⁸ Personal communication by Serigne Mor Mbaye, Dakar, Senegal (04/92).

¹⁵⁹ Bila’mish, *Nawāzil*, 60–4.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. Maḥand Bāba Wuld ‘Abayd (d. 1276–7/1860), a jurist from Trārza, wrote an influential fatwa on gum arabic debating its quality as food or condiment. He established that it was considered food because it was used in medicine, drinks, and dishes and during times of food scarcity. His own student, al-Hārith b. Maḥand b. al-Shuqrāwī, took the opposite view, declaring that gum arabic, which was a major

the value of salt should be determined by quality or origin, and whether equivalencies should be set by weight, volume (*wazn*, *wallā wazn al-kaili*), or local practice (*‘āda*).¹⁶¹ As is to be expected, Bila‘mish began his deliberation on loans with the question of the salt currency. Following his discussion of the measurements, he debated whether loans in salt bars should be calculated according to local custom.¹⁶² Sīdī ‘Abdallāh also studied this question, but more expressly than Bila‘mish, he recognized the tricky nature of determining usury in salt-bar loans. Because of the lack of precision in measurements, as seen above, reimbursements of such loans were highly disputed. While he conceded that there was no legal way around it, he implied that the lack of an exact measurement should not be an impediment to credit operations.¹⁶³

There was no consensus among jurists about the salt bar’s exact size or quality for, as Bila‘mish admitted, local measurements were not accurate (*la yakūn thābitih*).¹⁶⁴ After discussing the fungibility of salt bars based on Mālikī rules cited above, he concluded:

Salt bars are fungible (*mithliya*) because salt is a unit like gold for gold, paper for paper, seed for seed, barley for barley, dates for dates and salt for salt. . . . [Although] salt does not have a legal (*shar‘i*) standard measurement, it has a customary standard measurement.¹⁶⁵

Saharan jurists therefore concluded that the salt-bar standard could be determined only by traditional measurements, not by Mālikī law.¹⁶⁶

Saharan jurists acknowledged that the real problem regarding the standard valuation of the ‘adila was not its size but its quality. If salt bars were classified as “condiment” or “food,” their function as currency to purchase food or to engage in credit transactions could be considered usurious. For, as noted above, exchanging one good for another good of a different kind for profit and with a delay was usurious and therefore

trade item in western Africa, could be exchanged with a payment delay, and therefore, could be defined as non-food, and thus Muslims could trade it for food without fear of committing usury. See Ould El-Bara, “Al-muḥṭawī al-ijtimā‘ī li-fatāwī al-‘ilk”; and Wuld al-Sa‘ad, *Al-Fatāwā*.

¹⁶¹ Bila‘mish, *Nawāzil*, 58–60.

¹⁶² Ibid., 60–1.

¹⁶³ Sīdī ‘Abdallāh, *Nawāzil*.

¹⁶⁴ Bila‘mish, *Nawāzil*, 59. A century later, Sīdī ‘Abdallāh held the same opinion (*Nawāzil*, copy of a handwritten copy of the manuscript in author’s possession, no page numbers). He defers to Bila‘mish’s judgments on similar issues.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. Sīdī ‘Abdallāh summarizes the entire debate on salt in a very useful three-page discussion.

¹⁶⁶ Interview in Nouakchott with Ḥamdan Wuld al-Tāh (06/06/97).

prohibited by law. Accordingly, Bila'mish argued that the sale of salt bars for units of millet was lawful only if salt bars were considered a food and not a condiment, as in the lawful transaction of kind for kind. He added that for a sale to be considered lawful at least one of the goods exchanged had to be sold in a recognizable measure. Since salt bars were recognized as customary units of exchange, most jurists sanctioned such transactions. Bila'mish, however, held that only in times of need, and under circumstances in which people were pressed to barter, could sales be carried out in non-standard measures or weights. And so he was asked to rule whether this was also permitted in the case of the sale of an unspecified quantity of milk for another undetermined quantity of millet in a small bowl. Citing the foremost Mālikī manual, he explained that:

The sale, verbal agreement or negotiation of an unknown measure (*al-mikyāl al-majhūl*) in the presence of an established measure (*al-mikyāl al-ma'lūm*) is not allowed. . . . According to Imām Mālik [in his *Muwatta'*], the purchase of food measured in a *gedha* (standard wooden bowl in Hasaniya) or in *qasa'a* (wooden bowl in Arabic) and not with the [standard] measure of the people, is prohibited as is its forward sale (*al-salam*).¹⁶⁷

In other words, transactions had to be negotiated in the standard local measures.

On another question, Bila'mish ruled that a qualitative equivalence (*kayfiya*) did not require quantitative knowledge. By this he meant that equivalency in quality was more important than equivalency in quantity, and equals in quality were equal and therefore exchangeable whether they were weighed or otherwise measured. Sīdī 'Abdallah disagreed on this point. When asked about the sale of a good of an unknown measure for one of known measure, as in the case of three 'adīlas exchanged for six unknown quantities of millet, he ruled that this sale was unlawful.¹⁶⁸ He reasoned in quite mathematical terms that a known measure can never be equal to one that is unknown.

On another subject the jurist Sīdī 'Abdallah assessed the exchange rate between the mithqāl and the *dinār*.¹⁶⁹ Said to be equivalent to the Roman *solidus*, the *dinār* became the basic monetary unit in Islamic legal manuals and was supposed to be a gold coin weighing exactly one mithqāl.¹⁷⁰ Sīdī 'Abdallah argued that the *dinār*, like the mithqāl, was

¹⁶⁷ Bila'mish, *Nawāzil*, 49.

¹⁶⁸ Sīdī 'Abdallah, *Nawāzil*.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Garrard, "Myth," 450–1; Khan, *Glossary of Islamic Economics*, 34.

equivalent to 24 carats, which he believed to weigh 4.15 grams. However, he recognized that slight weight variations across Saharan markets prevailed.

The Tricky Business of Usury

As elsewhere in the Muslim world, the question of usury preoccupied Saharan legal scholars. But many jurists typically were willing to overlook certain kinds of usury, no doubt because of the specific circumstances of long-distance trade that necessarily was organized on the basis of various forms of credit.¹⁷¹ On the question of usury Sīdī ‘Abdallah ruled that for any person acquiring goods by exacting usurious interest (*ribā*), the appropriate behavior was to repent and return the misappropriated goods to the rightful owner. If, however, the owner was no longer present, then the goods could be distributed to the poor and the destitute. The fact that he advocated repentance, stipulated in the Qur’ān, as punishment for those who engaged in usury, suggests this breach of Islamic law was actually common.

In the early twentieth century, Dubié reported a strategy known as the *mud’āf*, meaning doubling, used by traders to disguise conspicuous usury. This strategy, which obviously contravened Mālikī rules, consisted in borrowing one currency and reimbursing the loan at a later date in a different currency for twice the value of the initial loan. Ironically, this term may have been inspired by the Qur’ānic verse that expressly states “do not live on usury, doubling your wealth many times over (*iḍā’fan mudā’fatan*).¹⁷² Dubié suggested that the *mud’āf* became prevalent in the early 1900s with the increased use of colonial currencies, but evidence shows similar patterns of usury dissimulation predating this period. Indeed, before the French franc supplanted most local currencies, other currencies and exchange goods were loaned in such a way.¹⁷³ Although the practice was reported by Dubié and

¹⁷¹ Stewart (*Islam*, 70, n. 2) notes that seven different forms of usury were recognized by nineteenth-century Mauritanian legal scholars. I did not come upon any specific discussion of this in my research, but the following section perhaps touches on some of these accepted usury forms.

¹⁷² Qur’ān 3:130.

¹⁷³ Historian Muḥammad al-Mukhtār Wuld al-Sa’ad informed me about several legal discussions concerning the *mud’āf* including a document by an eighteenth-century qāḍī of Walāta known as al-Qaṣrī, IMRS no. 2138, and ISERI nos. 233–5. I have yet to consult these documents, but it seems clear that the practice of *mud’āf* was a subject of Saharan legal debates well before the twentieth century.

discussed by Webb, oral sources were predictably mute about the muḍʿāf.¹⁷⁴

To illustrate the muḍʿāf, Dubié provides the example of one trader who gives 100 French francs to another trader to be repaid in three months (or six months or a year) with cloth worth 200 francs.¹⁷⁵ Animals were also part of muḍʿāf transactions. The terms of the muḍʿāf were apparently well defined. If the debtor paid before the term of the contract, he or she could not obtain a reduction in the loan price. At the same time, the creditor could not increase the price of the loan if the debtor was late in paying it back. While Saharan jurists may have condemned it, long-distance traders seem to have practiced the muḍʿāf openly with colonial currency, bayšas, or animals. Dubié discussed the case of a creditor in the Trārza (not identified) who was publicly attacked in a poetic verse that states: “You castrate money,” as in the practice of gelding animals to fatten them for a higher sales price.¹⁷⁶

Saharan traders circumvented the interdict on usury in a number of other ways. To be sure, few of these ploys are documented since evading the law was best done off the written record. One such stratagem was the practice of “leasing” capital, which was a disguised form of usury. Although I have not located any legal discussion of this type of contractual arrangement, oral sources and evidence examined below confirm that leasing (*al-kiraʿ*) salt bars, as well as other goods and currencies, was common practice. Another mechanism to circumvent usury was called “sale by the eye” (*baiʿ al-ʿayn* or *baiʿ al-ʿayniyya*), whereby “[t]he debtor sells to the creditor an item and immediately repurchases it for a higher sum, payable at a later date.”¹⁷⁷ In effect this amounted to making a loan with interest through the intermediary of a fictitious sale. It was a popular credit mechanism judging from oral evidence collected in Senegal where, in Wolof society, it was known as *bukki*.¹⁷⁸ In Wolof folklore, the *bukki*, or hyena, is an untrustworthy, erratic, and trickster-like character. As one proverb states, “one does not entrust a hyena with one’s dried meat” (*bukki ken du ko dênki sel*). The *bukki* system of disguising interest rates, sometimes the only means to obtain credit in Senegal, came to symbolize

¹⁷⁴ Dubié, “Vie matérielle,” 216–9. It is important to note that muḍʿāf means “to double” and not “to triple,” as Dubié claims. Webb also noted this practice (*Desert Frontier*, 63 and n. 58).

¹⁷⁵ Dubié, “Vie matérielle,” 218. ¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Hunwick, “Islamic Financial Institutions,” 13.

¹⁷⁸ Cheikh Anta Mbacké Babou (personal communication, 02/96); interview in Louga (Senegal) with Samba Souna Fall (07/04/97).

the classic relationship between shopkeepers and their cash-strapped customers.¹⁷⁹

Forward Purchases and Multiple Currency Loans

Yet another financial ruse was the forward purchase, or *bai' al-salam*. Forward purchasing is the “advance payment for goods which are to be delivered later.”¹⁸⁰ According to Mālikī codes, a sale could not lawfully proceed unless the goods were in existence at the time of exchange. Exceptions to this rule applied if the goods and the delivery date were clearly defined in the contractual agreement. This type of purchase on promise was considered lawful only if it involved fungible goods, not gold or silver. It corresponds to what economists today call forward contracts, in which one party agrees to buy something from another at a specified future date for a specified price.¹⁸¹

Saharan jurists debated the terms of a forward purchase extensively because this transaction constituted, in effect, a deferred payment or loan since the buyer paid at the time of the agreement and received delivery after a certain lapse of time. Sīdī ‘Abdallah argued that to sell goods that were absent was unlawful except in cases of dire necessity. Here he differed from the opinion of Bila‘mish for whom any sale made with a promise to pay at a future date, as in the future purchase of salt, was forbidden. Indeed, Bila‘mish argued that to purchase food with the promise to pay in salt bars to be extracted at the next salt harvest went against the *shari‘a*. Despite these legal opinions, Saharan sources, including cases examined in Chapter 7, suggests that long-distance traders relied extensively on forward contracts. By selling goods in advance of future caravan expeditions or ahead of the salt, date, or millet harvests, they not only financed part of the expedition with the advance payments but also guaranteed buyers for the products they would bring back. It is conceivable that some caravans organized by well-connected traders were financed entirely with forward contracts.

¹⁷⁹ Some aspects of the bukki system are similar to typical pawn shop transactions, while others are clearly linked to the practice of pawning that was once so widespread in West Africa. See Falola and Lovejoy, *Pawnship in Africa*.

¹⁸⁰ Khan, *Glossary*, 20.

¹⁸¹ Kamali, *Islamic Commercial Law*. This is the “futures market” that Hopkins (*Economic History of West Africa*, 71) identified, although he lacked the evidence, in his seminal study.

The Saharan commercial record also reveals how debts contracted in one currency or commodity were reimbursed in another tender in order to hide the interest represented by the difference in value, thereby contravening Mālikī law. A fatwa on usury written by a prominent muftī of Tīshīt, related to the aforementioned Aḥmad al-Ṣaghīr, described a case involving the exchange of gold for paper money (as previously noted, the latter began circulating in the colonial period). He argued that usury pertains only to transactions in “six things: gold, silver, burr [former copper currency in the Middle East], barley, dates, and salt.”¹⁸² According to him, only transactions made in these six items, which, unlike paper, are products extracted directly from the earth, were considered usurious. Deferred payments in one of these items had to be settled in the same kind, following the Mālikī rule cited above.

Money Transfer Tools

Trans-Saharan traders used myriad mechanisms to transfer funds and commodities to fellow business partners. As discussed below, the contractual world of trans-Saharan caravaners hinged on the use of intermediaries, partners, and trade representatives for commercial delegation. They transferred sums across long distances by relying on credit relations among family or network members living in separate markets. One such tool was the international or interregional traveler’s check, known as *suftāja* (plur. *safātij*) from the Farsi, and the *ḥawāla al-safar*, or simply *ḥawāla*, for bill of exchange.¹⁸³

Ismā‘īl b. Bāba b. al-Shaykh Sidiyya (c. 1890–1970), son of the above-mentioned nineteenth-century scholar of southwestern Mauritania, deliberated at length on the use of the *suftāja*.¹⁸⁴ He defined it as “a written document by the owner of capital to his agent to pay loaned capital [to the traveler] so as to protect him from the dangers of the road.”¹⁸⁵ For example, before going to Guelmīm, a traveler in Timbuktu approaches a local Wād

¹⁸² Fatwa on Gold for Paper by Shaykh Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Saghīr (AS2), Family Archives of Aḥmad al-Saghīr (Tīshīt).

¹⁸³ Both these tools were long in use among Muslim and Jewish long-distance traders. See Goitein, *Mediterranean*, I, 240–5. For examples from nineteenth-century Niger, see Baier, *Economic History*, 65–8, 69. On the Mālikī rules on such mechanisms, see Seignette, *Code*, 173–5.

¹⁸⁴ For a discussion of the legal deliberations of Ismā‘īl b. Bāba b. al-Shaykh Sidiyya, see Stewart, “Comparison of the Exercise of Colonial and Precolonial Justice,” 82–6.

¹⁸⁵ Ismā‘īl b. Bāba, “al-naql al-majmū‘a aw lahā al-inqāl al-muntāja hāl al-suftāja.” HCSL, 1235–98/12.

Nūn trader. The traveler pays the trader in Timbuktu the specific sum of money he needs transferred, plus a premium or fee, in exchange for a bill redeemable to the trader's cousin in Guelmīm. After the crossing the traveler takes his suftāja bill to the cousin, who redeems it for the specified amount. According to Ismā'īl b. Bāba, suftājas, like debt contracts, also were exchanged in financial markets between third parties.

The advantages provided by this financial tool were twofold. For the traveler, it ensured a certain degree of safety to engage in an otherwise perilous trans-Saharan crossing without carrying conspicuous cash. For the two related traders on either end of the caravan trail, they benefited from selling the service, while the intermediary traveler allowed them to settle accounts by way of this correspondence. What is more, they stood to gain if the traveler had the misfortune of not surviving the crossing. The nineteenth-century Panet described a suftāja transaction, pointing to the commonality of such financial tools.¹⁸⁶

As for the bill of exchange, or *ḥawāla*, its use was well established in trans-Saharan trade as early as the tenth century when Ibn Ḥawqal first reported it (see Chapter 2). Like the traveler's check, the *ḥawāla* was a mechanism for transferring money abroad or swapping debts. Recognized and defined in Mālikī law, it was still common in the nineteenth century, as seen below.¹⁸⁷ But the small number of records of such financial transactions suggests that these were not preserved, for once redeemed the document lost its utility.

CONTRACTING SAHARAN CARAVANS

As already emphasized here and in the [preceding chapter](#), Saharan caravan traders operated in a paper economy. Of all the records preserved by families documenting the trading activities of their ancestors, contracts were the most numerous. Contracts generally were short documents, typically written on a single sheet. They were expressed in classical Arabic, but with local words to designate certain goods. Information on such agreements was also contained in commercial correspondence and in legal sources such as fatwas.

Caravan entrepreneurs drafted all kinds of contractual agreements to finance and invest in both international and interregional caravans. I

¹⁸⁶ Panet, *Première établissement*, 124. See also Baier, *Economic History*, 65–9, on similar financial mechanisms in Niger.

¹⁸⁷ Seignette, *Code*, 173–5.

TABLE 6.1. *Saharan partnership agreements*

<i>Mufāwāḍa</i>	Joint-investment and joint-liability partnership between two parties whereby one partner confers full authority to or delegates (<i>yafawāḍa</i>) the other to dispose of their joint capital. This was a flexible contract typically used by sedentary and itinerant merchants who pooled resources to engage in overseas trade. Partners split the profits and losses according to their share of the investment in labor, capital, and equipment. This partnership usually was called <i>wakāla al-mufāwāḍa</i> to distinguish it from a simple plenipotentiary agency contract.
<i>Sharika</i>	Joint-investment company involving two or more parties engaged in ongoing transactions with joint liability and mutual sharing of profits and losses. The capital investment, decision making, and management were jointly shared. Each associate had power of attorney to act on the behalf of the others with their joint capital, but could not purchase on credit or add a new partner without the consent of all partners. The profit sharing of associates was proportional to their investment.

identified agency and commission contracts, labor contracts, debt and equity contracts, storage contracts, forward-purchase contracts, and leasing contracts, as well as partnership agreements. Several forms of partnership agreements prevailed with a tendency toward sharing liability among partners. The two most frequent contracts were the *mufāwāḍa* and the joint-liability, or *sharika*, contract. Seemingly, the use of limited-liability contracts was less common. Table 6.1 summarizes the two basic partnership agreements, based on what I encountered in legal and commercial records.

Mufāwāḍa Saharam Contracts

Often called *wakāla al-mufāwāḍa*, this partnership agreement primarily was used on international as opposed to regional caravan expeditions. As noted above, it was a joint-liability contract whereby one of the investors traveled with the joint capital and plenipotentiary rights to engage in trade. It was apparently best suited for overseas commerce involving long-term travel. Following Williamson, this contract was chosen because of the characteristics of trans-Saharan trade where transactions were less transparent across time and space, information asymmetries

were high, and the conduct of trade was fraught with danger. Consequently, *mufāwāḍas*, or so-called pooling contracts, were “applied in environments that featured extreme physical hazards . . . [and] in which agents’ survival was particularly threatened.”¹⁸⁸ By pooling capital, camels, expertise, and labor, itinerant traders could finance and sedentary merchants could invest in caravan expeditions. Profits were shared in accordance with investment shares or a prearranged understanding.

A fatwa dating from the second half of the nineteenth century describes a *mufāwāḍa* contract that was negotiated orally among several parties. In the late 1870s, Aḥmad b. Bāba and his brother Sīdi contracted a *mufāwāḍa* partnership with their father-in-law to work with their capital, including twenty camels, to transport Ijil salt for millet. For the period of the contract, they were to share the proceeds of “twenty camels for nine years each carrying five salt bars to the Sūdān and each one returning with loads of standard millet (*zar‘a mutawasit*).”¹⁸⁹ In the nine years that had expired since drawing up the partnership, the brothers had not received their share of the profits, so they sought a legal opinion from a muftī from Tishīt. They argued that the agreement stipulated that their partner was responsible for “the fodder for the camels during the travel,” and so in their calculation they were owed a total of ten camels and 110 bars of salt.

In his reply, the muftī began with a statement acknowledging the confusion that could arise in contracts negotiated orally especially among family members. He stated that “it was because they are one family and one house, and all lend to one another, and they all borrow each other’s money, by way of agency contracts, for varying amounts and lengths of time.”¹⁹⁰ Then the muftī stressed the importance of recording deeds, after determining that in this case, the partners had no written record of their agreement. In the absence of written contracts, he argued, people had to rely on “the fraternity (*al-ikhā*), the act of entrusting (*al-waḍīʿa*) and the closeness (*al-aqrāba*)” among them to solve disputes:

If the thing was entrusted or taken by contract, time passed between them and it was not written by the owner and the debtor, then the judgment for this is to believe the claimant if he swears (on oath). . . . Just like when the owner of the goods provides a statement declaring that he received what was entrusted.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁸ Williamson, “Transparency,” 4.

¹⁸⁹ Fatwa on *Wakāla al-Mufāwāḍa* dated 1304/1887 (FS2), Family Archives Fāḍil al-Sharīf (Tishīt).

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

Based on various Mālikī sources, including Ṣaḥnūn's *Mudawwana*, the muftī ruled in favor of the two brothers by concluding that the partner was responsible for returning the property entrusted to him and their share of the profits.

A more straightforward example of a *mufāwāḍa*, and this time a written contract, was negotiated between Mūlāy al-Mahdī, a Tikna who moved to Shinqīti from Guelmīm in the 1880s, and another Tikna caravaner, Ibrāhīm Wuld 'Amāra. In a *pro forma* contract, the first gave to the second a sum of 57 Spanish silver coins (*riyāl zabil*) on the basis of a joint-liability/joint-investment contract (*wakāla tāma mufāwāḍa*) for the express purpose of purchasing ostrich lard (*zihām*). The traveling partner, who contributed the camels and other transportation costs, was instructed to resell the lard (typically used in cooking as well as cosmetics) at a profit.¹⁹²

Sharika Partnerships

The second common partnership was a long-term contract involving the pooling of multi-party investments. Known as a company (*sharika*), this was a joint-investment contract whereby each associate gave and received the right to exchange or otherwise manage their common investment.¹⁹³ Such a partnership was first and most explicitly described in Mālikī sources as a "joint investment with joint sharing of profits and risks."¹⁹⁴ Khalīl's *Mukhtaṣar* contains a chapter on Sharika agreements that provides detailed instructions concerning the liabilities of partners in specific circumstances, including the sharing of commercial losses on the death of a partner.¹⁹⁵ Typically, two or more investors pooled their capital for a specific venture in which they shared in the profits or losses. Unlike the *mufāwāḍa* contract where one partner had full authority to trade on the behalf of the partnership, in a *sharika* there was no delegation and all investors had to agree on decisions. Oral sources suggest that such agreements were not uncommon, although few unlimited company agreements were found in the private archives.¹⁹⁶ Given the logistics of trans-Saharan trade and the

¹⁹² Wakāla al-Mufāwāḍa Contract 1355/1936 (LA21). Family Records of Limām Wuld Arwīlī, Archives of Shaykh Hammuny (Shinqīti).

¹⁹³ Hunwick, "Islamic Financial Institutions"; Coyne, *Étude*, 25.

¹⁹⁴ Udovitch, *Partnership*, 24.

¹⁹⁵ Khalīl b. Ishāq, *al-Mukhtaṣar*, 155–8.

¹⁹⁶ Harmann ("Dead Ostrich," 29 n. 125) makes mention of a legal dispute over a *sharika* agreement dating from 1270/1853 between a Ghadāmiṣī trader and another from Timbuktu.

non-delegated nature of these companies, it seems likely that long-distance traders preferred other contractual arrangements.

An early-twentieth-century fatwa concerning a multiparty company sheds some light on the use of such partnerships. ‘Abdallah Wuld Dāddāh, the above-mentioned jurist of the Trārza region, was asked to rule on the following question concerning a sharika: “Can company associates allow for one partner to participate but only pay his investment share three months after the drawing of the contract?”¹⁹⁷ Referring to various sources, from Khalil’s *Mukhtaṣar* to the Qur’ān, the muftī explained that there was disagreement in the legal arena on this question. He concluded with an open-ended statement based on the often-stated Qur’ānic verse “Those who believe do not eat each other’s wealth falsely because commerce should be undertaken only by mutual agreement between you (*‘an tarāḍin minkum*).”¹⁹⁸ In other words, the partner could pay his dues later if this was considered fair and if all the other company associates agreed.

A document officially putting an end to a sharika partnership was found in the archives of the above-mentioned Mūlāy al-Mahdi. The contract states that two trans-Saharan traders “disassociated (*tafāṣala*) from the partnership (*sharika*) that was between them and that nothing remains between either one or the other (*la naqīra wa lā qaṭmīra*).”¹⁹⁹ No other information was provided to indicate what had been the purpose of the original partnership.

Saharan Agency and Commission Contracts

Aside from the investment-pooling partnerships described above, a great variety of agency contracts and labor contracts for commissioning trade prevailed among sedentary merchants, traveling caravaners, and the public in general (see Table 6.2). Common to both international and interregional caravans, such contracts were used to mandate a person to act on behalf of the contractor in all kinds of situations, to collect debts or an inheritance, or to engage in commerce on commission. These contracts tended to be one-shot deals authorizing power of attorney for a specific transaction on a single voyage. Saharan archival evidence shows that such arrangements among merchants and traders, women and men, and family members were commonplace.

¹⁹⁷ ‘Abdallah b. Dāddāh “Ḥukm al-sharika” IMRS (No. 2747).

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Partnership Dissolution (MM6), Family Archives of Mūlāy al-Mahdī (Shinqīṭi).

TABLE 6.2. *Saharan agency and commission contracts*

<i>Wakāla</i>	A basic contract whereby a traveling agent (<i>wakīl</i>) is given power of attorney by a sedentary party to represent, act, speak, buy, or sell on his or her behalf. These contracts were generally one-shot deals for the duration of a single trip, mainly used in trading but also for mandating agents to deliver or collect dues, debts, or inheritances.
<i>Ibdāʿ</i>	Partnership agreement between a sedentary investor and a traveling agent for the sale of an item or a bundle of goods in a distant market <i>without commission</i> . The trade agent was not liable in the eventuality of loss or seizure of the mandated property. Also known as a sale through a non-commissioned agent (<i>baiʿ al-fuḍūlī</i>), contracts were common among family members, including husbands and wives.
<i>ʿAqādīm</i>	Contract between a sedentary merchant and a caravan worker for the transportation, sale, and purchase of camel-loads, including wage payment per trip. The <i>ʿaqādīm</i> caravan worker was usually of lower social status, such as a former slave (see Chapter 5).

Agency Contracts (*Wakāla*)

The most basic agreement was the “shipment via agency” contract of the kind detailed in the formula cited above. Most agreements consisted of hiring a legal representative or agent, known as a *wakīl*, whose specific task was to collect loans or sell goods for a principal contractor. As stated in Khalīl’s chapter on the *Wakāla*, the contracted agent had full power of attorney to represent his contractor in a legal capacity.²⁰⁰ The stationary merchant or party gave authority to the agent to act on his or her behalf and best interest, and the delegation service was on commission. A late-nineteenth-century fatwa concerning a contested agreement between a man and woman for the commissioned sale of goats makes mention of the rate of “one-third current rate (*darājīhi*) of the mandate (*tawkīl*) for the receipt of sale.”²⁰¹ Oral sources indicate that one-third of the value of the mandated property was a customary commission rate.²⁰²

²⁰⁰ Khalīl b. Ishāq, *al-Mukhtaṣar*, 158–60.

²⁰¹ *Wakāla al-Sharika* (LA36A and B), Family Records of Limām Wuld Arwīlī, Archives of Shaykh Ḥammuny (Shinqīti).

²⁰² Interviews in Timbuktu with Mūlāy Bāhah Wuld Mūlāy ʿAbdallah Wuld Mūlāy Aḥmad (04/24/98); in Tishit with Muḥammad Wuld Aḥmadī (04/16/97); in Shinqīti with ʿAbdarrahmān Wuld Muḥammad al-Ḥanshī (02/28/97); and in Nouakchott with Muḥammad al-Ḥanshī Wuld Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ (06/25/97).

I began the [preceding chapter](#) by discussing the case of al-Ḥuriyya who contracted her brother as a *wakīl* for the collection of her property and camels. The following examples further illustrate the extent to which Saharan women made use of agency contracts. In 1250/1834, a Tikna woman living in Guelmīm hired her cousin to whom she gave “full and absolute power of attorney” to collect her father’s inheritance, including his commercial contracts (*‘uqūd*).²⁰³ In the year 1322/1904, the Tikna widow Maryam Mint Aḥmayda sent her son, ‘Abd al-Qādir Wuld ‘Abāba, to collect a debt owed to her father for a bundle of merchandise of Moroccan origin.²⁰⁴ Another early-twentieth-century agency contract was drafted between the granddaughter of Shaykh Bayrūk and her husband to collect a debt owed to her by her cousin. The partnership agreement states that:

[‘Azīza bint Muḥammad b. Bayrūk] commissioned and delegated by the Might and the Power of God, and her agent (*wakīl*) and her representative (*na’ib*) is her husband al-Ḥusayn b. Mbārak al-Mu’tī . . . on condition that he obtain fourteen Moroccan reāls (*riyāl ḥasaniya*) owed to her by Shaykh Daḥmān b. ‘Abidīn b. Bayrūk.²⁰⁵

As noted earlier, the practice of contracts within families, in this case, between husband and wife, shows that trust between family members may not have been sufficient to overcome the commitment problem in long-distance transactions.

Merchants often hired agents to settle long-distance debts. For example, a contract was negotiated between a sedentary Tikna merchant in Guelmīm, Ibrāhīm b. Ḥamād ‘Umar, and his paternal cousin Muḥammad al-Shilī b. Bayrūk (who often traded in Timbuktu) in 1307/1889–90. It was written by a Tikna scribe, dated and certified by two witnesses. The purpose of this agency contract was the collection of a debt totaling 175 Spanish silver coins (*riyāl zabīl*) owed to the principal contractor by another Tikna trader who had just passed away in Timbuktu.²⁰⁶ In an informative case, which transpired in 1330/1912, two trade agents reported

²⁰³ Agency Contract between Munīna Mint Arraybī b. ‘Aly and ‘Aly Fāl b. Muḥammad Arāl b. Muḥammad al-‘Abd, 25 Rabi‘a al-nabawī 1250/1834 (LA4). Family Records of Limām Wuld Arwīlī, Archives of Shaykh Ḥammunī (Shinqīṭi). Dated 1165/1752 is a similar case of a woman hiring her brother to collect her inheritance from her husband.

²⁰⁴ Debt settlement via a Wakāla Contract between Mariam Mint Aḥmayda and Aḥmad Wuld Idda 1322/1904 (DI7), Family Archives of Dāddah Wuld Idda (Tishīt).

²⁰⁵ Agency Contract 1342/1924 (DB3), Family Archives of Daḥmān Wuld Bayrūk (Guelmīm).

²⁰⁶ Wakāla Contract 1307/1889–90 (DB16), Family Archives of Daḥmān Wuld Bayrūk (Guelmīm).

on the outcome of their mandated mission in a statement intended for the Tikna merchant who hired them, Mūlay al-ʿArabī Wuld Mūlay ʿAly, located in the town of Aṭār.²⁰⁷ They swore on paper to having buried fifty salt bars in a hiding spot in the oasis town of Walāta, located some fifteen camel-days away to the southeast, because of the fear of losing their capital at the hands of Saharan raiders. The document was drafted to ensure the liability of the trade agents, who would have to produce the salt at a later date as they still were liable since the capital technically was not lost.

On the other hand, some evidence suggests that agency contracts were not always respected and that the strategy to trade or correspond via proxies could fail.²⁰⁸ This may be the case for the late-nineteenth-century Tikna woman who wrote to Limām Wuld Arwīlī (related to the family discussed in [next chapter](#)) inquiring about the whereabouts of her wakīl. This was also apparently the case in the fatwa discussed at the beginning of the chapter. It concerned a trans-Saharan trader who traveled from Tīshīt to Wād Nūn with entrusted merchandise based on a wakāla contractual arrangement for the purpose of trading a portion of it and delivering the rest.²⁰⁹ But some merchandise seems to have been lost en route and some he apparently denied ever receiving. As this case makes clear, the trade agent was not responsible or liable for mandated property in the case of an unforeseen event or an accident. But admittedly in this unusual legal contest, the circumstances of the loss were not sufficiently documented, which is why the wakīl's trustworthiness came into question. Indeed, this case is a reminder that given the circumstances of long distances, time lapses, and the precariousness of caravanning, contracts were never full guarantees against the opportunistic behavior of trade agents.

Trade without Commission (*Ibdāʿ*)

Commission-free partnership contracts also were common between Saharan family members. They were known as *ibdāʿ* contracts, or simply a sale without commission (*baiʿ al-fuḍūlī*). In this case a trade agent was mandated to sell or purchase an item or bundle of goods, without commission or profit sharing, as a service to the principal investor. While

²⁰⁷ Hidden Salt Statement of Two Trade Agents (AMA6), Family Archives of Daīdī Wuld al-ʿArabī Wuld Mūlay ʿAly (Aṭār).

²⁰⁸ Letter from Aīsha Mint Aḥmad to Limām Wuld Arwīlī (LA2). Family Records of Limām Wuld Arwīlī, Archives of Ahl Ḥammuny (former Qādī of Shinqīti).

²⁰⁹ Fatwa issued by Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Sbāʿī on entrusted trade goods (MA1), Library Muḥammad Wuld Aḥamdī (Tīshīt), lines 3–7.

Udovitch makes brief mention of it, this type of partnership agreement is not discussed in the literature on Islamic partnerships, but evidently was common in nineteenth-century Sahara.²¹⁰ Such agreements resemble the flexible “formal friendship relationships” prevailing between medieval Maghribis where partners simply exchanged services without financial compensation, as discussed by Greif.²¹¹

Several nineteenth-century Saharan fatwas address the commission-free contract and especially problems arising concerning the prices of mandated goods. In particular, jurists wrote about the difficulties of determining payment amounts when long-distance traders were engaged in multiple transactions, and, consequently, property rights were blurred.²¹² The early-nineteenth-century legal expert Sīdi ‘Abdallah deliberated the case of man who was commissioned by another to sell salt in exchange for a slave. The contractor had engaged in various intermediary transactions, including the purchase of several male slaves, rendering it difficult to ascertain which particular slave was to be handed over to the investor.²¹³

Often women drafted such contracts to hire their husbands to trade on their behalf. As noted in Chapter 5, it was no coincidence that women made extensive use of contractual agreements to invest in long-distance trade since so few of them physically embarked on commercial caravans. In a letter of complaint concerning the revocation of the sale of a young female slave, the aggrieved trader described the status of his interlocutor in the following terms:

... he is the purchaser for his wife (*mushtarī li-zawjatihi*) and that [is how] he earns his living (*yatakasib*). Praise God. He is her trade agent (*wakīlihā*) for this [transaction], and this sale is without commission (*yakūn al-bai‘ fuḍūliyan*). This kind of sale without commission is commonplace in this area.²¹⁴

Although the letter-writer provided no more details about the identity of his commercial correspondent, he is explicit about the fact that he was working on a commission-free basis for his wife’s account and that this was customary. Another example comes from the inheritance report examined in the [next chapter](#). The widow of a Wād Nūn trade network member sought in vain to recover “a small quantity of gold that she had

²¹⁰ Udovitch, *Partnership*, 188.

²¹¹ Greif, “Fundamental,” 267–8.

²¹² Ould El-Bara, *Al-Fiqh* and *Al-Majmū‘a al-Kubrā*.

²¹³ Ibid., Fatwa by Sīdi ‘Abdallah b. al-Hājj Ibrāhīm No. 77.

²¹⁴ Commercial Letter of Complaint (FS7), Family Archives Fāḍil al-Sharīf (Tishīt); translated and discussed in Lydon, “Islamic Legal Culture.”

commissioned (*ibḍaʿthu*) with her husband (May God bless his soul).”²¹⁵ The gold was sold for salt bars but her husband’s caravan worker was not forthcoming in paying her due. The death of agents was a common event characteristic of long-distance trade, and is a subject I return to in the [next chapter](#).

‘Aqādīm Labor Contracts

Saharan societies of the nineteenth century used a variety of labor contracts to regulate relationships in agriculture and pastoral activities, as well as the management of water. In the Wād Nūn, individuals drew up contracts to manage labor on oasis irrigation systems and well maintenance. Labor contracts also were negotiated between date palm owners and workers to cultivate or tend to the trees for a share of the harvest. Similarly, labor contracts were drawn to hire caravan workers on interregional caravans. As discussed in the [preceding chapter](#), contractual agreements existed between sedentary caravan organizers and their caravan workers or ‘aqādīms. Copies of such contracts were not found, perhaps because they were mainly oral in nature. However, two informative nineteenth-century fatwas shed light on such contracts.

The first fatwa deals with the rights and obligations of the employer when his ‘aqādīm perishes on a caravan expedition. What was particularly at stake here was the deceased worker’s compensation and the share of his inheritance. In his response, the muftī cited references from several Sunni legal doctrines, including the Ḥanafī school, to argue that if “the ‘aqādīm dies during the journey, this nullifies the hiring (*al-kirāʾ*), whether he was hired or contracted in limited partnership (*muḍāraban*) for the stipulated journey.”²¹⁶ Comparing this to the case of the death of a hired transportation animal or a slave, the muftī concluded that such a death was unfortunate, but that the employer was not responsible for paying an inheritance to the family of the caravan worker, since the contract was necessarily canceled with the death of the employee. Given the fact that ‘aqādīms were usually of servile origin, such an opinion does not surprise.

The second fatwa, dating from the first half of the nineteenth century, similarly addresses the agreements between merchant and ‘aqādīm,

²¹⁵ Wād Nūn Inheritance Case (1269/1853), Arwīlī Family Records, Family Archives of Shaykh Hammuny (Shinqīṭi).

²¹⁶ Fatwa on the Death of an ‘Aqādīm by Shaykh Aḥmad b. al-Saghīr copied by ‘Andallah b. Ḥajār (BA 1), Family Archives of Shaykh Bū ‘Asriyya (Tīshīt).

especially the question of wages. The case had to do with “whomever employed an ‘aqādīm who transported for him [merchandise] to the south and sells it there at a fixed rate (*ujra*).”²¹⁷ The targeted market destination was not determined with precision, but the ‘aqādīm was not to go beyond the market of Nyamina, a market located along the Niger River and considered then the limit of travel for Tishīt caravans (Map 6).²¹⁸ Evidently, the hired caravaner traveled farther and longer than expected. The muftī deliberated whether in this case the contract was invalidated and, if not, how to determine his wage accordingly, since “for the agreement with the ‘aqādīm, the customary rule (*al-‘urf*) is that it [the wage] varies between four and five mudds [of millet].” Clearly, the sedentary merchant who requested the fatwa was trying to find a way to reduce the wage to be paid to the caravaner since the latter had failed to find a good market for his merchandise.

In his answer, the muftī argued that such contracts should precisely stipulate limits, including caravan destinations, deadlines, and desired prices. But in case of confusion, it was customary in Tishīt for both employer and employee to accommodate one another, since “both stand to benefit from the additional distance covered . . . because they share the common aim to maximize profit.” Quoting a number of legal manuals, the muftī discussed the law on the detours (*al-tiṭwāf*) made to obtain better prices in different markets. Citing Saḥnūn’s *Mudawwana*, he concluded that the ‘aqādīm should be paid the customary wage and should not be penalized for traveling farther or delaying his return. This decision differs from that of the previous fatwa that seemingly short-changed the family of the ‘aqādīm.

Other Contractual Agreements

Trans-Saharan traders employed a variety of financial tools to trade and transfer funds across long distances, as seen above. They used forward purchases (*bai‘ al-salam*) to finance caravan expeditions and guarantee sales. But other legal arrangements prevailed, starting with debt contracts. Table 6.3 summarizes the types of contracts discussed in this section.

²¹⁷ Fatwa of Shaykh Sidi ‘Abayda b. Muhammad al-Saghīr b. Anbūja (c. 1840s) on Caravan Wages (SBA 3), Family Archives of Sharīf Shaykhnā Būyahmad (Tishīt).

²¹⁸ For a discussion of Nyamina, a thriving market until the Umarian occupation in the late 1850s, see Chapter 3.

TABLE 6.3. *Other Saharan contracts*

Debt contract (<i>'Aqd al-qard</i>)	Simple debt contract. Often the interest or value of the service was disguised in the value of the currency of repayment.
Lease contract (<i>'Aqd al-kira</i>)	Lease contract that was in effect similar to a debt contract with interest rates disguised as rent. These were used for goods as well as slaves, but most commonly negotiated for salt-bar loans.
Money-order or debt swapping (<i>hawāla</i>)	Financial mechanism to transfer funds through the purchase or sale of a debt or credit contract to a third party. This was a popular strategy to render valuable services, travel in safety, or otherwise access finance in foreign lands.
Entrustment/storage contract (<i>'aqd al-waḍʿa</i> or <i>amāna</i>)	Agreement between a sedentary and an itinerant trader whereby the latter entrusted the former with goods in the form of a deposit. The purpose of this contract was the secure storage of merchandise in a foreign market and/or its sale on consignment.

Debt Contracts (*'Aqd al-Qard*)

One of the most common contracts between Saharan merchants and traders was the basic debt contract. This should not surprise as the entire caravanning world was based on the system of credit, a topic Saharan jurists dealt with at length. Debt contracts documenting loans in cash or in kind usually stated due dates linked to seasonal events, such as fairs. Each market probably had term-limit traditions reflecting the time-to-market in specific geographical settings. And so debt contracts in Guelmīm were contracted for either three or six months, whereas in Timbuktu, forty or eighty days (in tune with salt caravans) seems to have been current in the late nineteenth century. Despite the interdict on usury, rates of interest could be dissimulated in the value and currency of loan repayments.

An example of a debt contract was drawn in 1244/1829 between two men and Shaykh Bayrūk, the leader of Guelmīm.²¹⁹ Properly witnessed and dated, it concerned six male and six female camels loaned for the purpose of caravanning. The price of the loan was not recorded but the two traveling partners were to return the camels by the next Sīdī al-Ghāzī

²¹⁹ Qard Contract 1244/1829 (DB17c), Family Archives of Daḥmān Wuld Bayrūk (Guelmīm).

fair. A kunnāsh held by his son, Muḥammad Wuld Bayrūk, was entirely dedicated to recording debt contracts.²²⁰ Loans were disbursed in merchandise, such as cotton cloth or gum arabic, or in cash. Common debt contracts for either cash or goods were expressed in silver mithqāls. In one such transaction, drawn up in 1281/1864, an Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ contracted a loan of 100 mithqāls with a Tikna and “the term of this debt is six months.”²²¹ Similarly, in 1288/1881 a debt contract was negotiated between Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallah b. Arwīlī and another Tikna, Muḥammad al-Ḥaritānī, for cloth worth 65 mithqāls.²²² Once the creditor had been reimbursed, the loan agreement was crossed out and sometimes the conclusion of the contract was witnessed by a third party.

Diadié Haïdara’s translations of nineteenth-century trade records from Timbuktu are primarily of debt contracts issued by Jews to Muslims.²²³ Jewish contracts followed the same Mālikī templates as those written by Muslims, with sometimes the addition of the word *al-dhimmi* appearing after Jewish names. Due dates in this case were typically forty or eighty days, or until the first or second salt caravan from Tawdenni. One unusual loan contract, dated 1295/1878, by Eliahu b. al-Hazzan, involved a double-barreled rifle as collateral.²²⁴ Such a practice was not prevalent in nineteenth-century commerce, but perhaps it reflects, on the one hand, the willingness of this Jew to loan to strangers and, on the other, his extensive role as a financier.

Lease Contracts

Another common contractual agreement, used predominantly in inter-regional caravans, was the practice of “leasing” goods. As previously noted, this arrangement was a form of loan with interest rates disguised as rent. The literature on Islamic finance is oddly silent about such contractual agreements.²²⁵ Yet, manifestly, in the Saharan context these contracts, used

²²⁰ Muḥammad b. Bayrūk, Nineteenth-century Kunnāsh. See McDougall, “Conceptualising the Sahara,” for a discussion of debt contracts featured in similar registers.

²²¹ Debt Contract between Zayn al-ʿAbidīn b. al-Sūdānī al-Sbāʿī and Shaykh b. Bayrūk 1281/1864 (DB4) Family Archives of Daḥmān Wuld Bayrūk (Guelmīm).

²²² Debt Contract 1298/1881 (LA38), Records of Arwīlī Family, Archives of Ahl Hammuny (former qāḍī of Shinqīṭi).

²²³ Diadié Haïdara, *Juifs*, 83–105. On Jewish–Muslim partnerships in medieval trade, see Goitein, *Mediterranean*, I, 169–73.

²²⁴ Diadié Haïdara, *Juifs*, VIII:14, 83.

²²⁵ Udovitch (*Partnerships*, 9, n. 22) only mentions lease contracts in a footnote.

primarily for loans in salt, were mechanisms to disguise usury by calling loans with interest by a different name. In other words, by using the term “lease” (*kira*) instead of “loan” (*qard*) Muslim merchants bypassed, at least on paper, the technicality of engaging in usurious finance. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, interest rates on salt lease contracts were quite high. As noted earlier, it was the prevailing commercial practice not to record interest or commission rates in contracts. Evidence suggests that salt bars were leased at a standard rate of one-third the price of a salt bar.²²⁶ Contracts from the early twentieth century, however, reveal that interest rates could be higher than 50 percent.

A commercial letter, dating from 1329/1911, describes a lease agreement for a salt caravan. It specifies that the interest rate for the loaned salt was 60 percent per load, meaning that the proprietors of the camels transporting the salt were to collect the value of three out of five salt bars. On the one hand, the document reveals the arrangements between the owners who leased their camels for transportation. On the other, it provides information about the contractual culture prevailing between caravaning merchants. The letter states:

I am dispatching to Ḥamallah b. Aḥmad b. Idda 113 salt bars on lease for fifty percent (*bil-khamsīn*) to Ḥamallah and three-fifths for the camel owners. . . . If Ḥamallah is presently in Tishīt (God be praised), and the trade agent (*wakīl*) for it [the camel-loads of salt] is you, Abūbakar [b. al-Mukhtār al-Sharīf], then the stipulations for the camel owners are that if some salt gets lost along the way it will be taken from their share and not from Ḥamallah’s share, as per these conditions on the lease contract.²²⁷

At an average of five bars per camel, approximately 23 camels were required to transport the 113 salt bars. So the camel owners were to be paid with the sale of 69 salt bars, while Ḥamallah, who was responsible for selling the lot, was entitled to 50 percent of the sale of the remaining 44 bars. This group may have joined a larger interregional salt caravan to travel between Shinqīṭi and Tishīt. It is worth noting that this contractual arrangement stipulated that the caravaners were responsible for all potential losses.

²²⁶ Salt Lease Contract by Muḥammad al-Mukhtār b. ‘Amar (MH4), Family Archives of ‘Abdarrahmān Wuld Muḥammad al-Hanshī (Shinqīṭi); Agency Contract (FS7), Family Archives Fāḍil al-Sharīf (Tishīt); and Salt Lease Contract by Abūbakr b. al-Mukhtār al-Sharīf 1329/1911 (DI13), Family Archives of Dāddah Wuld Idda (Tishīt). Interviews with ‘Abdarrahmān Wuld Muḥammad al-Hanshī in Shinqīṭi (10/01/97) and Muḥammad al-Hanshī Wuld Muḥammad Ṣālih in Nouakchott (06/25/97).

²²⁷ Salt Lease Contract by ‘Abūbakr b. al-Mukhtār al-Sharīf 1329/1911 (DI13), Family Archives of Dāddah Wuld Idda (Tishīt).

TABLE 6.4. *Al-Yazīd b. Mūlāy ‘Aly’s leasing of salt bars from Shinqīṭi to Walāta 1335/1917*

Name of debtor	Loans and interest rates	Yazīd’s shares	Total
1. Muḥammad b. Fulān	98.5 (100%)	98.5 (+10)	207
2. Abūbakar b. Muḥammad	116.5 (100%)	116.5 (+12)	245
3. Muḥammad b. Sīd Aḥmad, plus one partner	32 (200%)	64	96
4. Muḥammad b. al-Amīn Aḥmad, plus two partners	218.25 (33%)	72.75 (+15)	306
5. Aḥmad b. al-Sharīf Muḥammad	80.75 (100%)	80.75 (+8.5)	170
6. Muḥammad b. Ghulām	28 (100%)	28	56
Total number of salt bars:	574	506	1,080
<i>Equivalent in camel-loads</i>	115	101	216

Lease contracts tended to specify not only the principal and agent, but also the itinerary or route of sale. A lease contract (described in Table 6.4) was negotiated in 1917 between al-Yazīd b. Mūlāy ‘Aly, of the Tikna Shurfa (discussed in Chapter 1), and nine traders who either planned to walk the caravan from Shinqīṭi to Walāta or to dispatch caravan workers to sell the salt on their behalf. What is remarkable about this example is that not only did the principal merchant charge interest at rates ranging from 33 to 200 percent, but Yazīd’s share also included small amounts of supplementary salt bars for four of the six agents. As stated in the contract, “leased from Yazīd 207 salt bars from Shinqīṭi to Walāta, 10 of these are specifically for Yazīd and the rest is divided equally between them (*bil-tanāṣif*).”²²⁸ The purpose of these additional sums earmarked for Yazīd is not entirely clear, but may reflect subtractions of obligations due by agents from previous transactions.

²²⁸ Al-Yazīd Caravan of Rented Salt (AMA 36b), Family Archives of al-‘Arabī Wuld Mūlāy ‘Aly (Aṭār).

Of the total amount of the 1,080 leased salt bars, which, at five bars of salt per camel added up to 216 camel-loads, Yazīd's share was just below 50 percent. Without taking into account the additional sums, Yazīd would have obtained the value of 460.5 salt bars in addition to his personal share of 506 salt bars. Such large sums and profit margins shed light on the commercial operations that made Yazīd one of the most prosperous merchants in early colonial Mauritania.

Besides salt, there is evidence of other commodities and merchandise leased on specific routes. In a letter reporting on loads of dates entrusted to his correspondent in Tīshīt, a trader in Nioro explains that he “took two baysa and twenty *dhirāʿ* (lengths of cotton cloth) on lease (*bil-kira*)” from Akanbu to Nioro.”²²⁹ As often was the case with other contractual agreements, the termination of a lease contract could be put in writing for the record to avoid further claims between partners or their families. Such was the case in 1281/1864, when the Tīshītī trader Aḥmad Wuld Muḥammad Wuld Idda “freed himself from liability from all the salt that he had leased during his stay in Shinqīṭi . . . [which] he transported to Walāta and the amount was 124 salt bars.”²³⁰

Debt Swapping and Storage Contracts

To transfer funds or settle financial obligations across long distances, merchants regularly engaged in debt swapping. In other words, they reimbursed their obligations by finding indebted intermediaries located in the right markets in order to transfer their debts to third parties. As noted above, this type of financial contract generically was called *ḥawāla*. In one example dating from 1340/1922, ‘Abdallah Wuld Laḥbīb Wuld Bayrūk, the grandson of the nineteenth-century ruler of Guelmīm, settled his debt of 675 five-franc pieces that he owed to al-‘Arabī Wuld Mūlāy ‘Aly, the brother of the above-mentioned Yazīd, by instructing him to collect his dues with a third party who owed him.²³¹ That debt swapping was common practice is confirmed in the inheritance case discussed in the [next chapter](#). By accessing information on

²²⁹ Commercial correspondence from Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Sharīf to Muḥammad Zayn, 1322/1905 (AZ4), Family Archives of Aḥmad Wuld al-Zayn (Tīshīt).

²³⁰ Cancellation of Lease Contract, dated 1281/1864 (DI 4), Family Archives of Dāddah Wuld Idda (Tīshīt).

²³¹ Third Party Debt Recovery Strategy (AMA 7), Family Archives of Daydī Wuld al-‘Arabī Wuld Mūlāy ‘Aly (Aṭār).

the financial market of indebtedness, traders found additional means to engage in long-distance finance while reducing transaction costs.

Negotiating storage space for the temporary deposit of merchandise was of critical importance to trans-Saharan traders. They depended on trusted lodgers and commercial correspondents to secure the safekeeping of precious camel-loads during their sojourns in foreign markets. The question of storage is one that too few historians have examined, yet it was vital to long-distance trade.²³² Merchandise could be placed on deposit in a merchant's home, on consignment or for temporary storage. Consignment sales were not always profitable, especially when the market went sour, as illustrated in an early-twentieth-century letter detailing the sale of "entrusted" silver coins, cloth, and dates.²³³ Other times, deposit or entrustment contracts (*'uqūd al-wadī'a*) were negotiated for temporary storage of goods with an option to sell at a price stated in the contract.²³⁴ Most entrustment contracts were for deposit only, to be retrieved directly or through an intermediary at a later date.

Written contracts, like other trade records of the paper economy, were critical to the conduct of caravan trade. Through a variety of contractual and partnership agreements merchants not only could invest in caravaning but also keep their capital working by extending credit. Based on his readings of the classic Islamic legal sources, Udovitch recognized (and Saharan records support) that credit was both a form of investment for the provider and a means to access capital for the traveling associate.²³⁵ But arguably, there were two additional incentives for investors to engage in such contractual arrangements. One was that a sedentary merchant invested in his own reputation, as generous and trusting, by extending credit to others. Since reputation, trust, and creditworthiness were framed by God-fearing Muslims through the currency of religion, investing in people was a means to acquire or reinforce one's symbolic capital. In this sense, such contracts were not necessarily founded on but actually contributed to creating mutual trust.

²³² Remie Constable (*Housing the Stranger*) discusses the storage services offered by caravanserais lodges and *funduqs*.

²³³ Commercial Correspondence, dated 1322/1905 (AZ4), Aḥmad Wuld al-Zayn Family Archives (Tishit).

²³⁴ Deposit Contract with Ḥamallah Wuld Idda (DI6b), Dāddah Wuld Idda Family Archives (Tishit). See Chapter 7. It is interesting to note that the muftī Muḥammad Yaḥya al-Walāti wrote a fatwa on the question of depositing goods without the permission of the owner of the house.

²³⁵ Udovitch, "Credit as a Means of Investment," 262.

Moreover, finance contracts also constituted, in effect, opportunities for merchants to “save” capital by transferring it temporarily to trustworthy partners. This must be understood in the context of nineteenth-century Sahara where social and religious etiquette made hoarding and avarice unacceptable behavior. At the same time, extending credit was perhaps a safer means to engage in long- and medium-term savings in situations where violence and raiding were imminent threats rendering risky the engagement in large-scale capital accumulation. This third function of credit, as a savings mechanism in situations of political instability, was perhaps a non-negligible incentive for merchants to extend loans.

Social Contracts: Sayings about Business Behavior

What Goitein observed in the Cairo Geniza records, namely, that eleventh- and twelfth-century Maghribis used “maxims reflecting a wisdom derived by merchants from long experience,” is also true for Saharan traders.²³⁶ While proverbs were not legal edicts, they influenced or guided behavior, and in this they could be considered “institutional elements,” as per Greif.²³⁷ An examination of Saharan sayings and proverbs in Hasaniya dealing with business behavior reveals the extent to which Islamic precepts concerning transactions, discussed in the first section of this chapter, were reflected in the moral fabric of Saharan societies.²³⁸

The legality of transacting stolen goods is conveyed in the following proverb: “Whoever seizes someone’s salt does not profit” (*illī dakhāl al-milḥ margu al-ribḥ*). A common saying recommends purchasing a good on the same day that it is sold (*ashtarī yawūm itbr*). As noted, immediate transactions were the safest, from a legal standpoint. The prevalence of this proverb suggests that Malīkī rules were indeed common knowledge.

Other proverbs recommend being scrupulous when contracting loans. For example, one proverb indicates that a loan established in precise terms will yield wealth (*al-salf maḥdūd, al-mulah mardūd*). Another saying conveys that indebtedness is essential to prosperity: “The one without debts has no wealth” (*illī ablā dayn ablā rizq*). A prominent nineteenth-century trans-Saharan trader from Shinqīṭi reportedly lived by two slightly contradictory sayings: (1) “Those who are not patient with the

²³⁶ Goitein, *Mediterranean*, I, 200.

²³⁷ Greif, *Institutions*, 30.

²³⁸ Ibnu, et al., *Al-Amthāl wa al-ḥikm al-sh‘abiya al-mūrītāniya*, 238–9.

treason of trade partners will never get wealthy” (*lā māl liman lam yaṣbir ‘alā khiyāna lilumanā*) and (2) “One cannot gain wealth if one does not have trust in people” (*lā māl liman la thiqa lahu bi al-nās*).²³⁹

CONCLUSION

The pervasiveness of Islam in western Africa makes it difficult to understand Saharan exchange outside its religious framework. The evidence presented in this chapter documents to what extent trans-Saharan traders and Saharan communities writ large operated within a paper economy of faith. They drafted multiple forms of written contracts to organize their long-distance trading operations. A semblance of economic order was maintained in large part through the services of legal experts who defined the rules of exchange. The authority of qāḍīs, comparable to that of local rulers, often went beyond the legal profession to assume larger administrative responsibilities. They acted as arbitrators who engaged in regulating weights and measures, holding and transferring financial sums, as well as adjudicating in disputes. Islamic institutions, upheld by both qāḍīs and muftīs, structured social and economic transactions. These legal service providers engaged in jurisprudence based on Mālikī law and local customs, upholding these rules and enforcing their compliance.

Saharan jurists tackled numerous questions regarding various forms of transactions, and their records provide information on prescribed business behavioral norms. Clearly, Muḥammad Bila‘mish, the influential faqīh, and Sīdī ‘Abdallāh b. al-Ḥājī Ibrāhīm both deliberated on similar topics from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth century. Their intellectual proximity is explained by the fact that the second followed the teachings of the first. But their similar legal positions on economic matters also suggests a certain continuity in Saharan legal jurisprudence. On the other hand, that Sīdī ‘Abdallāh, and later Shaykh Sīdī al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī, were concerned with the legality of transactions in pillaged goods, a subject not addressed in Bila‘mish’s *nawāzil*, is a reflection of the instability and violence of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Sīdī ‘Abdallāh also addressed questions concerning the trade in slaves with Europeans, which had intensified since the days of Bila‘mish.

²³⁹ Interview in Shinqīti with of ‘Abdarrahmān b. Muḥammad al-Ḥanshī, about his grandfather (10/01/97).

While scholars in the centers of learning and trade such as Shinqīti and Tīshīt set guidelines for exchange, it is reasonable to question to what extent their rulings were enforced or whether their legal opinions ultimately shaped business behavior. Presumably, many scholars were themselves involved in the caravan trade to support their scholarly activities. Like their immediate constituents, they would have strived to comply as best they could with the law. But how law-abiding was the average non-scholarly Muslim trader? At least some evidence presented in this chapter suggests that in western Africa, Khalīl b. Ishāq's warning against committing "frequent abuses that could lead to a dubious disguise of the loan in the form of a sale or to obtain a usurious advantage" was often overlooked.²⁴⁰ The existence of such practices as the muḍ'āf, the bukki system, or even the practice of "leasing" trade goods is a clear indication that traders frequently broke the rules. It also shows how the commercial practices of Muslims diverged from the often constraining legal codes of Islam.

As jurist Wuld al-Tāh admitted, dishonest individuals took the law into their own hands for, as a proverb explains, "the renegade makes his own laws" (*al-murtad faqīh nafsu*).²⁴¹ But this proverb probably alludes to a long-standing debate among Saharan jurists concerning the legality of entering into contractual agreements with warrior groups, or ḥasānīs, who typically obtained goods by illicit means, namely, through plunder. According to Ould Cheikh, legal scholars categorized these groups as *mustaghriq al-dhimma*, which literally translates as "those whose legal commitment is drowned."²⁴² In any event, as some of the examples discussed in this chapter suggest, drafting contracts did not always guarantee compliance. But clearly, this is an area in pre-colonial Saharan legal history that deserves attention.

Saharan jurists did not always agree with one another's judgments, as was typical across the Muslim world, because trade and usury are so ambiguously defined in the *uṣūl al-fiqh*. That there was a lack of consensus among Saharan scholars was obvious when they dealt with the complicated matter of sales and finance. Many jurists sanctioned technically unlawful transactions and were willing to overlook Mālikī codes in certain instances, letting customary practice prevail. While Saharan

²⁴⁰ Dubié, "Vie matérielle," 218.

²⁴¹ Interview in Nouakchott with Ḥamdan Wuld al-Tāh (06/03/97).

²⁴² Ould Cheikh, personal communication (10/25/00).

jurists struggled with the lawfulness of financial transactions, engaging in technical usury was often inevitable. Indeed, avoiding usury in commercial operations with multiple parties, in various currencies, and across long distances was a feat in itself. For transacting in salt bars or cotton bales, with their irregular valuation standards, made it at times quite impossible to “give fair measure and full weight” in trade.

Trade Networks and the Limits of Cooperative Behavior

Throughout the history of economics, the stranger everywhere appears as the trader, or the trader as the stranger.¹

“They all came together [to Mauritania] from Wād Nūn to trade and afterwards they scattered (*tafarigū*) to Mali and Senegal.” “When they died, all became dispersed for when one of them dies it is over.”²

In the caravan season of 1265/1848–9, where this book began, a Tikna caravaner nicknamed Baghlīl passed away on trans-Saharan trails. As was customary in Muslim societies in such matters, details about his death were not disclosed in the legal report that followed. But it is clear that Baghlīl died at the hands of a group of pillagers who took his life to get to his caravan. Immediately following this event, a member of Baghlīl’s trade network, also residing in Tīshīt, took on the responsibility of managing the deceased’s estate and sorting out his financial commitments. Such was the nature of the mutual obligations, contractual arrangements, and embedded trust that ideally characterized trade networks in which members cooperated in the risky business of long-distance trade. But soon after him, three other Wād Nūn traders stationed in Tīshīt passed away in turn. So a fifth network member assumed the task of calculating all the estates, after separating inheritances from financial obligations. In order to manage this complex affair he sought the assistance and mediation of the qāḍī of Tīshīt.

Network traders like Baghlīl used their multiple skills to maneuver across regional states and economic landscapes. They engaged in arbitrage

¹ Simmel, “The Stranger,” 403–5.

² Interviews in Nouakchott with Fāṭimatu Mint al-Nājim, known as “Djibi” (05/23/97), and in Aṭār with Khanātha Mint Ḥmayda (10/05/97).

between markets, selling Moroccan goods, European merchandise, and western African products and slaves. Numerous currencies prevailed in the mid-nineteenth century, as previously seen. So if credit transactions, the lifeline of caravans, were complicated by the use of multiple moneys, so too was the task of sorting out property and valuing estates for inheritance. Working in a trade network, or a coalition of traders sharing a common identity, trust and solidarity had definite advantages. Cooperative behavior among members was enhanced by a sense of belonging to a community of believers, in this case, Muslims. As discussed in Chapter 4, Wād Nūn traders worked with their Jewish associates whom they respected for also being “people of the book.” Their belief in divine and earthly sanctions and respect for common norms shaped their behavior.

At the same time, a semblance of economic and, by extension, social and institutional order, examined in the preceding chapter, was upheld by local legal service providers, namely, qāḍīs and muftīs. Their roles were critical to traders, even those belonging to a distinct trade network and who, therefore, were considered strangers in distant markets. Legal service providers supplied institutional recourse to legal arbitration in disputes. Their social presence and daily interactions with town residents in mosques ensured compliance with beliefs, rules, and norms. But this setup did not preclude that in certain situations mediation could fail, accords could be broken and with them trust and future cooperation between traders. Moreover, given the highly precarious and risky nature of caravanning, a network’s strength could be tested in the face of adversity such as a devastating sandstorm, a caravan raid, or the untimely death of a partner in trade.

This chapter examines, from a combined institutional and cultural history perspective, the case of the Wād Nūn trade network operated by the Tikna in collaboration with their primary allies, Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ and Jews. I first review the trade network literature to argue that religious and legal institutions were fundamental to the efficiency of commercial coalitions operating at the crossroads, or beyond the purview, of nations or states. I also place emphasis on the importance of literacy in trade network systems. Then I turn to the multiparty inheritance proceedings that unfolded after Baghlīl’s passing based on several legal sources concerned with the case. Here, I evaluate the mutual responsibilities of trade network partners to shed light on both the returns from and constraints on their cooperative behavior. This complex inheritance case, involving Baghlīl and several of his Wād Nūn partners, offers a unique snapshot of

the inner workings of a trade network. It demonstrates traders' reliance on a paper economy of faith in their extensive commercial transactions and their recourse to legal service providers. At the same time, this case study reveals how the death of trade partners, and ensuing negotiations about property rights, could test the cooperative behavior of members and even compromise the existence of a trade network.

THE TRADE NETWORK MODEL

Participating in a trade network was the most effective way to organize trans-Saharan caravans, as it was in other long-distance trade systems in the early modern world. A trade network involved a tight-knit community of traders dispersed across distant markets who collaborated with one another while maintaining family, financial, commercial, and cultural ties with a given homeland. More often than not they specialized in, or even monopolized, trade in certain goods not available in the markets where they worked. Such coalitions reduced the costs incurred in transacting across long distances while circulating reliable information and sources of capital in a highly personalized financial market. As argued in previous chapters, credit was key to financing trade as a means both to access and to accumulate capital by transferring it temporarily to trustworthy partners. Network traders communicated with one another to share market information, to monitor the behavior and movement of members, and to exchange equity and finance. Although such networks also were organized by non-literate societies, literacy enhanced the efficiency and transparency of commerce. The reliance on paper economies gave rise to levels of complexity in business transactions and management while enabling the building and maintenance of relationships based on trust.

The Literature on Trade Networks

Trade networks have been studied the world over. The case studies of the Armenians, Jews, Genoese, Greeks, Chinese, South Asians, and Lebanese are well known. Since the beginnings of African history, long-distance trade has been a popular subject of investigation. This choice of topic is hardly surprising because there are so many examples of so-called trading diasporas in the history of the continent. The western African region is especially propitious for the study of trade networks. The Wangara, who specialized in the gold trade between the forest regions and the

Sahara, are one of the earliest examples, as seen in Chapter 2. The case of the ubiquitous Julia, who traveled along various trade routes, settling in markets from Bonduku to Timbuktu, has been studied by several historians, including Philip Curtin and Marie Perinbam.³ Other examples include the Hausa traders who operated an extensive trade network. Abner Cohen's ground-breaking study of the Hausa cattle traders in Ibadan, Paul Lovejoy's research on Hausa kola traders, and the Hausa bankers of Maradi studied by Emmanuelle Grégoire all document Hausa itinerant entrepreneurship.⁴ Still other notable case studies include the Jakhanké of Senegambia and the Soninké of western Mali and Mauritania, Jean-Loup Amselle's study of the Kooroko of Guinea, and, most recently, the work on Fula traders in Sierra Leone by Alusine Jalloh and the Duala middlemen of Cameroon by Ralph Austen and Jonathan Derrick.⁵

The "trading diaspora" model, originally developed by Cohen but popularized by Curtin, provides a useful sociological framework for analyzing the organization of long-distance trade.⁶ It explains how members of a particular family or ethnic group cooperate in long-distance trade to overcome basic logistical challenges such as obtaining finance and business information, coordinating transportation, and regulating transactions, while upholding cultural and religious identities as minorities in foreign lands. As Cohen explains, trust among partners and communication of information – two key factors for success in long-distance trade – "are far easier between people who share values, language, a legal system, kinship ties, and other sources of solidarity."⁷ While Africanists rarely have tested or revised this simple model against discrete case studies, scholars have applied Cohen's landmark concept to other regions of the world in what has become a dynamic area of historical investigation.

Thanks to Greif's contributions to the study of early modern trade, what motivated traders to organize in distinct commercial coalitions is better understood. His primary case study is the Maghribis, who actively

³ Curtin, *Economic Change*; Perinbam, "Julias in Western Sudanese History."

⁴ Cohen, *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa*; Lovejoy, *Caravans of Kola*; Grégoire, *Albazaï du Maradi (Niger)*.

⁵ Curtin, *Economic Change* and "Pre-colonial Trading Networks"; Jalloh, *African Entrepreneurship*; Austen and Derrick, *Middlemen of the Cameroons Rivers*; Amselle, *Négociants de la Savane*.

⁶ Cohen, "Cultural Strategies in the Organization of Trading Diasporas." Curtin gave currency to the model while renaming it a "trading network," because of the historical use of the term "diaspora" to describe the forced migrations of Jews and Africans (*Cross-Cultural Trade*).

⁷ Cohen, "Cultural Strategies," 273-4; Curtin, *Economic Change*, 60;

engaged in trade between North African and Mediterranean ports from the tenth century onward, as documented by such sources as the letters and contracts of the Cairo Geniza. Discussing the behavior of coalition members, Greif distinguished between traveling or itinerant traders, and sedentary merchants who depended on commercial agents and overseas business associates. He noted the importance of information sharing, mechanisms for contract enforcement, and the application of sanctions to punish misbehaving traders. Moreover, Greif focused on the centrality of what he calls “reputation mechanisms” that structured these institutions, together with the codes of conduct and communal sanctions defined by traders.⁸

Markovits made important observations about trade network systems based on his study of Shikarpuri and Hyderabadi merchants in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁹ While emphasizing the need to study simultaneously the central node, or homeland, of traders and their clusters of members in peripheral markets, he identified circulation within these commercial institutions as a key factor. The circulation of merchants between center and periphery engendered the movement of credit, goods, information, and, occasionally, women. Of these elements only information and women, both critical for maintaining cultural distinctiveness in foreign lands, circulated exclusively within the network. The other elements circulated outside the network and across to other coexisting networks. Markovits’s recognition that different trade networks worked in tandem with one another is extremely significant, for it dispels prevailing notions about the hermetic existence of these institutions.

The Question of Membership

In his study of Maghribi traders, Greif pays little attention to the question of what determines membership in a particular commercial coalition. He simply assumes that “a business network of members” was created by the affiliation of those “who belonged to the same ethnic and religious community.”¹⁰ According to Markovits, however, trade network membership was determined more by locality, or a shared regional origin, than by either ethnicity or religion.¹¹ In many ways, the Wād Nūn trade

⁸ Greif, “Reputation and Coalitions”; “Contract Enforceability”; “Cultural Beliefs”; “Fundamental Problem of Exchange”; *Institutions*.

⁹ Markovits, *Global World*.

¹⁰ Greif, *Institutions*, 59.

¹¹ Markovits, *Global World*, 6, 28–9.

network case confirms such membership patterns where the partnering of the Tikna with their Jewish, Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ, and other associates was based in large part on common residence. The fact that they lived in the Wād Nūn region was perhaps the most important identity marker creating solidarity between these traders, as seen in Chapter 4. The use of place-names identifying traders, such as “the one from Wād Nūn” (*al-Wād Nūnī*) or “the one from Guelmīm” (*al-Ajlimīmī*), supports this conclusion. Place of origin and “homeland,” then, took precedence over religious affiliation.¹² But of course this does not imply that kin, clan, or ethnicity was irrelevant in determining network membership, because lineage identity mattered to members. Nineteenth-century Wād Nūn traders often self-referenced their specific clans, such as the one from the Tikna (*al-Tiknī*) or Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ (*al-Sbāʿī*), or their Jewish (*al-dhimmi*) associates. They further made reference to their sub-clans (*al-Tiknī al-Mūsā Wa ʿAlī*; *al-Sbāʿī al-Baggārī*), as seen below.

To be sure, membership in trade networks could be determined by a combination of factors and was not necessarily based on a single identity marker. Admittance to a network could stem from kinship ties and multiple forms of alliances – familial, marital, and political – as well as friendship and neighborliness. But engaging kin, neighbors, or friends in trade did not guarantee commitment or trust. While the importance of kinship ties to trade network membership cannot be denied, the fact that, as noted in previous chapters, written commercial contracts were drawn up between kin and even between spouses is an indication that kinship was not sufficient to ensure trust. Taking kin for granted was not realistic, either, especially when relationships of dependency needed to be managed from afar. Here the commercial correspondence between the Tikna brothers, discussed in Chapter 4, is instructive. When addressing his brother, Muḥammad b. Sālīm never failed to be reverential, courteous, loving, and civil. Because they counted on one another while being physically distant, it was probably unwise to upset or abuse kin or friends since dispersed merchants could not run the risk of alienating their partners. Another consideration is that even husbands and wives had separate property rights. With the exception of certain partnerships, the pooling of capital was uncommon. So whether one was dealing with kin or business friends, the boundaries of ownership and entitlement were clearly defined.

¹² It is worth mentioning that traders did not self-identify as members of particular Sufi orders. Only one trader’s name conveyed a link to Sufism (Bakkār b. al-Sūfi Aḥmad, in Table 5.3).

One of Markovits's contentions is that religion was not a "crucial structuring factor" in trade networks.¹³ While it may have been what his sources revealed, this part of his argument is not convincing. The South Asian merchants he studied were practicing Hindus, and while they may have belonged to different sects, the simple fact of their association is indicative. Certainly in the Wād Nūn case it is arguable that, on some level, religious affiliation was overlooked since Muslims and Jews collaborated in trade regardless. But they all used Mālikī law and shared commercial practices. Furthermore, as argued more explicitly below, religion in Muslim and Jewish contexts was especially relevant in providing structure in trade network organizing.

Network Structure and Hierarchy

Membership in a trade network meant abiding by specific rules of conduct and espousing a distinct business culture. The process of climbing up the corporate ladder, so to speak, entailed becoming initiated into the trade, often by a family member. Then a young man became an apprentice, and later an itinerant trade agent before settling down on his own account as a merchant or commercial investor, either in a distant market or in the homeland. In the Wād Nūn case, boys were initiated into the caravanning business at a relatively early age. When in their twenties, they typically struck out on their own in a market connected to the homeland. Eventually, they replaced fathers or uncles who retired to more sedentary lifestyles.

When a Wād Nūn trader of the first generation decided to retire, he invariably returned home where he had invested most of his wealth. From then onward, senior network members would become caravan financiers, dispatching sons and agents, while making business deals in town. Second-generation traders reproduced the network by continuing the vocation of their predecessors, acting in turn as local representatives of the network. As Khnātha Mint Aḥmayda, a fourth-generation Tikna of the Ādrār region, explains, "every son had his own town, and did [trade] there."¹⁴ The subsequent generations, however, often formed attachments in their localities through real estate purchases and/or cultural assimilation and were less likely to retire back in the homeland.

¹³ Markovits, *Global World*, 7.

¹⁴ Interview in Aṭār with Khnātha Mint Aḥmayda and her two daughters (with Muḥammad al-Farha) Fāṭimatu and Mariam (10/05/97).

Wād Nūn trade network members were required to possess basic skills in a variety of areas, including proficiency in relevant languages, commercial *savoir-faire*, familiarity with local markets, and practical knowledge of Mālikī law, to name a few. Empirical knowledge of the geographical, cultural, and political landscape of any given area, acquired during initiatory travels, was critical to the success of long-distance traders. Important, too, was having a handle on the prevailing currencies, weights, and measures. As seen in Chapter 5, each locality had distinct measures that varied, sometimes considerably, from one market to the next. Many scholars discuss the importance of such skills but few have recognized that literacy could also be a strategic tool of the network member.

Language skills were professional requirements for itinerant traders and especially for diaspora merchants acting as cross-cultural brokers to incoming network members. Access to local languages was necessary for basic communication in markets and to develop an understanding of local cultures.¹⁵ Having a flair for commerce also entailed savvy in all exchanges, including controlling, withholding, and encoding information.¹⁶ Sometimes, it required engaging in deception to protect membership property, as illustrated below. Moreover, their far-flung exposure to multiple cultures, the information they brought with them about faraway markets, together with the exotic goods they sold, made network traders socially popular and likely to be well received by host communities.

In the spirit of solidarity, reciprocity, and collaboration, network members were bonded to one another, exchanged services and risks, and watched over members' interests. They provided lodging and storage to other members and their camels, and acted as middlemen and local brokers. Arguably, one of their most demanding responsibilities was the guardianship of the family, property, and affairs of fellow associates during their absences. Often this meant taking over the management of their businesses for extended periods of time. Clearly, this was a risky task given the precarious and hazardous nature of their trade. But sharing such reciprocal obligations, including the management of estates of deceased colleagues, was among the rights and duties of network participation.

The literature has tended to depict trade networks as apolitical in the sense that their members did not meddle in local politics. Sanjay Subrahmanyam proposes that the political role of trade networks

¹⁵ Curtin, *Economic Change*, 60.

¹⁶ Douglass, *How Institutions Think*, 46.

in brokering diplomacy, for instance, is consequently overlooked.¹⁷ Throughout most of the nineteenth century, Wād Nūn traders nominally protected by the Bayrūk family in Guelmīm tended to serve a peaceful mission. As one put it, echoing the words of many Tikna informants, “we did not enter politics.”¹⁸ Clearly, many informants sought to portray themselves as peaceful communities who remained politically neutral. Yet Wād Nūn traders definitely would assume visible and privileged positions as political intermediaries in the colonial era. The relationship between political power and commerce, however, is not one which I explore here.

Women, Slaves, and Laborers

Once in a foreign town a network member relied on the assistance of associates, unless he happened to be a pioneer, in which case he would blaze a trail to establish himself both socially and economically. For first- and second-generation traders, access to hired and enslaved labor was critical in the western African context. Wād Nūn traders purchased slaves to fulfill their labor needs as well as for resale. In a previous chapter I discussed the various areas where slave labor was used by caravaners. Established Wād Nūn traders living in western Africa owned as many or more slaves than the average local resident. They relied on slave labor for practically every task, from domestic work, herding camels, leading caravans, and loading and unloading cargoes to other caravan jobs such as cooking and keeping guard. Slave women also were used as concubines, mothers, and wet nurses. Wād Nūn traders employed loyal slaves and former slaves as managers and couriers entrusted with loaded caravans for delivery to Wād Nūn associates in distant markets.

To a large extent, single men or solitary married men would have been the norm. But when they did settle down, network members often formed households with purchased concubines, since homeland women rarely circulated on caravans. But in an effort to preserve their cultural distinctiveness – a major source of the commercial success of diaspora traders – the second generation strove to marry within their own clan or within an associate clan. They sometimes married local women, especially when such alliances offered commercial and political benefits. As might be expected, network traders holding semi-permanent

¹⁷ Subrahmanyam, “Introduction.”

¹⁸ Interview in Nouakchott with Sid Aḥmad Fäll (06/18/97).

residence in the diaspora were more inclined than itinerants to form families, bringing spouses from the homeland.

Scholars who have remarked on the presence of women in trade networks have focused mainly on their passive and reproductive roles. Cohen, for his part, only discussed women he identified as “Hausa prostitutes” who served the needs of merchants.¹⁹ While Markovits similarly discusses this “sexual economy,” he is perhaps one of the first scholars to note that women “influenced the shape of the networks in many ways,” although he does not elaborate on this important point in his study.²⁰ To be sure, women in the diaspora played key roles in cultural, social, and biological reproduction. But I would suggest that some diaspora women were more involved in commerce than has previously come to light. In the case of the Wād Nūn network, as seen below, women’s contributions to maintaining separate identities and upholding traditions were critical, but they also influenced the demand for trade and otherwise were involved in upholding network structure. As previously shown, caravaners’ wives managed households and sometimes part of the business in the absence of their husbands. They relied on the paper economy to contract caravans and manage their long-distance affairs. But while diaspora women did engage in long-distance trade, they had fewer rights vis-à-vis their local counterparts.

The Question of Reputation

Cohen’s model makes no mention of merchant reputation, and he assumes that kinship ties offered sufficient restrictions on business cooperative behavior. Similarly, Markovits does not dwell on the question of reputation, or what he termed “mercantile honor,” while recognizing it to be a determinant of trust.²¹ Here Greif’s scholarship is compelling. He argues that traders belonging to a commercial coalition, such as the Maghribi network, succeeded in cooperating with one another because of the long-term benefit for each member in upholding a reputation as a trustworthy partner. As he explains, “by establishing *ex ante* a linkage between past conduct and a future utility stream, an agent could acquire a reputation as honest, that is, he could credibly commit himself *ex ante* not to breach a contract *ex post*.”²² In other words, the past record of their performances determined traders’ reputations, or what Bourdieu calls

¹⁹ Cohen, *Custom and Politics*, 52–70.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 252.

²⁰ Markovits, *Global World*, 29.

²² Greif, “Reputation,” 858–9.

symbolic capital. While cultivating membership reputation was vital, I would add that it was equally important that network members established their trustworthiness in host communities.

Cooperative behavior and contractual enforcement among members of a trade network, Greif argues, tended to be controlled internally through peer pressure and a “reputation mechanism.”²³ Refusal or failure to settle debts, or any other business infraction, would result in a trader’s exclusion from the network. Collective punishment, he maintains, was a common sanction. I would also add that local communities could put pressure on misbehaving traders. As previously noted, letter writing was a powerful tool for contract enforcement and debt collection. Writing to network members, including those targeted for defaulting, was a popular strategy. But if this failed, subsequent letters could be addressed to local qāḍīs and other religious authorities who, in turn, could pressure a community member to comply with his network obligations. In this sense, then, network members were not simply dependent on membership cohesion for institutional order, but they also could have recourse to the third-party arbitration provided by religious authorities.

RELIGIOUS AND LEGAL INSTITUTIONS

An expert in Jewish trade networks, Jonathan Israel, remarks that through religious organizing, diaspora families “provided an informal judicial structure.”²⁴ But he did not explicitly acknowledge that such judicial structures were supported by formal legal frameworks upheld by rabbis who often were active merchants.²⁵ Similarly, Greif discusses trade network activity without reference to religion. The inherent legal nature of religious institutions surely shaped rules, norms, and beliefs, while providing social order and mediation for litigators. Like Israel and others, Greif fails to recognize that Jews and Muslims relied on a judicial apparatus outside of their network communities as an arbitrary system of law. In the case of Sind merchants, Markovits describes how they took other Sind merchants to local courts.²⁶ Likewise, the Jews and Muslims documented in Geniza records that inform Greif’s work relied on rabbis and qāḍīs who arbitrated and issued rulings on commercial disputes.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Israel, “Diasporas Jewish and Non-Jewish,” 7.

²⁵ This point is developed by Botticini and Eckstein, “Jewish Occupational Selection,” and “Path Dependence.”

²⁶ Markovits, *Global World*, 262–3.

Islam and Judaism provided institutions that cut across ethnicity or family specificity. Even when considering the relationship between *dhimmīs* and their Muslim “protectors,” the institutional structure of the host community is an important consideration. Therefore, they did not operate in an institutional vacuum, nor did they ignore local legal practice. The notion that trade networks operated beyond states and institutions, relying on their own devices to regulate their affairs, is not only overly simplistic, but in many cases inaccurate.

Based on his South Asian case studies, Markovits downplays the importance of religion to building community.²⁷ Concurrently, Israel underscores, without analyzing the reasons why, “the resilient ties of religion and family” are key to the organization of trade networks. But neither scholar acknowledges that religious practice entailed much more than simply “fulfilling religious obligations and satisfying spiritual needs”²⁸ or creating a community “enforcing social discipline and maintaining strict standards of ethics and business practice.”²⁹

Many historians are now beginning to pay attention to the fact that religion mattered to the early modern and late modern societies whose behaviors they study. Decades ago, Goitein pointed to this in his monumental contribution to Mediterranean history. When discussing a corpus of medieval Jewish letters from the Cairo-Geniza archive he submits:

The modern reader is inclined to regard the continuous references to God in these letters as a mere *façon de parler*. This is not the case. God was conceived as the creator of all that happened in nature and in human life, including man’s thoughts, decisions and actions. He was, so to say, the most active substance in the physical world. Therefore keeping him in mind and mouth was the most practical thing a good businessman could do.³⁰

Cohen recognizes that among Hausa traders Islam acted as a “blueprint” for commercial organization.³¹ Based on her Kenyan case study, Jean Einsminger further suggests that “Islam may well have filled an institutional vacuum.”³²

Membership in a trade network entailed adhering to a code of behavior, or what economic historians call “merchants’ law.” This

²⁷ While he argues that “religion did not structure community,” Markovits makes conflicting statements about religious practice in his trade network case studies (*Global World*, 6–7, 251, 253–4, 293).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 253.

²⁹ Israel, “Diasporas,” 8.

³⁰ Goitein, *Letters*, 7; see also Douglass, *How Institutions Think*, 23–4.

³¹ Cohen, “Cultural Strategies.”

³² Enslinger, *Making a Market*, 60.

merchants' law was a rather vague set of agreed-on rules of conduct in which what constituted "cheating" was understood by all. It belonged to a specific area of what Greif calls the "regularity of behavior," or the normative behavior of any given context.³³ He assumes the existence of "cultural beliefs" regulating business conduct, but he does not explicitly tie such behavior to religious practice.³⁴ His concept of merchants' law, which is disengaged from either the Jewish or the Muslim traditions in which Maghribi traders' activities were so obviously embedded, remains poorly documented.³⁵ While he assumes that traders who cheated incurred network exclusion, he does not address the question of conflict resolution and legal arbitration in long-distance trade. More problematic is his suggestion that "most likely, the legal system was not used to mitigate the merchant-agent commitment problem," mainly due to the expense of litigation and "the uncertainty and complexity of long-distance trade."³⁶

But based on his voluminous translations of Geniza trade records, Goitein himself asserts that religion was central to the lives of traders. His position, partially quoted in previous chapters, is worth citing here in full:

Religion was not only conducive to the formation of business relationships, but also to their proper conduct. Again and again, a man's piety and fear of God are involved when he is reminded to adhere to good business practices or when he is praised for his excellent handling of his friends' affairs. . . . Religion was undoubtedly the strongest element in a merchant's mental makeup, and religion meant membership in a specific religious community. . . . [Some of the traders] were versed in Jewish law and lore, as is evident from the legal opinions which they wrote on the reverse sides of business letters. . . . Islam . . . took a similar attitude toward learning and the learned.³⁷

Aside from giving guidance, religious authorities, such as qāḍīs, performed as witnesses and notaries, or more accurately scribes. Traders also could choose to appeal to jurists to arbitrate or issue legal opinions in business disputes or provide mediation in contests over property rights, as seen in the case examined below. Indeed, while peer pressure and public denunciation of traders' transgressions were effective mechanisms of enforcement, these were not the actions of last resort available to Saharan traders such as the Tikna or even eleventh-century Maghribis.

³³ Greif, *Institutions*, 32–5.

³⁵ Greif, *Institutions*, 71.

³⁷ Goitein, *Letters*, 7–8.

³⁴ Greif, "Cultural Beliefs."

³⁶ Greif, "Contract," 529; *Institutions*, 63.

LITERACY AND THE QUESTION OF TRUST

Aside from structuring the law, religious authorities also dispensed education. In Muslim societies, as in the Jewish context, the teaching of ethics and morals, including in commerce, on the one hand, and the teaching of literacy, computation, and commercial law, on the other, trained boys and to some extent girls for commercial careers. The relevance of literacy to both economic organizing and institutional order has hardly drawn historians' attention. Here the work of Maristella Botticini and Zvi Eckstein is exceptional.³⁸ What they argue for the Jewish case, namely that literacy gave believers a comparative advantage in certain professions, including commerce, is equally valid for Muslim societies.

Among Muslims, elementary schooling tended to be mandatory for boys and girls. It was religious in nature, and so the Qur'ān, written in classical Arabic, was the basic text used for the teaching of reading and writing. Depending on what Sunni legal school they followed, Muslims further received instruction in specific legal traditions. They internalized verses through mnemonic traditions of Islamic learning, and they also received training in ethics and arithmetic. Because of the commercial culture embedded in the Qur'ān and the teaching of literacy and computation, young Muslim boys acquired what Brian Street has called "commercial literacy."³⁹ It follows that Islamic legal prescriptions shaped, to some extent at least, the business conduct of Muslims in western Africa. In fact, it could be argued that commerce may have been a driving force in the spread of literacy. Reflecting on the earliest written sources for the greater Muslim world, Nelly Hanna posits that the volume of documentation "suggests how literacy and writing were linked to trade and commerce."⁴⁰ At the same time, the "learning by doing" of apprentices and junior trade agents was as critical to commercial success as was their ability to make use of the written word.

Trade networks tended to operate in environments characterized by information asymmetries, that is to say environments where market information was scarce and unevenly distributed. In such a context, literacy provided an essential tool for enabling the flow of information across long distances and for network organizing. As Botticini and

³⁸ Botticini and Eckstein, "Jewish Occupational Selection" and "Path Dependence and Occupations."

³⁹ Street, *Literacy in Theory and in Practice*, 158–80.

⁴⁰ Hanna, "Literacy and the 'Great Divide' in the Islamic World," 46.

Eckstein have noted, literacy enhanced trade network externality. Members required “strong linguistic skills, often including the ability to speak and write in both their own and alien languages.”⁴¹ Furthermore, literacy created enforcement mechanisms, for, as they argue, “only a Jewish merchant who could read a fellow merchant’s letter was able to enforce sanctions on Jewish traders who cheated or acted opportunistically.”⁴² I would add that the question of handwriting was equally important in this context. Traders working within a group gained familiarity with each other’s handwriting, so as to authenticate documents, such as letters and contracts. The knowledge of handwriting styles would have further enhanced the ability of trade network members to limit opportunistic behavior across long distances.

Whether individually acquired or dispensed by hired scribes, literacy therefore enabled *internal enforcement* as well as information flows and financial complexity. Indeed, documents from the Cairo Geniza, like those of the nineteenth-century Saharan trade, are evidence of the panoply of literacy uses in business organization characteristic of paper economies. The oversight about literacy in the literature is especially remarkable considering that efficient communication was a major advantage of trade networks. Hindus used scripts derived from Sanskrit, Chinese relied on various scripts, Jews wrote in the Hebrew and Arabic scripts, and Muslims used Arabic. As seen in previous chapters, trans-Saharan traders relied on a “paper economy of faith” for the sake of letter writing, record keeping, and drafting contracts. Markovits recognized that Sind merchants tended to have “written agreements,” but he assumes that such behavior came about with colonial rule, and presumably the spread of the English language, together with the colonial court system and “the primacy it gave written documents.”⁴³

Although, as previously noted, Islamic legal traditions dismissed written documentation as legal evidence, written records did constitute proof between contracting parties of a particular transaction and its terms. Even societies with limited literacy had alternative forms of record keeping. As Austen and Derrick have shown for the case of the Duala, their credit obligations were denoted with markings on banana leaves or expressed in bundles of sticks and grass.⁴⁴ But when trading with the Atlantic

⁴¹ Botticini and Eckstein, “Path Dependence,” 6.

⁴² Botticini and Eckstein, “Jewish Occupational Selection,” 940.

⁴³ Markovits, *Global World*, 261.

⁴⁴ Austen and Derrick, *Middlemen*.

economy, “trust agreements” in late-eighteenth-century Cameroon “were inscribed by writing in ‘books’ or *kalati*, copies of which were retained by both Europeans and Duala.”⁴⁵ The recording of agreements, therefore, enabled the creation of a form of trust. But such trust was not absolute and to be activated it usually required testimonial proof through the authentication of witnesses. In other words, the reliance on writing to record agreements solved, to some extent at least, the commitment problem between contracting parties. Documents of transactions, therefore, became informal mechanisms of enforcement.

The question of trust has both fascinated and frustrated scholars, while the opposite question, that of mistrust or breach of trust, has not been given the same attention. Legal arenas are propitious fora for analyzing contexts leading to the breakdown of trustworthiness, as seen below. Recently, Timothy Guinnane has argued that the concept of trust is both nebulous and superfluous.⁴⁶ He contends that the term is loosely applied to myriad contexts and that economists long have identified that mechanisms of information and enforcement constitute “the core of the useful notion of trust.”⁴⁷ To the extent that trust and trustworthiness often were invoked in the writings of early modern traders, ignoring contextual meanings of trust arguably amounts to ignoring the cultural determinants of trust.

On the question of the relationship between kinship ties and trust, as discussed in the preceding chapter, Kuran compellingly argues that written contracts among kin “enabled mutual trust.”⁴⁸ Markovits, for his part, believes “it is a widely held fallacy that family and kinship are privileged breeding grounds for trust.”⁴⁹ Insofar as families provided institutional bonds of an informal nature, it seems plausible that certain credit transactions among kin presented unique advantages. Since pre-modern societies were characterized by information asymmetries, contracting within a known circle of close kin or within a trade network provided some level of insurance against breach of trust through access to information about past behavior and trustworthiness. Conversely, the risk of default may have been higher among kin forced to be less stringent when collecting debts.

In sum, the new institutional economics literature focuses on transaction costs, information, enforcement, and sanctions as well as reputation mechanisms, not to mention rational choice and game theory, to explain commercial actors’ disincentives to cheat or engage in untrustworthy

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Guinnane, “Trust: A Concept Too Many.” ⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Kuran, “Islamic Commercial Crisis,” 418. ⁴⁹ Markovits, *Global World*, 261.

behavior. These concerns are largely disconnected from the trade network literature and its emphasis on culture, religion, language, and homeland. This literature, for its part, treats the question of trust in a rather abstract manner, while focusing on skills required to engage in long-distance trade and reproducing cultural identities in the diaspora and to a lesser extent on the institutions that enabled circulation among communities in dispersal. However, both literatures downplay the existence of legal infrastructures provided by religious institutions and overlook the importance of literacy for cementing trust and supporting accountability. The following inheritance case involving the Wād Nūn trade network focuses on just these issues.

WĀD NŪN TRADE NETWORK INHERITANCE CASE STUDY

By the 1840s, Tikna and Awlād Bū al-Sibā' traders had taken up residence in the active commercial center of Tīshīt for at least a decade or so. But soon would unfold a dramatic series of events leading to the sequential, and rather unusual, deaths of four Tikna traders living there. Until this point, the returns of collaborating in a trade network have been underscored. What happens to the system at the crossroads of adversity is the subject of this section, which is based on an inheritance case revolving around these deaths that occurred between the late 1840s and early 1850s.

Because of the prominence of the deceased, as well as the standing of the Awlād Bū al-Sibā' merchant Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl and other members of the Wād Nūn trade network involved in this case, not to mention the size of their estates, the inheritance proceedings came into dispute. The most contested claim was between the inheriting families of two of the deceased over certain quantities of gold. One of the two was Shaykh Bayrūk's grand-nephew, and so naturally it became a high-profile case. The legal contestation led these families to engage the services of three different muftīs to review the actions of the executor of the estates, Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl (hereafter Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm), and the judge of Tīshīt who assisted in the devolution proceedings.

The type of documentation that this case generated is remarkable, to say the least. Remarkable, too, was the manner in which I came upon this document. It lay buried underneath the sandy floor of the vacant house of the former qāḍī of Shinqīti, alongside a box containing the records of the Arwīlīs, the family of Bayrūk's cousin. The record reveals how traders of the Wād Nūn network were bonded to one another's families

and commercial interests in the spirit of cooperation and mutual trust. It also documents the relations prevailing among members of a network including Jewish traders from Guelmīm and non-network traders. More than any other source, this inheritance case provides a vivid cross-section of a trade network. It informs about the centrality of credit transactions, the shifting use of currencies and their valuations, the high risks involved in long-distance trade in mid-nineteenth-century western Africa, and the roles of Mālikī scholars in assisting network traders.

The parchment, when unfolded, is an unusual size. The entire folio, penned in tight small Maghribi script completely covering both sides, is 50 by 65 centimeters (20 by 25 inches) in dimension. The sheer size of the sheet of paper, which in all likelihood is of European origin, is such as I have not encountered elsewhere. The parchment contains the certified copies of four documents produced for safekeeping and future referencing. While I have seen copies and excerpts of original fatwas in Saharan private libraries, never have I come across such an attempt to record several legal documents in a single folio.⁵⁰ These multiple versions and interpretations of events make for particularly rich historical data. Indeed, it is fortuitous for the historian to review four texts authored by different parties deliberating a single case. While much information is missing (including the exact causes of the traders' deaths) and while the document was damaged in places and there are several gaps, the source is unique. It provides intricate details about the *modus operandi* of members of a trade network and their peripheral associates, on the one hand, and the mediation of legal service providers – a qāḍī and three muftīs – on the other.

The first and lengthiest text is the legal report by the qāḍī Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Ṣaghīr b. Anbūja of Tishīt's well-known family of legal scholars, who modestly identified himself as "the poor man (*al-faqīr*) who needs his God." It is written in the form of a letter addressed to: "the community guarded by the watchfulness of God and guarded by His divine providence, that is the community of the protected people of Guelmīm and in particular those who fear God exalted," Shaykh Bayrūk, his paternal cousin Arwīlī, and other men concerned with the inheritances of the four Tikna traders formerly stationed in Tishīt. The report tallies the estates of each trader in turn, detailing their financial affairs with other network members and associates. It also describes how Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm

⁵⁰ Wād Nūn Inheritance Case (1269/1853), Arwīlī Family Records, Archives of Shaykh Ḥammūny (Shinqīti). The document, which I photographed in 12 segments, once painstakingly transcribed and translated, is 24 single-spaced typed pages in length.

managed the daunting task of sorting out the inheritances and complex finance of the deceased. The qāḍī, who assisted him in the matter, indicates several points of tension between the inheriting families, to which I will return. This document, originally written in Rajab 1268/April 1852, eighth months after the passing of the last trader, occupies the recto and one-quarter of the verso of the large parchment. These legal texts are discussed further below, but for now I turn to the events as they unfolded, based primarily on the most informative text, the qāḍī's report.

Death on the Trail

Sometime between 1265/1848–9 and Dhul-qī'da 1266/September 1850, four Wād Nūn traders met their deaths on trans-Saharan trails. These men, who resided in Tishīt, were all originally from the town of Guelmīm, where at least three also held primary residence. As noted above, the report does not explain what caused their deaths, but they were strangers in Tishīt where they collaborated with one another in network fashion on caravans headed to regional markets. What it documents is a complex web of financial transactions among these four trade network partners, their wives, and close to thirty other traders summarized in Table 7.1. A reminder of the historical context is necessary to consider these events.

As stated in the Tishīt chronicle, and as the quotes below illustrate so vividly, insecurity was rampant in mid-nineteenth-century Tishīt, as it was throughout western Africa in this period. Then the state of repression of the Masina Caliphate, under the leadership of Aḥmad Lobbo I, was ongoing. Yet the backdrop to the deaths that unfolded in and around Tishīt is the protracted war that raged between the Māsna and the Awlād Billa (Chapter 3). The last group recently migrated to Tishīt from the north in the 1780s and entered into conflict several decades later with the Māsna. The war raged for thirteen years (1253–66/1837–50) and caused most of the Awlād Billa to leave Tishīt and found the nearby oasis of 'Aghrayjīt. One of the underlying causes of the conflict had to do with assessing the local taxes (*mudārāt*) of the Awlād Billa and their access to Tishīt's amersāl salt.

To be sure, in times of war and civil strife, stranger traders such as the Tikna and the Awlād Bū al-Sibā' were especially prone to being attacked. This was addressed by the qāḍī of Tishīt in an addendum to his report where he states that:

If it remains together their property is exposed to danger. And suffice it that the raiders (*al-mutaghālibīn*) find out about it, to attack it wherever it is located,

TABLE 7.1. Financial Transactions of the Five Wād Nūn Traders (and Their Tikna, Awlād Bū al-Sibā', Jewish, and Other Associates)^a

I: <u>Baghlīl</u> (B)	II: <u>Al-Hājj 'Alī</u> (HA), Executor of <u>B</u>	IV: <u>'Alī Fāl</u> (AF), Executor of <u>B</u> , <u>HA</u> & <u>AH</u>
1. Owens: cloth (<i>khunt</i>) worth 140 mq. 2. Credit: 50 mq. paid by unnamed 3. Credit: 140 bayṣas (paid by a third party, Muhammad b. Ahmayda^b) 4. Credit: 137 mq. (owed by <u>AH</u>) 5. Debt: 40 mq. <u>Izargīn man</u> (paid) Stated total: 232 mq. (95 mq. from <u>HA</u> and 137 mq. from <u>AF</u>) (<i>More debts are revealed below</i>)	6. Owens: 197 mq. collected from <u>Ṣidī Mas'ūd al-Yaggūrī</u>^c (in Niassène, Senegal?) 7. Debt: owed to Al-Kayḥil b. 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Rgaybī (amount unknown, paid by <u>AF</u>) 8. Payment: 11 mq. to al-Māsnīya paid by <u>AF</u> (after being forced to do so by <u>SI</u> and the qāḍī) Stated total: 186 mq.	1. Acquires 45 mq. of the 140 mq. in cloth belonging to <u>B</u> 4. Acquires 137 mq. belonging to <u>B</u>'s estate and owed by <u>AH</u> 40. Acquires unspecified quantity of food and cloth from <u>B</u>'s estate 41. Lease: in partnership with <u>Bujum'a b. Ahmad b. Ibrāhīm</u>^d of 130 salt bars on a southern caravan (see 43) 42. Forward purchase: remainder of <u>AH</u>'s akḥal in advance of the salt extraction season. 43. Lease: salt on caravan to the Sudan (most probably Mali). See 41 for a sense of how <u>AF</u>'s and <u>AH</u>'s salt was consolidated

(continued)

TABLE 7.1 (continued)

III: ‘Aly b. Ḥammad (AH)		
4. Debt: 137 mq. (owed to B) 9. Owms: number of camels 10. Owms: ten camel-loads carrying 90 bayṣas of markānī (American?) cloth 11. Owms: over 200 milḥafa of akḥal 12. Owms: 20 loads (?) of ḥirām cloth (wool) 13. Debt: (shared with unnamed): 350 salt bars owed to ‘Aly b. Arāyah of which 250 were reimbursed with camels, camel-feed, and bayṣas. 14. Debt:^e 464 silver mq. (116 mq.) to unnamed Jew. Reimbursed with 87 milḥafas of akḥal via <i>Bāba</i> (brother of SI) in Guelmīm 15. Debt: to <i>Shalūm the Jew</i> (in Guelmīm) 36 silver mq. (12 mq.) paid in akḥal 16. Debt: to Shalūm’s envoy, ‘Aly b. Ibrāhīm b. Limḥif 12 mq. paid in akḥal 17. Debt: to <i>Muḥammad b. Buddab</i> of 8 mq. paid in akḥal 18. Debt: to al-Ṣāliḥ Ibrāhīm b. Ahmayda^f of 7 mq. paid in akḥal 19. Debt: to <i>Muḥammad b. Ahmad b. Ahmarmar</i> of 4 mq. paid in akḥal	20. Debt: to <i>Muḥammad Ibrāhīm al-Demuys^g</i> 10 mq. paid in akḥal 21. Debt: to SI 3 mq. (paid?) 22. Debt: to AF 27 mq. paid in akḥal 23. Debt: to AF 150 silver mq. (40 mq.) paid in akḥal 24. Entrustment:^h 45 mq. Ahmayda b. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm for 5 blankets (<i>kisā’</i>) paid in akḥal 25. Entrustment: 11 mq. Ahmad al-Qadūr al-Majā’ir for 1 red blanket (<i>kisā’</i>) paid in akḥal 26. Entrustment: 4 mq. to al-Ghazīma (wife of B) paid in akḥal 27. Entrustment: 4 mq. to Mbārak b. Ahmad al-Znāgī paid in akḥal 28. Debt: to wife #2 of AH a small amount of gold invested in an <i>ibda’</i> contract (not paid) 29. Debt: 75 salt bars owed by ‘Aly b. Arāyah to wife #2 of AH, paid with a forward purchase of camels, all except 13 $\frac{1}{2}$ salt bars 30. Debt: to wife #1 of AH 30 salt bars paid in clothing (<i>athwāb</i>)	31. Debt: herder is paid his due (unspecified amount) in akḥal 32. Debt: man (unnamed) owed mq. (unspecified amount) paid in akḥal 33. Indemnity: paid to ‘Aly b. Arāyah for a forward purchase of defective camels, paid with a debt-swapping contract 34. Substantial debt (<i>dhimma ‘āmira</i>): owed to an unnamed debtor 55 $\frac{1}{2}$ mq. (not disbursed but found in AH’s contracts) 35. Partial credit: owed to <i>Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm b. Sīd Ahmad Lazgham al-Baggārī</i> (unspecified amount) reimbursed in merchandise 36. Payment: to unnamed 100 mq. paid in akḥal 37. Payment: to unnamed 50 mq. paid in akḥal 38. Debt: to <i>Bujum</i> ‘a 45 mq. paid in akḥal 39. Payment: to the qadī of Tishīt for his services 2 mq and $\frac{2}{3}$
		Stated total: 133 $\frac{1}{3}$ mq.

		(total of 602 $\frac{1}{2}$ mq. obtained for the akhal which included 137 mq. advanced by <u>B</u> and 40 mq. advanced by the <u>Izargiyin</u> (5) and 64 mq. advanced (investments and forward purchases) by numerous investors and clients to <u>AH</u> for a total of 241 mq.)
V: Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl (SI), Actions as Legal Executor of ‘Aly Fal’s Affairs, with the Assistance of the Qādī		
1. Provides for <u>AF</u>’s family, paying the maintenance fee (<i>nafaqa</i>) to his breastfeeding wife, ‘Aqida bint Ṭālib al-Ṣālih, and their three children 2. Paid <u>AF</u>’s local taxes (<i>mudārāt</i>) 3. Collected <u>AF</u>’s cloth (<i>khunt</i>) arriving from Senegal (100 mq.) 4. Collected <u>AF</u>’s akhal (100 mq.) 5. Forward purchased 205 salt bars with 3. 6. Reimbursed <u>AF</u>’s confirmed debts 7. Transferred 50 mq. to <u>AF</u>’s family on his behalf as per <u>AF</u>’s instructions in a letter sent after his departure 8. Hides from raiders the deceased traders’ assets in various secret locations	18. SI settles a complex transaction (unknown debtor–document gap) of 72 mq. paid to Ṣālim b. Aḥmad Ṣālim.¹ In turn Ṣālim owed 70 mq. to <u>Hamayda</u> who, in turn, owed 16 mq. to <u>AF</u> 19. Paid <u>AF</u>’s debt of 6 mq. owed to <u>Bujum</u>’a 20. Paid <u>B</u>’s debt of 13 $\frac{1}{3}$ mq. owed to <u>Bujum</u>’a 21. Paid <u>AH</u>’s debt of 450 silver mq. (112.5 mq.) owed to <u>Muhammad Fāl b. Sidi Buya</u> of the <i>Aulād Bū Siba</i>^a the envoy of Sīdī ‘Abdarrahmān^k (in Guelmīm one of the addressees of the qādī’s report) paid with several debt-swapping contracts (for a total of 68 $\frac{1}{2}$ mq.)	28. <u>AF</u>’s brother, ‘Abdallah b. Arwālī, took 375 $\frac{2}{3}$ mq. plus 22 mq. plus 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ mq. and merchandise (worth 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ mq.), plus 8 mq. and a provision bag (<i>muzāwad</i>) and water-skin (<i>girba</i>) and 10 mq. (from the sale of clothes and cloth). He also paid 2 mq. and 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ mq. in local taxes (<i>mudārāt</i>), but he left without paying <u>AF</u>’s wife, ‘Aqida bint Ṭālib al-Ṣālih, her share of the inheritance. Stated total: 436 $\frac{1}{3}$ mq.

(continued)

TABLE 7.1 (continued)

V: Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl (continued)		
9. Sends 3 envoys to collect <u>AF</u>'s 700 salt bars (in mq.) located in the Sudan (most probably Mali) 10. Paid <u>AF</u>'s unnamed associate who sold his salt in the Sudan 11. Paid the rent for <u>AF</u>'s family house in Tishit 12. Kept 5 salt bars as personal fee (?) 13. Sold to <u>AF</u>'s wife, 'Aqīda, a male slave for 34 salt bars (taken from her inheritance share and later valued at 17 mq.) 14. Collected <u>AF</u>'s 55 $\frac{1}{2}$ mq. exchanged for salt 15. Collected 11 mq. debt owed to <u>AF</u> by Ibn Mabruk 16. Paid a debt of 2 gold earrings worth 40 mq. 17. Paid <u>AF</u>'s wife's brother 30 mq. (with 14)	22. Paid to the envoy of <u>AF</u>'s father (named <u>Arwālī</u>) 375 $\frac{2}{3}$ mq. 23. The total maintenance fees paid to the families of <u>AF</u> and <u>HA</u> was assessed at 50 mq. 24. <u>AF</u>'s possessions included one knotted rug sold for 7 mq., a provision bag for millet (gap), a knife, some amount of honey, and one book valued at 15 mq. 25. Paid 11 mq. to <u>Bāba</u> (brother of <u>SI</u>) to deliver (physically or with a money order) 300 mq. to families of <u>B</u> and <u>HA</u> in Guelmīm 26. <u>SI</u> charges 15 mq. for paid expenses including to <u>AF</u>'s family. 27. Payment of 5 mq. to the scribe paid by the qāḍī (who himself was paid 2 $\frac{2}{3}$ mq.)	29. Entrustments held by <u>B</u>, that were presented with written contracts, including 2 salt bars for <u>Muhammad b. 'Amāra</u>, 3 salt bars for '<u>Umar b. al-Shaykh Ibrāhīm</u> (this is possibly another brother of <u>SI</u>), 1 mq. to 'Aqīda bint Tālib al-Ṣālih, 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ salt-bars to <u>Shalūm the Jew</u>, and 2 salt bars and 1 bayṣa for 'Abdallah b. al-Mansūr (Maghribi name) 30. Debt owed by <u>B</u> according to a written contract due to <u>Mulāy Ibrāhīm</u> of 304 mq. and 2 ounces (in ugiya or coins?) settled on his behalf by <u>Ambayrikāt b. al-Hājī Muhammad al-Rakūl</u>^m (who took charge of the <u>HA</u>'s estate on behalf of his inheritors in Guelmīm) which include 40 mq. for <u>Muhammad b. al-Faqir Muhammad al-Mashari</u>, 7 mq. for 'Abayd b. Aḥmad Ahrāū, 100 mq. for <u>Shalūm the Jew</u>, and 97 mq. for the warehouseman (<i>al-khazzān</i>) <u>Mas'ūd b. al-Naftālī</u>^m

- ^a The names and initials of names of Tikna are underlined, while those of the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ and Jews are italicized. Names not underlined or italicized either are not from these groups or have not been identified as such. The transactions between the four Tikna traders are numbered (repeated numbers corresponding to shared transactions). The actions and transactions executed by Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl are numbered separately.
- ^b Tikna who resided in Shinqīṭi and was one of the first Tikna traders to settle there from Wād Nūn.
- ^c Tikna trader from Liksābī who was later joined by Sālim b. ʿUmaru Dawūd Kaolack (Senegal), of which Niassène is a suburb.
- ^d Tikna trader from Guelmīm residing in Shinqīṭi who purchased land there in 1271/1855 (see Chapter 4).
- ^e Most of the debts were paid in akhal cloth from AH's caravan (see Table 7.2) at the rate of 1 $\frac{2}{3}$ mq. per milhafa.
- ^f Father of Mariam Mint Ahmayda (discussed in Chapters 1 and 4).
- ^g This trader belonged to the earliest clan of the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ to reside in Shinqīṭi.
- ^h The following four entries were entrustments (*amānāt*) held by AH for safekeeping or for resale.
- ⁱ This Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ trader and progeny first resided in Shinqīṭi before moving to Aṭār in the early twentieth century.
- ^j This is the father of Muḥammad, Ibrāhīm, and Buhay, the three brothers whose correspondence from Shinqīṭi, Wālāta, and Timbuktu is discussed earlier and in Chapters 3 and 5.
- ^k While this man's full name is never stated in the report, it seems likely that he was from the Wād Nūn.
- ^l Tikna from Guelmīm who resided in Shinqīṭi.
- ^m Tikna from Guelmīm who resided in Wālāta and whose son, Bashīr, moved to Timbuktu in the early twentieth century.
- ⁿ Brother of Joseph and Abraham Naṭfālī Afriat who was Shaykh Bayrūk's representative in Al-Ṣawīra (discussed in Chapters 3 and 4).

whether it is the property of the people of the North [*ahl al-Sāḥil*, meaning the Tikna and Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ], or those of the people of Arawān [north of Timbuktu]. *They covet the property in the houses of strangers (al-gharīb)*, in preference to the houses of the deceased or missing (*al-faqīd*). And this is their custom (*ʿādatihum*) which everyone knows about.⁵¹

That raiders targeted foreign assets first, and the assets of the missing or the deceased second, is an important consideration for understanding the case of the four Wād Nūn partners. Attacks by warrior groups and random raiders caused the death of at least the first of the traders. Two others are known to have perished in Senegal and Mali while on trade missions.

Trader One: Baghlīl's Passing

Sometime in 1265/1848-9, Muḥammad b. Mbārak, nicknamed “Baghlīl” (“the potbellied”), died at the hands of pillagers who ransacked his caravan. The exact circumstances surrounding his death were not revealed in the report. This probably was due to the fact that Baghlīl's fate had been the subject of a previous correspondence dispatched to Guelmīm by the qāḍī of Tīshīt. As he stated, “we have written to you about what happened to his inheritance (*tarikatihi*) and the property that the raiders took from him during the time of his death.” Baghlīl left behind a wife in Tīshīt named al-Ghazīma, some unspecified amount of cotton cloth, several lines of extended credit, and a handful of debts. Following this tragic event, Baghlīl's colleague and fellow Tīshīt resident, al-Ḥājj ʿAly, took responsibility for his inheritance. He proceeded to collect his property and sort out his financial obligations, including his guaranteed debt contracts (*duyūn bil-dhimān*) in order to assess the estate for Baghlīl's inheritors. The extent of his assets, in the form of generic cloth (*khunt*), was valued at 140 mithqāls.⁵² Baghlīl's largest loan, on the order of 137 mithqāls, was owed by another Tikna trader named ʿAly b. Ḥammād. Moreover, based on another written debt contract, an unnamed trader owed Baghlīl the sum of 50 mithqāls, which his executor al-Ḥājj ʿAly collected.

During the months that followed, other outstanding debts were revealed (see Table 7.1, Sections I and V). One such debt of 40 mithqāls was paid to a Tikna of the Izargiyīn clan, who seemingly was in partnership with Baghlīl. More substantial debts were later settled on Baghlīl's behalf, including several amounts owed to other Tiknas, and two debts to

⁵¹ Ibid. The quotes that follow are from the same source, unless when otherwise stated.

⁵² All these sums are in gold mithqāl (approx. 4.25 grams) unless otherwise indicated.

Jewish traders of Guelmīn. One in the amount of 100 mithqāls was owed to “Shalūm the Jew,” from the prominent Jewish family of Guelmīm discussed in Chapter 4. The other debt was for 97 mithqāls owed to the aforementioned Mas‘ūd b. al-Naftali also of Guelmīm.⁵³ As suggested previously, he was identified as “the warehouseman” probably because of his import-export activities with Al-Ṣawīra. Mas‘ūd’s brother Joseph, who worked closely with Shaykh Bayrūk as his principal agent in Al-Ṣawīra, would have been his associate.

Another of Baghlīl’s debtors, not named but simply referred to as his *ṣāhib* (associate, friend), came forward to reimburse his loan of 140 bayṣas of cloth of an unspecified quality. But he offered only 4 mithqāls per unit of cloth, which apparently “was insufficient and al-Ḥājj ‘Aly refused to take it.” But, in an act of generosity, another Tikna trader in town named Muḥammad b. Aḥmayda, with interests in Shinqīṭi, stepped forward. He took possession of the loan, saying that “it was not good for one to have debts underneath him.” In other words, Ibn Aḥmayda took over the debt of his deceased trading partner at a seemingly unfavorable exchange rate on the basis that it was unacceptable for his colleague to take debts to the grave, a point I will return to. However, the report does not make clear how this transaction was realized, nor does it state what sum was derived from the deal or how it was computed into Baghlīl’s estate. In any event, what appears to have been a last gesture of solidarity toward a deceased trader was one that ideally characterized the cooperative behavior among members of a trade network.

Trader Two: Al-Ḥājj ‘Aly

Shortly after Baghlīl passed away, al-Ḥājj ‘Aly died while visiting the town of Aniyās. Although not identified this may be Niassène (Taiba Niassène), in the Saloum region of Senegal not far from the town of Kaolack, where, decades later, the Tijānī Sufi leader Ibrāhīm Niasse would rise to fame and several Tiknas held strong positions in the market. The circumstances surrounding al-Ḥājj ‘Aly’s death are undisclosed. But, while he could have been killed, it is not unlikely that he may have contracted a disease, such as smallpox, or died of natural causes.

Before leaving on his mission, al-Ḥājj ‘Aly appointed ‘Aly Fāl b. Arwīlī, a fellow partner also residing in Tishīt, to manage his affairs in his absence. As the news of his death reached Tishīt, he took responsibility for

⁵³ Schroeter, *Merchants*, 48; Abitbol, *Commerçants*, 90, n. 116.

al-Ḥājj ‘Aly’s postmortem affairs. By extension, ‘Aly Fāl also assumed the task of sorting out Baghlīl’s pending inheritance, since this fell under al-Ḥājj ‘Aly’s obligations. This inheritance, however, proved to be slightly more complicated than that of Baghlīl. For one thing, like many trans-Saharan traders, al-Ḥājj ‘Aly practiced long-distance polygyny, with a wife and children in Guelmīm and another family in Tīshīt. The name of his wife in Tīshīt was not revealed, although she is referred to as al-Māsnīya, which is to say that she was of the Māsna clan.

Although al-Ḥājj ‘Aly’s “assets were lost” in Aniyās, it came to be known that another Tikna trader there, named Sīdī Mas‘ūd al-Yaggūtī, had some of his property in holding. So ‘Aly Fāl quickly dispatched a wakīl who retrieved the considerable sum of 197 mithqāls (almost one kilogram of gold). Then he settled with a trader of the Rgaybāt clan to whom al-Ḥājj ‘Aly owed an unspecified amount. What is more, ‘Aly Fāl reluctantly paid 11 mithqāls as part of the inheritance due to al-Māsnīya, but only after the qāḍī of Tīshīt and Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm compelled him to do so. As the qāḍī reports:

We know that he paid the eleven [mithqāls] to the wife by our order, after he consulted with us to put an end to the dismaying dispute, for the escalation and circulation of the news of such malicious acts unquestionably would cause damage.

While there is no way to know what happened, it is clear that ‘Aly Fāl had intended not to furnish al-Māsnīya her share of the inheritance. Other examples discussed below demonstrate a similar tendency to shortchange women of the Wād Nūn diaspora.

Trader Three: ‘Aly b. Ḥammād

‘Aly b. Ḥammād was the next of the Tikna traders to die, in 1266/1849, just months following al-Ḥājj ‘Aly. And so ‘Aly Fāl took responsibility for his inheritance as well. Here, too, the task was compounded by the fact that ‘Aly b. Ḥammād, like his deceased colleague al-Ḥājj ‘Aly, also was a polygynist. ‘Aly b. Ḥammād’s passing occurred shortly before the arrival of several of his caravans. One came from the north, transporting woolen blankets (*hirām*, 20 units or camel-loads?) and ten camel-loads of bayṣas of *markānī* cloth (probably of American origin), originally purchased in Al-Ṣawīra. The other caravan was transporting over 200 milḥafas (7.5 meters in length) of akḥāl, or black cotton cloth of South Asian origin and purchased from European traders.

As news traveled about ‘Aly b. Ḥammād’s death and the return of his caravans, various unidentified raiders descended on Tishīt to lay their hands on the merchandise. As the qāḍī reports, “then there were so many raiders that [people] feared for their possessions.” But thanks to the maneuvers of both ‘Aly Fāl and his colleague Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm, they succeeded in safeguarding this merchandise and that of the two other deceased traders. First, they consolidated the goods, then “they hid them completely.” They made use of Tishīt’s underground tunnels (*naqb al-dūr*) and secret cellars in various houses. But the raiders

entered the home of ‘Aly b. Ḥammād and requested his property, and they did not spare Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm and ‘Aly Fāl to the point that they encircled them to force them to reveal where the goods were hidden, and they made them swear that they did not have any assets. Such a case cannot be considered within the jurisdiction of the *sharī‘a*. They both told them what was left of his wealth, what was taken by his creditors, and that there was nothing left.

Eventually, they managed to deter the raiders by offering them “necessities” (*hawā’ij*) as gifts. But in the process, they had lied to the raiders about the extent of ‘Aly b. Ḥammād’s assets. As the qāḍī admits, their duplicitous actions could not be considered within the domain of the divine law since they were performed under duress caused by unruly raiders. To protect their fellow partners’ property, therefore, trade network members were prepared to engage in subterfuge.

Once the raiders had departed, “the creditors rose to claim their rights . . . to free the dead of their obligations to which they are indebted.” As for ‘Aly b. Ḥammād, he owed many creditors, but this was a reflection of his reputation and creditworthiness, not his indebtedness. In fact, a large portion of these debts were simply forward purchases of akḥāl made in advance of his caravan. It was through such forward purchases that ‘Aly b. Ḥammād, like other trans-Saharan traders, financed caravan expeditions. While there are some gaps in the document, it is nevertheless possible to assess the size of these investments, totaling about 743 gold mithqāl, or over 31 kilograms of gold.

The majority of ‘Aly b. Ḥammād’s investors for this particular caravan were northerners, namely, Tiknas, Awlād Bū al-Sibā’s, and Jews from Guelmīm. These debts were paid at the rate of one and two-thirds mithqāl per milḥafa of akḥal cloth. Other debts were settled in other merchandise, and well as through other means, such as the swapping of debt contracts (see Table 7.2).

Among the third trader’s creditors were several women, namely, his two unnamed wives and the wife of another network member. One wife,

simply referred to as ‘Aly b. Ḥammād’s “first wife, mother of his young daughter,” presented herself to ‘Aly Fāl to claim her due. She had a credit of 30 salt bars, for which he reimbursed her not in goods but simply in clothing (*athwāb*). As for his second wife, whose location is uncertain, she had invested an unspecified amount of gold in an *ibḍa‘* contract with her husband. As discussed in the preceding chapter, these were trade-without-commission contracts, typically negotiated between husbands and wives. She was due to receive in exchange 75 salt bars, but her husband’s principal caravan worker, a certain ‘Aly b. Attāyah, who was in charge of his camels, simply “did not transfer her due payment (*lam yaḥawal ajlihā*), and it still remained unpaid at that time.” Eventually, “during the salt extraction season (*zaman al-hūsh*),” she was reimbursed, but received only 61 $\frac{1}{2}$ bars, and not the full amount. Finally, a “written and witnessed document” between ‘Aly b. Ḥammād and al-Ghazīma, the wife of his deceased colleague Baghlīl, was “found” in his papers. This was a storage or entrustment contract for the sum of 4 mithqāls, for which al-Ghazīma was then reimbursed in akḥal.

Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm b. Sīd Aḥmad Lazgham al-Baggārī, one of the earliest Awlād Bū al-Sibā‘ to settle in Shinqīṭi, was also one of ‘Aly b. Ḥammād’s debtors.⁵⁴ He

presented himself with a written document stating that he owes 6 mithqāls to ‘Aly b. Ḥammād and he claimed that he had already paid a portion [of this debt]. In the end he [‘Aly Fāl] took what was accepted as debt in [the form of] merchandise. Then they both presented themselves [before the qāḍī] and scratched his name from the document in our presence.

As noted in Chapter 6, erasing or crossing out names and dues on written contracts in front of witnesses, including judges, was a common method for recording debt cancellations. The fact that this Awlād Bū al-Sibā‘ trader traveled to Tīshīt to make due on a debt, and the fact that he was believed about having made a previous installment, are indicative of the honesty and good faith prevailing among the members of the Wād Nūn trade network.

Other Wād Nūn debtors either sent envoys or made use of the financial tools of the paper economy to collect their dues. To receive payment, the above-mentioned Shalūm sent an Awlād Bū al-Sibā‘ agent, who also was owed several mithqāls by ‘Aly b. Ḥammād. His largest Jewish creditor,

⁵⁴ Interviews in Nouakchott with ‘Abd al-Wahāb Wuld Shaygar (07/18/97); Muḥammad al-Mahdī Wuld Muḥammad al-Amīn Wuld Ibrāhīm Wuld A‘waīsi (07/08/98); Muḥammad al-Amīn Wuld Sālah Wuld al-Gharrābī (07/05/98).

TABLE 7.2. *Investments and forward purchases of akḥāl cloth made on ‘Aly b. Ḥammād’s caravan from Wād Nūn paid in gold mithqāl unless otherwise specified*

Baghlīl ^a	137 (basic loan or forward purchase?)
Unnamed creditor	100
Unnamed creditor	50
‘Aly Fāl	67 (including 150 silver mq.)
Būjum‘a b. Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm	45
Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl ^b	3
Shalūm “the Jew” ^c	12 (36 silver mq.)
Shalūm’s envoy ‘Aly b. Ibrāhīm b. Limāyif ^b	12
Unnamed Jewish Trader ^c	116 (464 silver mq.)
Muḥammad b. Buddah ^b	8
Muḥammad Ibrāhīm al-Dimuysī ^b	10
Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Ahmarmar ^a	4
Al-Ṣālīḥ Ibrāhīm b. Aḥmayda ^a	7
‘Aly b. Ḥamayda ^a	112.5 (450 silver mq.)
Mbārak b. Aḥmād al-Znāgī ^d	4
Creditor X (gap in the document)	55.5
Herder (<i>al-ra‘ī</i>)	Forward wage
<i>Total amount obtained for the sale of the caravan loads of akḥāl</i>	743 mq. (equal to 450 milḥafas of akḥāl)

^a Tikna.

^b Awlād Bū al-Sibā‘.

^c Jew.

^d Unknown.

who remained unnamed, was owed 464 silver mithqāls, or 116 gold mithqāls, at the going exchange rate of four to one. He was reimbursed through the intermediation of Bāba b. Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl, the brother of Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm stationed in the Wād Nūn. Apparently, this debt was transferred by means of a money order (*hawāla*) between Bāba and his brother Shaykh. Later, Bāba’s services were employed to transfer the inheritances of Baghlīl and al-Ḥājī ‘Aly, for the fee of 11 mithqāls, although in this case it is unclear whether this was done physically or virtually. Such financial transactions demonstrate the embeddedness of Wād Nūn traders with their Jewish and Awlād Bū al-Sibā‘ associates, as well as the facility with which they transferred funds across long distances through “IOUs” between members.

Aside from paying off their creditors, ‘Aly Fāl b. Arwīlī also managed the affairs of his deceased partners, as executor of their estates. Obviously,

for this task, it was imperative to keep the merchandise moving so as to avoid its becoming the target of raiders. Some quantity of ‘Aly b. Ḥammād’s cloth remained, so ‘Aly Fāl used it to forward-purchase salt. As stated in the report, “he sold the akḥāl for salt until the salt extraction season (*bai‘ al-milḥ ilā zaman al-ḥūsh*), and with [the salt] he purchased gold but not until the arrival of the caravans.” In other words, the cloth was sold for salt bars to be delivered at a future date, and subsequently these would be exchanged for gold. ‘Aly Fāl also leased ‘Aly b. Ḥammād’s salt to others on lease contracts. Yet it appeared that some of this salt became “confused” with ‘Aly Fāl’s own salt and that of another trade network member, the above-mentioned Tikna Būjum’a b. Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm stationed in Shinqīti.⁵⁵ This, but especially other actions discussed below, indicate that ‘Aly Fāl may have taken certain liberties with the estates of his deceased partners.

Trader Four: ‘Aly Fāl b. Arwīlī

Shortly after the arrival of the northern salt caravans, ‘Aly Fāl b. Arwīlī organized an expedition headed south to Mali in January 1850 (*rabbī al-awal* 1266). Aside from ‘Aly b. Ḥammād’s salt, he traveled with funds belonging to the estates of the other deceased partners. As per the report:

This is evident from the testimony he gave to us on the day he [‘Aly Fāl] departed from [Tishīt], on his trip from which he never returned, that he [‘Aly Fāl] had in his possession 186 gold mithqāls belonging to al-Ḥājj ‘Aly... Moreover, he also testified the day of his departure that he was liable for the amount of 45 [mithqāls] taken from one of Baghlīl’s debtors.

It was the gold of al-Ḥājj ‘Aly that was to become the main point of contention in the ensuing legal dispute.

Before leaving, as was customary for members of a commercial coalition, ‘Aly Fāl designated an associate to watch over his affairs in his absence. So he chose Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm of the Awlād Bū al-Sibā‘ as legal guardian of his estate. The words of the qāḍī of Tishīt are worth quoting here in full since, as I have argued above, this task was among the principal responsibilities of trade network members.

He commissioned Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl as legal representative (*wakīlan*) of his property and his dependents (*‘iyālihi*) and as legal executor (*waṣīyan*) of his

⁵⁵ Interviews in Shinqīti with Muḥammad Sa‘īd Wuld Buhay, Khadijatū Mint ‘Abdallah Wuld ‘Aly, and Faṭīma Mint ‘Abdarrḥamān Wuld Buhay (03/02/97).

estate after his death. He informed him about all of his affairs and delegated to him exclusively the administration of his assets and the property entrusted to him, while alive and after his death. He gave him his written contracts (*‘uqūd*) and he commissioned him the management of his estate. However, to our knowledge, he did not leave any goods in his hands, but he informed him about the locations of his affairs throughout the town, with whom he deposited them and what he left in his house. So he [Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm] took care of his family. In his absence he collected some of his khunt which arrived after his departure from the direction of the Senegal River (*al-gārib*). With it, he forward-purchased 205 salt bars deliverable at a future date (*ilā ājli*). And he did not cease taking care of his affairs, providing for his family and doing what [‘Aly Fāl] ordered him to do. And he discharged debts that were confirmed on his behalf.

But ‘Aly Fāl b. Arwīlī never returned from this caravan expedition. Eight months later, the community of Tīshīt got news that he had met the fatal fate of his fellow partners in trade. It befell Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm, therefore, to face not only the task of settling ‘Aly Fāl’s inheritance, but also, by extension, the postmortem accounts of the three other Tikna traders who had died in a relatively short period of time. Such a time-consuming endeavor could take years given the itinerant lifestyles and extended polygynous families of these trans-Saharan traders. Clearly, this was a highly risky commitment because of the exposure of stranger-traders to raiders, not to mention the fact that ‘Aly Fāl was related to the prominent leader of the “Door of the Sahara.”

The Limits of Collaboration

For reasons that can only be speculated about, the fifth trader, Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm, tried to back out of his legal obligations toward the Wād Nūn trade network. Perhaps he believed that he was not capable of handling this now infinitely more complicated matter. Perhaps he foresaw that it would become a contested series of inheritances. He may have argued that times were extremely insecure, ransacking was rampant, and as a foreigner in town he feared for his own safety and that of his family to the point that he could no longer guarantee the safekeeping of the estates of the deceased. Whatever his reasons for suspending his collaboration with the network, Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm attempted to relieve himself legally of the obligation to manage his partners’ affairs.

So Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm approached the qāḍī and the council (*jamā‘a*) of Tīshīt “to withdraw from the contractual obligation as legal executor of [‘Aly Fāl’s] estate.” But the religious establishment responded that “this was impossible because what is expected of him after his death is greater

than what is expected of him during his living (*lā sabīl ilā dhālik liāna al-marjūw minhu baʿd wafātihi aʿzam min al-marjūw minhu fī ḥāl ḥayātihī*).” They consulted with other Wād Nūn traders in town, including Sīdī al-Nafāgh, ʿAbd al-Qudūs, and Sālīm b. Aḥmad al-Sālīm (the father of the Tikna traders whose late-nineteenth-century correspondence between Shinqīṭi, Walāta, and Timbuktu was featured in previous chapters). But they all agreed that Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm

is the first and best positioned to manage his inheritance, may God bless him [i.e., ʿAly Fāl] with judiciousness, accuracy, and *trustworthiness* (*ḥazman wa ḍabṭan wa amānatan*). Moreover, we found no other who would accept [this task] because of the difficulty of the situation and the great number of thieves (*katharat al-sarrāq*). And everyone is busy with their own affairs seeking shelter in the underground tunnels of their houses and safety to save only himself.

They therefore insisted, until he finally accepted the task, for “he acknowledged that it is not in his power but that of God to refuse it.” Pressured by fellow traders and the local Muslim authorities, then, Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm took responsibility and proceeded to manage the postmortem affairs of ʿAly Fāl and the three other Wād Nūn traders (Table 7.1, Section V).

Consequently, Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm continued to provide for ʿAly Fāl’s family in Tīshīt, namely, his wife ʿAqīda bint Ṭālib al-Šāliḥ, who was breastfeeding⁵⁶ their third child, and his slave girl (*āma*). In preparation for the final dissolution of ʿAly Fāl’s estate, his male slave (*ʿabd*) was allocated to his wife for 34 salt bars. This sum was later assessed for inheritance purposes at 17 mithqāls, but, as seen below, ʿAly Fāl’s Guelmīm family failed to provide ʿAqīda with the remainder of her share of her husband’s inheritance. Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm also settled with ʿAqīda’s brother who had invested two golden earrings weighing 40 mithqāls in the salt trade with ʿAly Fāl. Moreover, he assessed his local taxes, received his shipments, forward-purchased salt with his cloth inbound from Senegal, and settled his numerous debts and those of the other deceased traders.

Debtors of the deceased arrived in Tīshīt demanding their dues. On one such occasion Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm allowed the debtor to collect in exchange for debt contracts, yet another financial practice discussed in Chapter 6. And so:

Muḥammad Buya b. Aḥmad Fāl of the Awlād Bū al-Sibā⁵⁷ came with an agency contract (*rasm wakāla*) that certifies that ʿAly b. Ḥamayda owes 450 silver

⁵⁶ The specific mention of breastfeeding was important, for it meant that she was entitled to receive an extra ration in her maintenance fee (*nafaqa*).

⁵⁷ This is the great-grandfather of Falla Samba Djaye, interviewed in Tīshīt (05/03/97).

mithqāls [112.5 gold mithqāls] to Sīdī Abdarraḥmān [one of the men from Guelmīm to whom the letter is addressed]. He [Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm] authenticated the document (*ṭhabata al-rasm*), and he found only the outstanding 55 and $\frac{1}{2}$ [mithqāls], set aside for another debt contract that remained unclaimed that were paid to him, and we gave him access to ‘Aly b. Ḥammād’s documents to check his creditors to recover his loan in this way [by acquiring an outstanding debt contract]. He took 4 mithqāls with one creditor and he took 7 mithqāls from the 13 [?] and the remainder, which we said was left for ‘Aly b. Ḥammād from the 75 aforementioned. And he found some of the assets [probably akḥal] of ‘Aly b. Ḥammād [gap] he took them at 1 mithqāl and $\frac{1}{4}$. And he noticed 5 mudd⁵⁸ of millet that were taken on credit for $\frac{5}{7}$ of a mithqāl.

So this debt was swapped in exchange for a bundle of contracts and other merchandise, and while the total did not amount to the original debt, it was accepted and payment was thus settled.

More than a year after ‘Aly Fāl’s passing, several agents of the four Tikna traders traveled to Tishīt to recover directly the assets of their relatives. In Ṣafar 1268/December 1851, a representative of the Arwīlī family, named ‘Abdallah b. ‘Aly, arrived accompanied by Ibrāhīm b. al-Ḥājj ‘Aly, the son of the second deceased trader. The first carried with him two legal documents. One authorized ‘Abdallah b. Arwīlī, the brother of the deceased ‘Aly Fāl, to collect the inheritance on behalf of the family, and the other gave the carrier of the documents, the said ‘Abdallah b. ‘Aly, power of attorney to act on behalf of ‘Abdallah b. Arwīlī. As for Ibrāhīm b. al-Ḥājj ‘Aly, he “came requesting the estate of his father and he brought with him a document containing the power of attorney for the inheritors of his father (*tawfīl wirth abihi*) and their exclusive list.”

All those involved attempted to sort out their claims from the bewildering complexity of multiple transactions by multiple parties in multiple currencies. Meanwhile, additional debtors came to plead for their rights. Among what was owed to Baghlīl, what remained of ‘Aly b. Ḥammād’s wealth, and what was to be bequeathed to the inheritors of the two other traders, several hundred mithqāls were separated for al-Ḥājj ‘Aly’s inheritors and just over 500 were set aside for ‘Aly Fāl’s family. But soon, ‘Abdallah b. Arwīlī came in person to Tishīt to deal directly with his brother’s estate. There was some disagreement about what the son of al-Ḥājj ‘Aly, who had by then departed, was given and what was due to the Arwīlī family. When claiming his rights, ‘Abdallah b. Arwīlī apparently took more than his fair share and in the process certain debts owed

⁵⁸ A mudd was a dry measure for cereal. The mudd of Tishīt was the largest one in the region (Chapter 6).

by his brother ‘Aly Fāl remained unsettled. As for Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm, who did not receive anything except perhaps five salt bars for his services, he generously or wisely downplayed, according to the qāḍī, what he was due for caring for ‘Aly Fāl’s family.

Trade Network Misbehavior

Throughout this report, several of the actions of traders did not comply with what was expected behavior for a network member. Indeed, there are instances, some clear, others less so, that point to the misbehavior of coalition members. First, Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm’s attempt to step down as executor of the traders’ estates shows that there were limits to collaborative behavior in a network. His readiness to renege on his pledge to protect the assets and families of his deceased colleagues could be perceived as defaulting on his membership commitment. By all accounts, however, his actions were those of a man desperately seeking to safeguard his life and that of his own family. Given the extenuating circumstances of the insecurity reigning in Tishīt in this period, marked by the final debacle of a violent civil war between the Māsna and the Awlād Billa, this decision may have been warranted. More problematic, however, were the actions of ‘Aly Fāl prior to leaving on his final caravan.

On several occasions, disclosed with subtle tact in the qāḍī’s report, ‘Aly Fāl apparently pocketed the loans of his partners without computing these into the final accounts. I have already mentioned that in dealing with ‘Aly b. Ḥammād’s leftover cloth, which he exchanged for salt bars, ‘Aly Fāl then leased some of the salt. These actions also went unrecorded, and he added this salt to his own share without specifying amounts. Moreover, when preparing his departure for Mali, he evidently misbehaved by initially refusing to pay to al-Ḥājj ‘Aly’s family, namely, his wife al-Māsniya, her inheritance share. This incident was sufficiently awkward for the judge of Tishīt to call it a “malicious act,” which potentially could have escalated into a major feud between the parties. It was only after being pressured by the qāḍī that ‘Aly Fāl was compelled to hand over to her 11 mithqāls. It is further apparent that he discriminated against ‘Aly b. Ḥammād’s first wife in disbursing her credit of 30 salt bars not in merchandise, as with all his other debts, but in mere clothing.

But perhaps the most grievous act of all was when he took off on caravan with gold belonging to the inheritors of two of his deceased partners, namely, 186 mithqāls belonging to the estate of al-Ḥājj ‘Aly and

45 mithqāls owed to Baghlīl's inheritors. 'Aly Fāl seems to have financed his last caravan expedition with funds that belonged to the deceased. To borrow Beshara Doumani's words, describing inheritance among kin, 'Aly Fāl seems to have confused his partners' estates with a personal "consolidation strategy."⁵⁹ While he did declare to the qāḍī and others before his departure having such amounts in his possession, by all accounts these should have been transferred to the rightful heirs. Because these funds were folded into his own assets, and 'Aly Fāl failed to keep proper accounting and to distinguish between the liabilities, the amounts became muddled up in the devolution proceedings. While the son of al-Ḥājj 'Aly was handed over the 186 mithqāls by the executor, Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm, with the assistance of the qāḍī, this particular amount was contested by 'Aly Fāl's inheritors who claimed it as their own.

Finally, when 'Abdallāh b. Arwīlī departed from Tīshīt with his brother 'Aly Fāl's estate, the qāḍī and others realized that he had taken some funds by mistake. Worse still, he callously neglected to bestow upon 'Aly Fāl's Tīshīt family, namely, his wife 'Aqīda, their share of the inheritance. So the qāḍī pleaded: "she demanded the remainder of what was due to her to 'Abdallāh b. Arwīlī who did not give her anything. Now that the estate had been delivered to you, listen to her." Whether justice was served in the end is uncertain. But clearly this pattern of misbehavior toward the wives of the deceased seems to have been generalized in this particular case. What is also abundantly clear is that in all of these proceedings the women of the trade network were not consulted. Even in the case of al-Ghazīma, Baghlīl's wife, she was reimbursed her credit to 'Aly b. Ḥammād only after her contract was found among his papers.

A Legal Dispute

By the time all accounts were cleared and all of these transactions had been committed to writing by the qāḍī in his report to the community of Guelmīm, three years had elapsed since Baghlīl's unfortunate passing. Because of the stakes and high profiles of these traders, this multiple inheritance case became the subject of a long-distance legal dispute. The gold that the inheritors of 'Aly Fāl claimed from al-Ḥājj 'Aly's heirs was the main subject of dispute.

The second text in this lengthy parchment is a fatwa issued by the muftī 'Abd al-'Azīz b. al-Shaykh al-Māmī to 'Abdallāh b. Arwīlī, the

⁵⁹ Doumani, "Adjudicating Family: The Islamic Court and Disputes between Kin," 196.

above-mentioned brother of the deceased. This jurist was the son of none other than the nineteenth-century grand muftī Shaykh Muḥammad al-Māmī from the Gibla region (Chapter 6). In his fatwa, the muftī quotes extensively from Mālikī sources to strengthen his invalidation of the qāḍī of Tīshīt’s inheritance report. That this mufti espoused such a conservative position is especially ironic given his father’s stance on accommodating Mālikī law to serve the best interests of the people.

The argument revolves around three points. First, the muftī emphasizes that the leaders of the Muslim community, namely, qāḍīs, should possess a minimum of scholarly qualifications to produce sound judgments – qualifications which, in his opinion, were not demonstrated in this case. Thus, he argued that the report of the qāḍī of Tīshīt was not legally binding because it did not comply with the rules of Mālikī law. Second, he discussed the proper legal procedures to be followed by judges with regard to managing inheritances and devolving property. In particular, he underscored that legal evidence and proper testimony were required by law before disbursements of funds from a deceased’s estate could be effected. Third, he pointed to the infraction committed in this case by a judge who was at the same time a witness and a legal service provider.

The third text is a legal comment on the above fatwa by a muftī named ‘Abdarraḥmān b. Muḥammad al-Lamṭī, “originally from Āsrīr, living in Guelmīm where he resides, where he grew up and where his clan solidarity (*‘aṣabiyatīhi*)” remains. As his name indicates, the jurist was from the above-mentioned scholarly Lamṭa lineage. Based on an array of additional Mālikī references, the muftī in turn criticized the legal methods of the qāḍī of Tīshīt. In particular, he pointed out that as a legal service provider the qāḍī could not act as the second witness (the first being Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm) to the legal proceedings dividing the inheritances of the four Wād Nūn traders. In support of Ibn al-Māmī’s fatwa, he argues that a qāḍī could not serve simultaneously as judge and witness in any given case. What is more, he questioned the impartiality of Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm’s position as a witness, depositor, and manager of the estates of the deceased.

The final document is the shortest and most pointed assessment of the above texts, written by a third muftī, ‘Umaīs b. Ṭaīfūr b. al-Samkī from the town of Tiznīt, located to the southwest of the Wād Nūn. The jurist, about whom I know nothing, bluntly stated that al-Lamṭī’s opinion was “fair except for his attack against the scholar of law (*al-faqīh*),” that is to say, the qāḍī of Tīshīt. Moreover, he asserted that the qāḍī did not issue a fatwa, as the other jurists were insinuating, but merely wrote a legal report pertaining to the estates of the deceased traders. He was consulted

by the estates' executor, Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm, and his actions were taken during dangerous times when these assets were at risk of being pillaged.

There is no way of knowing whether this matter was resolved, and whether these two Tikna families ever managed to resume their collaboration in trade. What seems clear, however, is that Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl withdrew from the Wād Nūn trade network after this event. In fact, it is tempting to date to this particular time his alliance with the house of Illigh, the large market in the Tazerwālt region that competed with Guelmīm for a share of trans-Saharan trade (Chapter 4). In Pascon's reckoning, between 1850 and 1875, Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm became the primary caravan correspondent of the Ḥashim Bū Damī'a that controlled Illigh and their Jewish community.⁶⁰

ISLAMIC INSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINTS

Among the most informative facets of this case are the qāḍī's actions and the muftīs' reactions for what they reveal about the role of legal service providers in structuring the environment in which trade networks operated. There are many examples of how the judge of Tīshīt provided his services to the network. First, he assisted in the logistics of processing the estates of the Wād Nūn traders. Aside from providing counsel and acting as an enforcer, he endeavored to sort out a complex series of financial transactions in writing, reporting with sincerity and to the best of his knowledge. It is noteworthy that the qāḍī was paid 2 $\frac{2}{3}$ mithqāls by the family of 'Aly Fāl for his services, but in turn he paid 5 mithqāls to a scribe who had assisted several of the traders in authenticating handwriting and drafting documents. Second, the network traders relied on the qāḍī to witness various transactions, including property transfers and debt cancellations. Third, the qāḍī and the council of Tīshīt pressured into compliance the fifth network member, Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm, who had decided to shirk on his commitment to the network by abandoning his position as executor. All of these actions illustrate how Islamic legal institutions contributed to enhancing the structure and cohesion of trade network organization.

But there were limits to the ability of legal institutions to enforce the law, and a certain arbitrariness of the legal system. By hiring eloquent muftīs, with the scholarly power and reputation to dismiss the legal actions of qāḍīs, a disgruntled party could purchase the means to change legal outcomes. This was the aim of the Arwīlī family in engaging in

⁶⁰ Pascon, "Commerce."

this long-distance legal contestation. The two muftīs, in this case, reprimanded the actions of a qāḍī all the while being located themselves at great distances from the scene of the action. Moreover, there is an additional element of arbitrariness in the fact that they were asked to judge the actions of the qāḍī based, ostensibly, only on his letter to the community of Guelmīm and communications with the disputants.

As noted, the muftī who issued the fatwa to ‘Abdallah b. Arwīlī was from the Gible region in the southwestern corner of the Trārza. In all probability he was chosen by the Guelmīm family for two reasons. First, he carried authority as a son of the celebrated Saharan jurist of the nineteenth century reputed for his position on legal innovation. Second, he came from a region with a historical relationship with the Tikna. As already noted, the Trārza Emirate paid a yearly tribute to the Tikna confederation from the early eighteenth century. This last factor is an important consideration when assessing Ibn al-Shaykh Māmi’s legal reasoning. It could explain his partiality toward the interests of the Bayrūk alliance, represented by the Arwīlī family, to the detriment of the opposing party. In discrediting the qāḍī’s report the muftī sought to throw into doubt the claim to the 186 mithqāls of the inheritors of al-Ḥājj ‘Aly.

After praising God “who established the laws of the people to dissuade them from oppression and corruption by [their] application,” the muftī proceeded to reprimand the qāḍī. In no uncertain terms, he insinuated that he was an illegitimate practitioner of the law. Referencing Khalīl’s *Mukhtaṣar* on the subject of void judgment,⁶¹ he wrote:

He claims to be the qāḍī responsible for all the divine laws in that city, by arrogance and pretense, and without respect for precedence as is required from the legal [*sharī‘ī*] point of view.

As noted above, the crux of his argument had to do with the lack of due process in the witnessing of the individual claims of the creditors of the deceased. In particular, by accepting the word of those who presented their claims without “the guarantee of others,” he was not following proper procedure. As he stated:

And he [the qāḍī] took [the assets] after their release [from debt] to give them to whomever had a legal right among the beneficiaries, the guardians and the envoys, without fulfilling the requirements and obtaining confirmation from anyone who pretends to be a creditor of the deceased by trade, loan or other means among the things that must be repaid. And he must not give him anything

⁶¹ See Khalīl, *al-Mukhtaṣar*, 191–2.

big or small from the estate of the deceased until he has impartial proof (*al-bayyina ʿādila*). Proof is either the testimony of two trustworthy witnesses or an oath, or the testimony of one trustworthy witness accompanied by an oath that supports it, and the oath of the qāḍi. He must guarantee [these conditions] for he has neglected [the proper procedure] and abused [his position].

Moreover, he cited the Qurʾān (2:282) on the question of witnesses, to criticize the judge for having released the funds of the deceased without the appropriate number of witnesses testifying to the authenticity of their financial claims. Finally, he accused him of partial implication in the case by his acting as both witness and juror. Quoting from Aḥmad b. al-Wansharī's *al-Mi'yār*, he wrote that "if an arbiter judges on it, his judgment is null, void and without effect."⁶² On both accounts, al-Lamṭī, the muftī of Guelmīm, agreed with this legal reasoning.

Here, the legal dispute touched on one of the fundamental problems of Islamic legal institutions elaborated on in the preceding chapter. It has to do with the reliance on oral testimony and not on written documentation as the only valid form of evidence (*al-bayyina*) in Islamic law. How could legal contracts be enforced across long distances when those who authenticated their validity were located in dispersed markets? In accusing the qāḍī of Tīshīt, these muftīs were disingenuously pointing to a problem that clearly was almost insurmountable, especially for those making a living from crossing the Sahara Desert to trade. Compromises in the area of the legal witnessing of written deeds had to be made for any sense of social and economic order to be achieved. For the Islamic precept calling for the reliance on two or more valid witnesses to authenticate legal deeds was simply unachievable in environments characterized by long-distance commerce.

Another problem this case raises is how the death of trade network partners complicated the affairs of all involved. The logistics of inheritance proceedings posed fundamental problems affecting the operation of long-distance trade. As one informant quoted at the beginning of this chapter explains somewhat dramatically, "When they died, all became dispersed for when one of them dies it is over." Since the economic interests of long-distance traders tended to be scattered across the markets where they and their associates operated, calling in all the financial obligations of the deceased could take years, as in this case.

In his pioneering scholarship on the "Great Divergence," Kuran has sought to understand the roots of the underdevelopment of Muslim

⁶² See Al-Wansharī, *Mi'yār al-Mu'rib*.

economies.⁶³ He compellingly argues that several key institutional factors serve to explain what hindered economic growth in the Muslim world leading up to the late modern period. The Islamic inheritance law, which caused the fragmentation of estates, impeded intergenerational transfers of capital and therefore its long-term accumulation. The laws on commerce, by remaining stagnant, further limited the continuity of business organizations by keeping partnerships small and ephemeral. This, and the lack of a concept of legal personality in Islamic law, prevented the formation of complex enterprise such as corporations. Finally, the *waqf* or Islamic endowment system, which was the only institution that remotely resembled a corporate entity such as a formal bank, allowed for perpetual ownership of mainly non-productive entities such as mosques.

The invalidity of written documents as evidence in Islamic legal systems, together with the inefficiency of oral testimony for authenticating transactions, I would submit, may have also posed considerable economic constraints on the development of many early modern Muslim societies or those operating in later periods characterized by early modern economic conditions.⁶⁴ That a written document, such as a contract, carried no legal weight without the oral testimony of those who witnessed the transaction and could swear to its authenticity probably contributed to reducing the size, scope, and endurance of Muslim partnerships and capital accumulation in the long run. As this inheritance case makes clear, however, practitioners of Mālikī law often chose to accommodate legal practice to the needs of the people. For in the case of long-distance traders, it was simply impossible to observe the rules of evidence in such circumstances as the settling of inheritances and commercial accounts because of the dispersal across markets of witnesses to contracts.

Evidently, it was imperative that families of long-distance traders remain informed about their activities. Not only did they have a vested interest in having up-to-date intelligence about their relative's affairs, but they also needed to have strategies in place for the retrieval of their estates in the event of death. Given the precarious nature of trans-Saharan caravanning, the deaths of traders would have been such common occurrences as to engender preemptive procedures to ensure the survival of both families in the diaspora and in the homeland. Here, the use of

⁶³ Kuran, "Islam and Underdevelopment: An Old Puzzle Revisited," "The Provision of Public Goods under Islamic Law," and "The Islamic Commercial Crisis: Institutional Roots of Economic Underdevelopment in the Middle East."

⁶⁴ I develop this argument further in Lydon, "Paper Economy of Faith."

written documentation, the bundles of contracts, became precious sources of information and wealth. Debt contracts represented investments and savings to be realized at future dates. Commercial correspondence and other forms of documentation containing business intelligence became critical for appraising the sum total of the deceased's assets. Therefore, keeping a written record protected the property rights of all concerned. But of course, since such behavior depended on human capital, namely, literacy, wealth, and access to writing paper and scribes, keeping a paper trail was not always possible. Moreover, many traders would not have been so scrupulous as to take precautions to ensure their family's welfare after their passing or inform their wives and other families of the extent of their assets.

The problem of collecting the inheritances of long-distance traders in nineteenth-century western Africa, as elsewhere in world history, was obviously generalized. In this context, the above legal dispute is insightful. It is not surprising, moreover, that Saharan jurists would address these issues in their legal opinions. Bila'mish, the early-eighteenth-century jurist of Shinqīṭi whose opinions are discussed in the preceding chapter, deliberated on the subject. The question was prompted by a woman faced with the classic predicament of safeguarding the property of her deceased husband's estate. Bila'mish's lengthy legal response addressing the problems faced by long-distance widows is worth pondering here.

When this woman's husband died, he left 150 mithqāls' worth of merchandise. However, she had no knowledge about his financial affairs in other locations, including in his "country," where he had a second wife and sons.⁶⁵ She asked the jurist whether she could keep this sum as a reimbursement of the debt owed to her by her deceased husband who had not paid in full her original bridewealth (*ṣadāq*). So the question, as posed, was, "Can the payment of the debt of the wife be postponed until it is known whether the deceased has more debts or not?" Because of the distance of the husband's other home, it would not be practical for her to designate a wakīl to inquire into her share of his estate. But she also was concerned about staving off "the creditors of the deceased" who might present themselves, in order to safeguard her property. Could she delay paying these creditors until she received more information about the extent of her deceased husband's wealth elsewhere?

Bila'mish spent several pages deliberating this case. He wrote, "as for the stranger who died and left some money with which one can pay his

⁶⁵ Bila'mish, *Nawāzil*.

debts . . . on the contrary, the debt must be paid immediately . . . for her right and for his right, because if there is debt it causes harm to the deceased, as it was determined in the hadith.” Citing Khalil’s *Mukhtaṣar*, he emphasized that debtors were obligated to come forward and not wait for their names to be called as they appeared in the deceased’s commercial records. Even though the wife was a creditor in her own right, in the sense that her husband owed her bridewealth money, Bila‘mish’s opinion was that she must wait for the others to collect before taking her share. He also noted that the inheritors in “both countries” had the right to decide to devolve the estate in whichever way they saw fit. So in the end, the jurist ruled against the wife, despite the fact that she arguably was her husband’s first creditor. Such an opinion, which does not surprise given the status of Muslim women’s rights, does raise the question about the qualitative difference between the debts of men and women. It also highlights points raised elsewhere in this chapter about the predicament of diaspora women.

These cases concerning inheritance proceedings bring to light an inherent problem in the practice and the precept of Islam. The first, revealed in both cases, has to do with the requirement, common to all Sunni legal doctrines, that debts had to be paid immediately on the death of a creditor. Both the qāḍī of Tishīt and Bila‘mish cited the Mālikī rule that “the debt is payable immediately upon the death of the guarantor.” The question is, how could God-fearing and law-abiding Muslims who engaged in long-distance trade, the profession of their Prophet and therefore the worthiest of professions, reconcile themselves with their inability, financial or physical, to meet the challenges of paying their dues “immediately” after the passing of a creditor? Moreover, it is noteworthy that while the trade partners in my case study selected an executor of their estates prior to embarking on caravan expeditions, as was ordinarily done in such commercial institutions, they apparently were not in the habit of producing wills. Indeed, in neither of these cases did the deceased exercise his responsibility to write a will, and this despite the insistence on this practice in Mālikī law. As stated in Mālik’s *Muwattaʿa*, in a section enjoining property owners to write their wills, “It is the duty of a Muslim man who has something to be given as a bequest not to spend two nights without writing a will about it.”⁶⁶

But these problems aside, it must be recognized to what extent a trade network such as that operated by the Tikna and their associates was

⁶⁶ See Mālik b. Anas, *al-Muwattaʿa*, 300–4 (Book 37.1.1 on wills and testaments).

reliant on the use of paperwork in other ways. Contracts, written and witnessed, functioned not simply as records of partnership agreements or the issuance of credit. Built into the contract was the concept that divine power commanded that what was agreed upon in *principle* be turned into *practice* “by force and by law.” The contracting parties placed their trust in God, who was considered the ultimate enforcer. These pieces of paper also supported myriad financial tools, such as money orders, while debt contracts swapped among trade partners further functioned as means of exchange, in effect like cash facilitating transaction liquidity. Receiving payment in the form of a debt contract also had the advantage of being safer for travel in lieu of carrying conspicuous cash. Moreover, as noted above, keeping documents of transactions was an insurance mechanism to secure property in the eventuality of death, which obviously loomed in the daily horizon of trans-Saharan traders, as it most certainly did in the world of early modern traders elsewhere. When Wād Nūn traders left town on a mission, as in the case examined above, they handed over their contracts and paperwork to their colleagues for safekeeping and business management. They could build relationships of trust when recording their transactions in writing and with trusted witnesses to seal their deals. Contracts and correspondence, treasured and preserved as the rudimentary tools in their paper economy of faith, were the records upon which hinged their extensive commercial activities.

CONCLUSION

The Wād Nūn trade network was an efficient organization facilitating trans-Saharan commerce. Whether they were Tikna, Jewish, or Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ, these traders belonged to a commercial coalition. They frequented or expedited trade to the same distant markets where many settled as a community. When one member was on the trail, others watched over his interests, paying debts on his behalf and caring for families and estates. Managing partners' affairs in their absence was arguably a network member's most important responsibility. However, members' wives also were engaged in the business of holding the fort while their husbands were on the trail. This institutional support therefore offered the tremendous advantage of mobility. Traders collaborated by receiving and extending credit in the form of salt bars, gold and silver mithqāls, and cloth, and they accepted entrustments or deposits of goods for safekeeping. If one of them died, his partners were accountable for his property. As this case study suggests, members of a network relied, and

indeed depended, on one another to share commercial risks and information, thereby reducing the cost of transacting in foreign lands.

But as several elements of this case study illustrate, there were limits to collaborative behavior when serious problems unfolded. Dire situations, such as those that prevailed in mid-nineteenth-century Tishit, could test network solidarity, and members of a coalition could be tempted not to live up to their end of the bargain by shirking on their commitments. While, as Bila'mish conceded, Muslims knew the rules and could sort things out on their own, they depended on legal institutions as a last resort. Only if difficulty or contestation arose were transactions "executed in front of the judge." While I have emphasized the role of legal service providers in maintaining law and order in the Sahara, such institutional support varied in terms of its effectiveness. Moreover, as the above legal dispute demonstrates, the rulings of qādis could be overturned by muftīs hired to provide alternative legal opinions. But even Wād Nūn traders such as the Tikna sometimes chose to ignore legal rulings.

This chapter makes the following related points. First, I concur with scholars, such as Cohen, Greif, and Curtin, that in situations of market uncertainty and information asymmetry, access to regular sources of credit and market information for the purposes of long-distance trade was far easier for traders who organized themselves in social institutions such as trade networks. Belonging to a group of traders who trusted one another and collaborated in this risky and complex business was one of the most effective ways to be commercially successful. Network members managed the commitment problem through exchanges of information, peer pressure, and a reputation mechanism that created economic disincentives to cheat fellow partners. While members of a trade network tended to have common business ethics and behavioral norms that created informal constraints on dishonest actions, they also relied on the authority of Muslim scholars as arbiters in disputes and enforcers of contractual agreements (written or oral, with witnesses). It was the reliance of traders on the religious establishment that I suggest has been overlooked in the literature on the organization of early modern long-distance trade. For literate Muslim and Jewish communities, religion provided a legal structure, and religious scholars (who often were traders themselves) ensured that it was upheld. Their roles in matters of critical importance to commercial families, such as inheritance proceedings, cannot be underestimated. They assisted in the application of the Islamic rules of inheritance, including such stipulations that an individual's debts be immediately paid after death.

The subject of capital transfers and the distribution of property rights that takes place upon a trader's death is an area that deserves more attention on the part of historians of commerce. In the absence of corporate structures and because of the Islamic laws on partnerships, the death of a partner, for all intents and purposes, was also the end of a structural component of a trade network. Because of the legal implications, therefore, Muslim trade networks tended to be fragile and ephemeral, as Kuran has underscored, and Curtin recognized but for other reasons.⁶⁷ The Wād Nūn trade network never recovered from the loss of so many partners in Tishīt, and aside from Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl, who remained, no Tikna ever resided there again. But the Wād Nūn network would survive into the twentieth century after which it was dissolved in the context of the French colonial economy.

Second, it is equally important to recognize the significance of operating within a paper economy. Purchasing paper was a non-negligible transaction cost for members of the Wād Nūn network. As argued above, by committing to writing their transactions and contracts, traders could solve the commitment problem that otherwise inhibited commerce. Paper therefore enabled the building of relationships of trust. Literacy and access to a stable paper supply to keep records, communicate information, and transfer funds across long distances was fundamental to sustaining efficacious and far-flung trade network operations. For both Jewish and Muslim traders, their literacy enhanced network externality, allowing for efficient accounting, far-reaching communication, and legal transparency to enforce sanctions. But aside from the work of Diadié Haïdara for late-nineteenth-century Timbuktu, and the studies of Schroeter and Abitbol, the written sources of Maghribi Jews engaged in trans-Saharan trade remain to be mined.

Third, I argue that trade networks were not as hermetic as generally believed. Indeed, it is important to recognize, as Markovits has, to what extent traders of a network tapped into the economic and symbolic capital of other trade networks across markets. In the case of the Wād Nūn network, among the financiers were Jewish families, and marriage partners included Māsna women. Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl was himself married to one of the most successful female entrepreneurs in the living memory of Tishīt, Fāṭima Mint Seri Niaba. Jewish traders, such as Sha-lūm living in Guelmīm, banned from western African markets for so long,

⁶⁷ Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade*; Kuran, "Islamic," 415.

had little choice but to collaborate with members of an established Muslim trade network.

Finally, as I have suggested, there were limits to cooperative behavior among coalition members. Trade networks have mainly been understood in terms of idealized models. These social institutions deserve to be studied in action, and particularly in times of crises that test the limits of collaboration in long-distance trade.

On Trans-Saharan Trails

Praise be to God, the one who imposed trustworthiness (*amāna*) between people and forbade all forms of betrayal.¹ One cannot gain wealth if one does not have trust in people (*lā māl li-man lā thiqa lahu bi al-nās*).²

Understanding how the challenging feat was realized of conducting trans-Saharan caravan trade across perilously arid lands not ruled by a unifying state or regulated by a common currency is the principal aim of this book. By focusing on the institutional mechanisms that facilitated long-distance trade, namely, the place of the law, religion, and literacy, on the one hand, and trade network organizing, on the other, I hope to have come closer to this goal. The nineteenth century witnessed an increased volume of caravan traffic now more directly interconnected with European maritime trade. The proliferation of firearms and the increased availability of writing paper in this period were two factors that had a significant impact on the organization of camelback commerce. But aside from these developments, one question remains largely unanswered, namely, how commercial and legal institutions and practices may have been transformed in the course of time.

On the eve of the colonial period where this study ends, dramatic changes in the lives of long-distance traders were about to unfold. Before the end of the nineteenth century, some Wād Nūn merchants were forgoing the arduous Saharan crossings by embarking on European ships to transport goods, including horses, from Al-Ṣawīra to Ndar and back. Others would eventually move into the Senegalese peanut basin to lend their camels to transportation. Still others abandoned their itinerant

¹ Fatwa issued by Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Sbā'ī on entrusted trade goods (MA1), Library Muḥammad Wuld Aḥamdī (Tishīt). See Chapter 6 for a discussion of this fatwa.

² Interview with of 'Abdarrahmān Wuld Muḥammad al-Ḥanshī in Shinqīṭi (10/01/97).

lifestyles for the profession of wholesale and retail merchants in trading posts and general stores that sprang up in the wake of the French conquest of the western African interior.³ Certainly, the age of the telegraph modified the format and speed of financial transfers and distant communications. This, and the imposition of colonial currencies, including paper money, caused Saharan jurists to ponder the validity of these new media in the eyes of Islam. In time, the colonial economy would lead to the replacement of the camel by the truck for regional transportation, but this did not put an end to regular trans-Saharan traffic, which continued into the second half of the twentieth century. Today caravans still supply “landlocked” oasis towns, and the yearly salt caravans from Timbuktu to Tawdenni continue as of old, mainly for lack of roads. But further research is needed in order to ascertain how colonial rule changed the nature of Saharan trade.

The profession of the long-distance trader who transported goods from one end of the Sahara Desert to the other was the domain of certain groups that specialized in international commerce. Nineteenth-century caravan trade was facilitated by the existence of networks of traders who benefited from mutual relationships of collaboration and trust. The Tikna, the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ, and the Jews of Guelmīm then formed a dynamic trade network based, in large part, on a territorial identification with the Wād Nūn region. Especially in the case of the first two groups, they became professional caravaners navigating comfortably among often widely divergent cultural environments, while their Jewish partners performed for the most part as caravan investors. These traders dealt with European merchants on the Atlantic coast and Saharan oasis-dwellers and western African producers and consumers in the interior. They relied on their empirical knowledge of international trade, their understanding of local customs, and their good relations with regional polities. To circumnavigate the pitfalls of conducting caravans across far-flung political, economic, and cultural spaces, they developed institutional strategies to protect their interests while trading abroad or ensuring the successful mission of their agents.

Trade network members collaborated in ventures by disseminating information, extending and receiving credit, and sharing in the commercial risks and perils of hazardous crossings. By working within a

³ For a discussion of trans-Saharan trade in the colonial period, see Lydon, “On Trans-Saharan Trails: Trade Networks and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Western Africa, 1840s–1930s” (unpublished dissertation, Michigan State University, 2000), chaps. 6 and 7.

common commercial culture, with similar legal, ethical, and business norms, they reduced their transaction costs and overcame problems of market uncertainty and information asymmetry. In the [preceding chapter](#), I examined how network traders behaved in the face of extreme adversity. That they relied on one another for the success of their commercial businesses, in good times and in bad, during their lives and after a partner's death, is evidenced in the remarkable legal report documenting the sequence of events that unfolded in mid-nineteenth-century Tishit. Community pressure and the assistance of legal service providers gave structure to such commercial institutions, but sometimes this setup was insufficient to fully control opportunistic behavior.

Another insight of this book, afforded by the documentary evidence, is the participation of women in long-distance trade. Trade network women were not simply vessels of network reproduction. They performed as immobile partners relying on contracted intermediaries, both hired agents and kin, to trade via proxy. Some widows even carried on their husbands' businesses. Similar to the families engaged in international maritime trade, when husbands periodically sailed to distant markets, Saharan women managed affairs during the long absences of their men. Local Saharan women, who also participated in trade through the paper economy, were considerably less subjugated than Wād Nūn women, who typically were secluded and often were under the legal guardianship of trade network members when their husbands were away on caravan. Some Saharan women, such as the Māsna, physically participated in caravan trade as professional caravaners in their own right. These conclusions should cause historians to reconsider the androcentric paradigm that has led to distorted representations of a male-dominated long-distance trading profession.

ORALITY AND TRADE NETWORK HISTORY

Writing trans-Saharan history in an area once described by the nineteenth-century governor of Senegal as “the big blank space” posed unusual challenges.⁴ Not only did it require developing a familiarity with a vast terrain, it also was necessary to fill the informational gaps in this understudied region in order to connect the histories of dispersed communities. An intimate understanding of family histories, derived from extensive interviews, on the one hand, and access to trade records written in Arabic

⁴ Faidherbe, “Renseignements,” 1023.

and collected from private sources, on the other, sets this study apart from those of other scholars who have studied trans-Saharan trade. While scholars such as Diadié Haïdara, Pascon, Naïmi, Hermann, and Hunwick have made important contributions by translating trans-Saharan trade records, few, with the exception of Pascon for Morocco, Bjørkelo for the Sudan, and Saied for Libya, have combined an analysis of these sources with oral interviews to document traders' identities and historical itineraries.

When laying out in Chapter 1 the full panoply of sources upon which I relied to reconstruct this history, I placed emphasis on the importance of orality for bringing to life all forms of historical evidence. Oral sources are fundamental means to document trade network history, especially from the nineteenth century onward. Because these institutions have tended to work betwixt and between states and national boundaries, orality is often the sole means by which to map out traders' trajectories and to get a sense of what motivated the engagement of families in far-flung migrations. Genealogical analysis is essential for dating both migrations and correspondence. Moreover, to make sense of a diaspora as a whole, beyond the limited view afforded by studying a single trade network node, the researcher necessarily has to engage in transnational research guided by targeted informants. Bringing the written word to the elder, who could decipher foreign and obsolete vocabulary, identify names, and explain contemporaneous legal, social, and economic practices, was equally integral to my methodological approach. Even colonial sources would have made less sense without the interpretations of informants. Concurrently, I have argued for an appreciation of the oral dimensions of written documents, from the dialogic nature of legal texts to the oral sources that originally framed the colonial record. In other words, orality permeated the process of a historical investigation bent on listening to a multiplicity of voices, both spoken and embedded in texts.

The unavailability of private records is often the greatest challenge to documenting long-distance trade. Thankfully for the historian of the Sahara, many family archives were preserved for posterity, which is as much an indication of the symbolic value of written documents in Muslim societies as it is of the faith they placed in paperwork for securing property rights. I found documentation in the ruins of Wād Nūn traders' homes, in the hands of the families who held onto old letters as curios, and in the libraries of notables with significant archival collections. It was equally important not to tear away these original sources from the context of the very families whose ancestors they documented.

Investigating private family libraries, and even the national archives of Mauritania for that matter, was not unlike what Goitein explained about the nature of doing research in the Cairo Geniza where “everything is topsy-turvy.”⁵ I literally waded through piles and bundles of ad hoc paperwork in search of names, subjects, currencies, contracts, and legal discussions about commerce. Just as in Goitein’s collections, where “the largest and most valuable group of Geniza documents is made up of court depositions,” a large section of Saharan archives is composed of legal sources, namely, reference manuals, fatwas, and contracts.⁶ Surely, there is an institutional explanation for the primacy placed on formal adjudication in early modern trade. Yet historians of long-distance trade often overlook this type of evidence. Even Greif claims that “few documents indicate that commercial disputes between merchants and agents were brought before a court, and the operation of the court in these cases seems to have been expensive and time-consuming,” although Goitein’s translations, supplying much of Greif’s data, tell a different story altogether.⁷

ON CONTRACTING TRUST

Trust was fundamental to the success of trade across dispersed markets. The saying quoted above, which stresses that trust is a prerequisite to economic gain, was the motto of a nineteenth-century caravan trader of Shinqīṭi. But precisely how does one define what constituted the bonds of trust, and what are the elements contributing to a trader’s trustworthiness? Indeed, how was trust maintained across dispersed markets where the temptation to cheat a partner may have existed?

Throughout this study I have emphasized how the paper economy enhanced long-distance trade. I have argued that access to literacy, for the sake of accounting and accountability, was a fundamental feature in the world of nineteenth-century trans-Saharan traders. Literacy and writing paper made it possible for them to work in a wide geographic area, through the use of contracts and correspondence. Financial tools, such as debt-swapping and traveler’s checks, enabled many to travel in safety, and others to engage in virtual financial transfers. The reliance on the paper economy, structured by Islamic legal practice, gave traders a comparative advantage to engage in multi-party and multi-local business operations. Trust, embedded in religious faith, promoted cooperative behavior. This

⁵ Goitein, *Mediterranean*, I, 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷ Greif, *Institutions*, 63.

religious environment prevailed even between Muslims and Jews, who not only enjoyed similar literary and legal traditions, but also shared a trust in God as fellow “people of the book.” It is worth noting that the Arabic word for trustworthiness (*amāna*) is of the same root as the sacred pronouncement of divine peace (*amīn*).

Reflecting on the case of an early-thirteenth-century traveler who agreed to settle a debt in London based on a written contract on behalf of a fellow Genoese, Greif notes that many “merchants trusted agents to handle their affairs abroad, even without legal contracts.”⁸ The same was true in the nineteenth-century world of trans-Saharan traders, especially when traders were so closely related after years of repeated transactions as to not require the drafting of contracts for certain business deals. However, as argued in the two preceding chapters, the act of recording transactions served multiple functions. The creation of a written document, drafted in God’s presence and with faith-abiding witnesses who could authenticate the agreement, served as an informal enforcement mechanism to ensure the commitment and accountability of contracting parties. These documents also represented proof of transactions for the inheriting families and other debtors with claims on any given trader’s estate. However, many traders did not participate in the paper economy for lack of literacy skills or the resources to hire scribes.

In the preceding chapters, I have argued that written documentation and literacy “cemented trust” between contracting parties. Yet the bonds of trust would have developed gradually, after repeated exchanges. When examining the trust prevailing between agent and principal, between itinerant trader and sedentary merchant, it may be useful to think about concentric circles of trust and trustworthiness. In the outer circles, written contracts witnessed by third parties could cement trust after repeated transactions, while at the core of the inner circle, a simple handshake symbolized absolute trust between parties who had previously achieved a business friendship based on years of interaction. Using contracts, therefore, enabled traders to cement trust in the initial stages of a relationship. But clearly all parties had a vested interest in interacting in a paper economy not just for the sake of ensuring transparency, but also for the purposes of creating records for posterity.

The “paper economy of faith” was therefore a significant feature of trans-Saharan trade. Paper, which was imported from afar became more

⁸ Ibid., 3.

affordable and increasingly available in the nineteenth century, and it remained a necessary transaction cost in far-flung long-distance trade. Paperwork functioned both as record and reminder note. Agency contracts were proof of the agency representation of the bearer of the document to be presented to a third party for completion of a transaction. The third party had to trust that such a written statement, authorizing collection or payment of an inheritance or a debt, for instance, was not a forgery. There would have been no way to verify the claim across distant markets, except through the time-consuming and expensive dispatching of couriers. By working within the institutional environment of a trade network, members had knowledge of the handwriting of their business associates or their scribes, and were familiar with their styles or signatures, which resolved the problem of document authentication. These considerations, it is hoped, will cause historians to consider how literacy and writing paper enhanced commercial institutions.

ISLAMIC LAW AND THE ORGANIZATION OF TRADE

As discussed throughout this book, nineteenth-century trans-Saharan trade is comparable to the organization of trade in early modern Europe and North Africa. But by pointing to the similarities of the *modi operandi* of nineteenth-century caravaners and early modern traders, I do not mean to imply that the contractual world of Muslim or Jewish traders changed little across the centuries. In the Sahara no state ruled supreme, although several polities, such as emirates, did govern in regional contexts. While powerful chiefs, such as Shaykh Bayrūk and his sons, ensured certain levels of security by maintaining diplomatic relationships with local leaders throughout western Africa, their power rested solely on their reputations, their ability to exclude merchants from the Guelmīm market, and their limited military might to inflict violence in its vicinity.

In such a context, Islamic institutions provided a semblance of political, social, and economic order. While temporal polities imposed their authorities, exacting tribute and ruling through violence, legal institutions in nineteenth-century Sahara were the responsibility of learned Muslim men who performed as legal service providers, while often themselves participating in caravan trade. By issuing rulings and legal opinions, qāḍīs and muftīs supplied an institutional framework. In cases of commercial disputes, a learned legal expert could be called upon to arbitrate. And so members of the Wād Nūn trade network, for example, could count on the services of the qāḍī of Tīshīt to assist in the complicated task of sorting out

multiple inheritances. At the same time, Saharan legal service providers sanctioned certain transactions that constituted “technical usury,” in order to facilitate the credit market so vital to trade. They also were prepared to overlook certain rules, such as the requirement to consult the witnesses in order to authenticate contracts, when the circumstances of long-distance trade did not lend themselves to a strict obedience to Islamic law. But it is important to recognize, as seen in Chapter 6, that Mālikī law was not the only referent that guided exchange, since local customs defined both Islamic practice and normative behavior.

There were, of course, limits to the system. It could be jeopardized by private interests, as seen in the inheritance case. Moreover, while Islamic institutions favored efficiencies in the organization of long-distance trade, certain constraints hampered the formation of large-scale merchant enterprise. As I have suggested, a fundamental restriction in the Islamic legal system is the fact that written documents were not vested with legal standing. The written record of such transactions, properly witnessed and dated, was simply a record and not official proof of a transaction, since it was the witnessing process that validated the agreement. In other words, oral testimony was paramount and documents on paper did not prove anything in the eyes of the law unless the contracting parties and their witnesses were present. This impediment complicated the process of engaging in long-distance litigation. Arguably, it is because of this constraint that Muslim economies could never expand beyond the familial or move in the direction of impersonal exchange.

THE VITAL ROLE OF CREDIT

Like merchant ships in the early modern period, caravans were joint ventures involving the orchestrated participation of multiple agents, investors, caravan professionals, and enslaved laborers, as well as sedentary family members. The circulation of credit was vital to the organization of caravan trade. The most efficient way to access regular sources of credit was for traders to organize a trade network where, based on reputation mechanisms, information sharing, and reciprocity, they could establish a highly personalized financial market. The centrality of credit arrangements for financing caravans involved not just receiving loans but also finding trustworthy partners to extend credit. Indeed, I have argued that extending credit was part of an accumulation mechanism to store wealth in contexts of market uncertainty and political instability and in the absence of formal banking institutions. Receiving credit was a way

to access capital, while extending it was a means to secure wealth by transferring it temporarily to trustworthy partners.

That network members were traders, landlords, brokers, and bankers simultaneously is also highlighted in the inheritance case. Traders were “entrusted” with the goods of others, drafting entrustment contracts in the process. These arrangements were akin to receiving bank deposits, or holdings, redeemable at a future date. Since settled traders often lived in stone houses, almost like bank vaults to the average nomad, placing goods on deposit in his or her house was considerably safer than the alternative. While it was essential to trade, storage was also a risky business, especially in times of heightened insecurity, as in the case of mid-nineteenth-century Tīshīt. Accumulated capital needed to be dispersed in various houses, and thereby hidden from threatening nomadic pirates ready to descend on a town. So traders needed to strategize when making deposits by diversifying their portfolios of entrustments.

NETWORKS OF TRADE NETWORKS

Trade networks generally have been studied in isolation from their host societies. A major focus in the literature is how these merchant communities maintained their cultural distinctiveness and connections with their homelands. Consequently, trade networks tend to be portrayed as insular institutions disconnected from the social and cultural environments in which they operated. Markovits recently overturned this simplistic view when discussing the interlocking dependencies among trade networks. This study has shown that, in the Wād Nūn case, traders developed ties and cultivated their reputations with other trade networks, as well as with local communities. The most noteworthy of these relationships was the partnering of Jews and Muslims within a single trade network. Such interfaith trade had been ongoing for centuries. Through their separate Jewish associates with extensive international relations, the Jews of Guelmīm provided vital access to European merchandise entering the port of Al-Ṣawīra. Jewish traders, who had not been welcomed in the Sahara or in key markets such as Timbuktu since the fifteenth-century pogrom, had little choice but to partner with Muslim intermediaries.

Wād Nūn traders also developed close ties with groups in the localities where they came to settle. Through marriage arrangements in Tīshīt, they tapped into the Māsna trade network with its southern connections. Both the Tikna and the Awlād Bū al-Sibā‘ also depended on local groups as allies, customers, suppliers of camels, salt, dates, and real estate, as well as

colleagues on caravan expeditions. They joined forces with regional caravans while developing relationships with locals. In Senegal, they hired and depended on Wolof workers, and dealt with French and métis wholesalers. Moreover, they sometimes traded with Moroccan merchants of Fez, and later with Lebanese and Syrian storekeepers who had settled in Senegal since the late nineteenth century. In Nioro, a market that gained importance in the last decades of the nineteenth century, they cooperated in business with the Fulbe, the Bamana, and the Soninké. Similarly, in Timbuktu, Wād Nūn traders dealt with the Songhay, the Kunta, the Berābīsh, the Tajakānit, and the Ṭūāreg.

LONG-DISTANCE TRADE AND CULTURAL DIFFUSION

Like long-distance traders the world over, caravaners were largely responsible for the distribution of foreign commodities. They exported gold dust, ivory, and ostrich feathers destined for European markets, and western African cloth and spices in demand in northern Africa. In exchange they imported goods such as sugar, tea, calicoes, and firearms. They also transported Moroccan luxury goods, including teapots and rugs, and Islamic supplies such as books and chaplets, to western African markets. This exchange was a dynamic process, as cultural, religious, intellectual, and philosophical currents circulated in all directions along caravan trails. As Bovill noted decades ago in his first book on caravan trade, "The trans-Saharan trade wove ties of blood and culture between the peoples north and south of the desert."⁹ By transporting and distributing new products, traders were invariably spreading new concepts, and thereby influencing consumer behavior and consumption patterns. That long-distance traders were on the cutting edge of such cultural permutations may be stating the obvious. Yet it is the very function of traders as vectors of cultural change that tends to be overlooked.

The experience of the Wād Nūn traders reveals both subtle and obvious patterns of cultural diffusion. One of the most notable cultural trademarks of the Tikna in the diaspora, for example, was their food. Tikna culinary traditions were particularly remarkable among Saharans, who had limited gastronomical variety. Tikna women distinguished themselves with their elaborate dishes, including couscous and sweet pastries, which diffused into western Africa. They also brought the

⁹ Bovill, *Caravans*, preface.

tradition of the Moroccan *tājīn*, or stir-fry, which supposedly people “had never heard of before.”¹⁰ Many local elders described how the dishes produced in Tikna kitchens were held in fascination. The concept of the *tājīn* quickly spread among Saharans, who would develop their own version that, to the international palate, was less enticing (such as the *kibda wa thirwa tājīn*, or camel hump and kidney stir-fry). Eventually, *tājīn* would come to designate any type of snack, including tea-time peanuts and biscuits.

Another more remarkable transformation of cultural behavior was the adoption of tea drinking. That Wād Nūn caravaners were largely responsible for introducing into western Africa the habit of drinking green tea is no small accomplishment considering that today it is a daily ritual in Senegal and Mauritania, as well as in many parts of Mali and southern Morocco. Along with green tea and sugar, Wād Nūn trans-Saharan traders imported tea-drinking utensils made in Morocco based on British designs, which were then reproduced by local blacksmiths. They also imported the small glasses in which tea was served, since glass was not locally manufactured. Only gradually did tea drinking spread to the masses, and so by the second half of the twentieth century a majority of Senegalese and Mauritanian households prepared tea at least twice daily. The Saharan tea-drinking tradition was an almost exact science. It dictated a finite number of glasses per guest, and a precise amount of water and sugar per teapot. Unlike their Moroccan northern neighbors, the Tikna and the Awlād Bū al-Sibā‘ prepared their tea in a highly condensed form, using fresh mint sparingly, and they served it in small shot glasses. They created the custom of serving three conventional glasses of tea (the first more bitter, then the sweet last) per sitting. This ritual was emulated elsewhere in western Africa. It is important to note that the green tea zone was originally Saharan in scope, for North Africans, including Moroccans, took to drinking black and red tea. This fascinating topic certainly deserves further research.

Cultural exchange on trans-Saharan trails was a two-way process. Naturally, Wād Nūn traders residing in western African markets returned to the homeland bearing new cultural traditions, as well as objects and commodities. Gastronomical influences also traveled northward to influence northern African cuisine. Much of this cultural diffusion was due to the fact that a great number of enslaved western African women, destined to supply the Moroccan market, were put to work in kitchens as

¹⁰ Interview in Nouakchott with Maimūna mint Aḥmad Targa (05/21/97).

domestic cooks.¹¹ The Tikna in particular adopted western African cultural traits to the point that these would significantly shape their own culture. Some such influences were driven by long-distance stylistic borrowings. One obvious example is the adoption of the western African woven indigo-dyed cotton cloth that became the vestimentary trademark of the so-called blue men of the Wād Nūn and the greater western Saharan region. It also became the prized cloth for turbans and to dress women in “traditional” garb at weddings. Another shared tradition, spread by way of caravans, is the use of the umbrella in regal ceremonies practiced from northern Nigeria to Morocco. Moreover, popular fashions, such as the wearing of red Fez caps or Moroccan clothing, were disseminated from the north to the west. Other artistic borrowings from both sides of, and across, the Sahara have to do with aesthetics and design, to say nothing of intellectual exchanges and the circulation of technological knowledge.

But cultural diffusion was not limited to changes in consumerism and identity markers. Wād Nūn traders acquired proficiency in western African languages such as Songhay, Bamanakan, and Wolof. Their cultural immersion entailed linguistic borrowings the extent of which cannot be discussed here. It also engendered the adoption of certain western African institutions, especially in the area of music, including most notably the adoption of griots, or musicians who were bards and custodians of oral history. In the 1810s, a French “white slave” who capsized on the Atlantic coast and was ransomed by Shaykh Bayrūk, provided a rare account of the Tikna chief.¹² His description of the dark-skinned chief’s clothing made of indigo-blue cloth, as well as the musical performances of western African dancers in his home, point to the cultural markers that linked African societies across the Sahara.¹³ Several decades later, the English surgeon Davidson described the arrival in Bayrūk’s house of a group of musicians and performers who had traveled from Timbuktu to entertain in the chief’s home.¹⁴ Such exchanges, alongside the long history of trans-Saharan slave trade to northwestern Africa, place the Gnāwa musical ensembles of present-day Morocco in context. The prevalence of western African diasporas in northern Africa, resulting from the slave trade but also from voluntary migrations, obviously sets such elements of cultural diffusion in an African continental perspective.

¹¹ Ennaji, *Soldats*, discusses the predilection of Moroccan slave masters for young women of certain ethnic groups as cooks.

¹² Cochelet, *Naufrage*, 239–41 and 267.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 239–40, 336.

¹⁴ Davidson, *Notes*, 109–10.

The Sahara was an active space within and across which exchanges in peoples, ideas, foods, and things took place. One only has to look at photographs of the houses of Ghât and those of Tîshît or Shinqîti, or compare the adobe-walled structures of Jenne with those of Guelmîm, to appreciate the extensive circulation of architectural design and engineering. The works of Du Puigaudeau and Prussin go a long way toward uncovering the shared cultural and artistic traditions that radiated in all directions from Saharan crossroads. Trans-Saharan trade, therefore, was not only about exchanges in merchandise and the human commodity, it also went hand in hand with “the exchange of ideas, more important for the development of civilizations than the simple exchange of merchandise,” as recognized early on by French colonial ethnographer Delafosse.¹⁵ In this regard, caravans activated information flows while traders performed as cultural ambassadors on the cutting edge of articulating social change.

BRIDGING THE AFRICAN DIVIDE

When considering trans-Saharan history, it is easy to see that the forced and voluntary migrations of Africans across the desert created cultural, political, and economic ties that united African societies north, south, and across Saharan regions. The ramifications of the interactions and interdependencies of Africans throughout the region are multifaceted and widespread. They involve demographic, political, and economic exchanges, as well as cultural borrowings. Moreover, trans-Saharan trade was indeed part of an international trade system connected to, and at times dependent on, the Atlantic world. To be sure, the economic and cultural history of North Africa is inextricably linked, through centuries of trans-Saharan trade, with that of western African societies.

This study began by embracing a transcontinental approach to African history. But as Miège acknowledged several decades ago, which is still true today, “the contacts between Morocco and West Africa constitute one of the most confused areas in the history of a region where great shadows are separated by spots of light.”¹⁶ While the Sahara and camel caravans still captivate Western and Eastern popular audiences, the region continues to attract too few scholars. This historical reconstruction of the commercial itineraries of caravaning communities was made possible through extensive travel. In treating this whole area as one united by the Sahara Desert, this book has sought to transcend the divide that has

¹⁵ Delafosse, “Relations,” 158.

¹⁶ Miège, *Maroc*, I, 146.

traditionally characterized the study of Africa. It is an attempt to move the historiography in a new direction away from the conventional descriptions of caravans of gold and closer to an understanding of the internal dynamics of trans-Saharan trade. It is hoped that our knowledge about migration patterns and cross-cultural exchange in western Africa will be greatly improved when more scholars tackle history transnationally by following in the trails of their historical subjects.

Appendix 1

NINETEENTH-CENTURY EVENTS AND WESTERN SAHARAN TRADE

Events	Date	Remarks
Ṭuāreg–Fulbe War; beginning of the jihad of Aḥmad Lobbo I	1233/1817–18	According to the Walāta Chronicle, combat between these two groups was unheard of. Aḥmad Lobbo I starts his jihad and founds the Caliphate of Masina
Ṭuāreg–Awlād Dlīm War	1240/1824–5	This war suspended caravan traffic from Tuwāt to Timbuktu for an entire year. ^a Price inflation in Walāta.
Attack on Tīshīt by the Awlād Dlīm	1241/1825–6	Trade with the north was disrupted as a result of the dozens of men killed and the raids on slaves and camels. ^b
Drought	1249/1833–4	Famine conditions prevailed in Walāta and beyond. The price of a <i>mudd</i> of millet (approx. 4 kg) there was worth one salt bar. ^c
Māsna and Awlād Billa War in Tīshīt	1253–67/1837–51	This war, which raged for 13 years, caused most of the Awlād Billa to leave Tīshīt and found the nearby oasis of ‘Aghrayjīt.
Ransacking of Walāta	1260/1844–5	The Awlād Nāsir pillaged Walāta, destroyed close to one hundred houses, and occupied the oasis for five months.
Beginning of Shaykh ‘Umar Tāl’s jihad	1268/1852	This jihad started in Dingiray and mobilized the region of Futa Toro. The Saharan market of Tindūf is founded.

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Events	Date	Remarks
Tajakānit Civil War	1269/1853	Communication between Tindūf and Timbuktu was curtailed. The annual <i>akābār</i> from Morocco did not arrive that year. ^d
War between Trārza and the French	1271/1854–5	The emir Muḥammad b. Laḥbīb fought the French in Senegal under General Faidherbe.
Heightened insecurity and price inflation	1272/1855–6	Famine conditions in Tishīt occurred when the salt bar reached 1/3 <i>mudd</i> of Tishīt (or about 2 kg of millet). ^e
Various wars in and around Tishīt; incursion of the people of Futa Toro against the Awlād al- Nāṣir and the Tinwajiwu	1273/1856–7	Long-distance trade was disrupted.
The people of Futa Toro attacked the Awlād Mbārak	1274/1857–8	They seized their women and children. The Awlād Mbārak, known for their raiding activities, were defeated the following year by the Laghlāl. That year, caravaners of Tishīt helped build a fortified wall to protect Nioro.
Umarian army in Nioro	1275/1858–9	At the end of that Hijri year, al-Ḥājj ‘Umar Tāl occupied Nioro. Both the Sultan of Morocco and the Tikna chief of Guelmīm, Shaykh Bayrūk, passed on.
Several raids in the Ḥawḍ	1276/1859–60	The Laghlāl attacked the Mashdhūf, causing over 100 deaths. Trade is disrupted.
Al-Ḥājj ‘Umar Tāl victory	1277/1860–1	Umarian army entered the markets of Segu and later Sansanding.
Large raid by the Mashdhūf on the Tikna and the Awlād Dīm	1278/1861–2	This raid resulted in over 600 deaths. ^f Al-Ḥājj ‘Umar occupied Hamdullahi, the capital of the Masina Caliphate, killing its ruler, Aḥmad III.
Awlād Bū al-Sibā‘ war against the Kunta	1281–2/1864–6	The people of the north (Awlād Bū al-Sibā‘, Tikna, Awlād Dīm, and Rgaybāt) waged war in and to the north of the Adrār region. Shaykh Sīdī Muḥammad al-Kuntī (al-Saghīr), and several hundred men, perished.

Events	Date	Remarks
Regional famine	1282/1865–5	Famine coincided with a locust invasion and a cattle epidemic affecting a large area from Shinqīti to Timbuktu and beyond.
Cholera	1285/1868	Reported to have traveled into western Africa, including Senegal, by way of caravans from Morocco. ^g
Regional smallpox epidemic	1286/1869–70	Over one hundred victims in Tishīt alone.
Series of raids in the Hawḍ and the Azawād	1288/1871–2	Large-scale raids between the Ṭuāreg and the Mashdhūf. Four thousand camels were seized in the Azawād region.
Major attack by Aḥmadu al-Kabīr on the markets of Kaarta	1292/1875–6	His 4,000-man army attacked the main markets of the Bamanakan but was defeated; two to three hundred men perished.
Renewed war between the Māsna and the Awlād Billa	1298–9/1880–2	The Māsnā were under siege in their homes in Tishīt for a month. The war was concluded by truce (but it resumed again in 1301/1883–4). The people of Shinqīti organized a pilgrimage caravan (rare in the second half of the nineteenth century).
Libyan traders in Timbuktu	1302/1884–5	Merchants from Tripoli were reported (probably Ghadāmisīya). Aḥmadu al-Kabīr placed a siege on Nioro, killing his own brother.
The Sultan of Morocco and his army visit the Wād Nūn	1303/1885–6	Reported in the Ni‘ma Chronicle. ^h
Famine in Walāta and Tishīt	1306–7/1889–91	An exceptionally dry year led to famine conditions. This was reported first in Walāta (in 1306 the bayṣa was worth one <i>mudd</i> of Walāta (4 kg) and then in Tishīt (in 1307 the salt bar was worth one <i>mudd</i> of Tishīt (5.5 kg of millet), and the bayṣa was worth one and a half <i>mudd</i>).
French occupation of Nioro and beyond	1308/1890–1	They defeated the army of Aḥmadu al-Kabīr, who sought refuge in Ni‘ma, before going to Bandiagara.

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Events	Date	Remarks
War between the emirs of Ādrār and Tagānit	1308–16/1891–9	Beginning in the summer, this protracted war mobilized hundreds of camels and “paralyzed the economic prosperity of the Ādrār.” ⁱ
Civil war of the Tajakānit	1312/1894–5	This war resulted in the sacking of Tindūf.
Drought	1315/1897–8	In Tishīt, the <i>bayša</i> was worth one and a half <i>mudd</i> .
Arrest of Samori Turé	1316–18/1898–1900	News of the arrest brought the salt trade to a halt in Nioro for the year 1900. ^j
Numerous raids by the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ	1321–2/1903–5	Chaos reigned in the Ādrār region. Coppolani and the French colonial forces occupied Tijikja where he was later assassinated.
Reunion of Saharans with Moroccan Sultan Mūlāy Idrīs	1324/1906–7	Shaykh Māʾ al-ʿAynayn, leader of the jihad against the French, the emirs of Brākna, Tagānit, and the Ādrār, and the chiefs of the Laghlāl met with the sultan to rally their forces against the French.

Source: Based on a combination of sources, including the Chronicles of Tishīt, Walāta, and Niʿma; oral sources; and various published works.

^a Monod, *De Tripoli à Tombouctou*.

^b Reported in the Tishīt Chronicle. For a discussion of this event based on oral sources, see Chapter 5.

^c As Marty explains, in the early twentieth century, the average price of the salt bar was between 20 and 25 *mudds* of millet (“Chroniques,” 363, n. 1).

^d Barth, *Travels*, IV, 468, 489, and V, 32.

^e The Chronicles of Tishīt and Walāta are in disagreement by one year regarding the famine in Tishīt.

^f Tishīt Chronicle. Most of the 600 deaths were of the Ludaykāṭ fraction of the Awlād Dlim.

^g Beaumier, “Le choléra au Maroc.”

^h Reported in the Chronicle of Niʿma most probably because of the small Tikna community that resided in Niʿma in the late nineteenth century. Also see Marty, “Chroniques,” 537.

ⁱ Ba, “Un emir de la guerre en Ādrār,” 590.

^j Reported in McDougall, “Salt,” 65 n. 28.

Appendix 2

PILLAGED CARAVANS REPORTED IN THE CHRONICLES OF TĪSHĪT, WALĀTA, AND NI‘MA

Chronicle	Date	Remarks
Walāta	1253/1837–8	Caravan composed of people from Walāta raided in Sansanding.
Tīshīt	1272/1855–6	Surprise attack on the caravan of ‘Aghrayjīt.
Tīshīt–Walāta	1275/1858–9	An interregional caravan near Tīshīt was ransacked. One caravaner was killed, and the millet and camels were stolen. A Walāta caravan was also pillaged that season.
Walāta	1276/1859–60	A caravan from Tīshīt was intercepted by al-Ḥājj ‘Umar and he purchased 2,000 salt bars, half of them in slaves. The price of the salt bar rose to ten millet <i>mudds</i> of Tagānit (approx. 35 kg).
Tīshīt	1277/1860–1	A Shinqīti salt caravan was raided, all the caravaners perished, and a number of loaded camels followed the Niger River unaccompanied and arrived on the shores of Segu; this was unprecedented, according to the Tīshīt Chronicle.
Tīshīt–Walāta	1278/1861–2	The Mashdhūf seized a caravan belonging to the Laghlāl. The Laghlāl raided about 140 camels from the people of Tīshīt.

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Chronicle	Date	Remarks
Tīshīt	1280/1863–4	Small Tīshīt caravan raided and cargo seized; one caravaner was killed. Aḥmadu al-Kabīr seized a caravan from Walāta and drove it to Segu where it was detained for eight months.
Tīshīt	1281/1864–5	The Awlād Dīm (of the Awlād Lāb lineage) raided the camel herds of Tīshīt inhabitants.
Tīshīt	1282/1865–6	Many caravan raids. In the north, the context was the war between the Awlād Bū al-Sibāʿ and the Kunta. In Shinqīti, the Awlād Dīm raided the camels belonging to traders from ʿAghrayjīt. The salt caravan of Tīshīt was raided, as was a caravan returning from Nioro.
Tīshīt	1283/1866–7	Various battles and raids. Two Tīshīt caravans, one returning from the north, and another from Nioro, were almost entirely ransacked by the Mashdhūf. That same year, members of another Tīshīt caravan, including a traveling scholar, succumbed to thirst. ^a
Tīshīt	1287/1870–1	Aḥmadu al-Kabīr seized several caravans heading south, including one from Tīshīt and others trying to avoid his army.
Tīshīt	1288/1871–2	The Tīshīt caravan left in early December and was intercepted by a band of raiders who exacted tribute, killing one and wounding others.
Walāta	1289/1872–3	A caravan from Walāta was pillaged by the Bamanakan of the village of Moloko.
Tīshīt–Walāta	1291/1874–5	Aḥmadu al-Kabīr seized the bulk of the salt loads of the Tīshīt caravan. The Rgaybāt pillaged a caravan from Walāta and neighboring Buradda, seizing most of its camels. The people retaliated and recovered most of their goods. Several raids on caravans around Nīʿma.

Chronicle	Date	Remarks
Walāta	1292/1875–6	A caravan from Walāta and neighboring Buradda was pillaged near Tawdenni by the Berābīsh, who seized 500 camels.
Walāta	1296/1878–9	The Fulbe raided a Māsna caravan of Tīshīt, killing twenty people.
Tīshīt–Walāta	1308/1890–1	The French, now in Nioro, seized half of the salt loads of a caravan belonging to the people of Tīshīt and ‘Aghrayjīt. They also intercepted a caravan of the people of Tīshīt and Walāta, brought it to Nioro, and exacted at least one-fifth of the loads.
Tīshīt	1314/1896–97	The goods of ‘Aghrayjīt caravaners were set on fire in the millet market of Banamba.
Tīshīt	1318/1900–1	A Tīshīt caravan was pillaged in Banamba.
Tīshīt	1319/1901–2	The Awlād Nāṣir stopped the caravan of the people of Tīshīt and ‘Aghrayjīt.

^a This scholar of law in question, nicknamed “the breaker of disagreements” (*qatā‘ al-sharr*), was named Abū Bakr b. al-Sayyid b. Aḥmad b. Idda Ghūr.

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¹ Most interviews were tape-recorded, and most interviewees received cassette copies. I am in the process of digitizing these recordings to be archived in Mauritania at the Institut Mauritanien de Recherche Scientifique and the Laboratoire d’Études et Recherches Historiques, and in Senegal at the Institut Fondamental d’Afrique Noire. I also plan to make these interviews available at an institution on North Africa such as the African Online Digital Archive at Michigan State University or the Archive of Traditional Music at Indiana University.

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- Sīd Aḥmad Fāl, “Dah” (06/18/97, 06/21/97)
- Sīdī Wuld Dāhī (06/12/98, 06/26/98), former caravaner
- Ṭaqiya b. Muḥammad al-Amīn b. ‘Abdallah b. Awubilla (07/02/98, 07/05/98), former caravaner
- Tūtu Mint al-Shaykh (07/01/98)
- Zaynabu Mint al-Kuntī b. al-Gamāni (06/28/98)
- Zaynabu Mint Būbakar Sīra (03/06/98)

Rosso (Mauritanie)

- Al-Ḥājj Dāma Sy (07/30/97)
- Bāba Wuld al-Mukhtār (08/01/97), former caravaner
- Ibrāhīm Wuld Ḥamdīnū (07/30/97)
- Kenza Bughālib and ‘Abd al-Salām Bughālib (07/31/97)
- Muḥammad ‘Abdallah Wuld Quṭūb (07/30/97)
- Muḥammad Shaykh Wuld ‘Amāra (08/02/97), former caravaner

Shinqīti

- ‘Abdarrahmān Wuld Muḥammad al-Ḥanshī (02/27/97, 02/28/97, 09/29/97, 10/01/97), former caravaner
- Aḥmad Wuld Jidduh (03/05/97, 09/29/97)

- Dhahabiya Mint ‘Amāra (10/01/97)
 Fāṭima Mint ‘Abdarrahmān b. Buhay (02/25/97, 03/02/97, 03/08/97, 09/27/97)
 Khadijatū Mint Buhay (02/25/97)
 Khnātha Mint ‘Amāra and Ghalāna Mint ‘Amāra (10/02/97)
 Laghnād Mint Aḥmad al-Khalīfa and Al-Wālī Wuld Luda‘a (03/08/97)
 Muḥammad al-Amin Wuld ‘Abāba (02/27/97)
 Muḥammad Wuld al-Ghulām (10/03/97)
 Muḥammad Sa‘īd b. Buhay, Khadijatū Mint ‘Abdallah Wuld ‘Aly, and Fāṭima
 Mint ‘Abdarrahmān Wuld Buhay (02/25/97, 03/02/97, 03/08/97, 09/27/97),
 group interviews
 Ruqaya Mint Taqla Wuld ‘Abāba (10/03/97)
 Sīdī Muḥammad Wuld Mādī Wuld Mūlāy al-Mahdī (03/02/97, 03/03/97), former
 caravaner
 Tikbir Mint al-Ghulām b. al-Ḥabbuṭ (03/08/97)

Tamshakett

- ‘Abdāwa Wuld ‘Abāba (05/21/98, 05/22/98, 05/24/98), caravaner
 Aḥmad Wuld Ḥāki (04/21/98, 04/24/98)
 Layla Mint Ibrāhīm (05/24/98)
 Maḥmūd Wuld Mbārak (05/21/98)
 Shaykhna Wuld Shaykh Wuld Muḥammad al-Nāmuḥ (05/21/98), former caravaner
 Sīd Aḥmad Fāl Wuld Muḥammad Wuld al-Khyar (05/24/98)
 Zayna Mint Mūlāy Ibrāhīm (04/23/98, 04/24/98)

Tijikja

- Ahl Yubba with Ḥurma Wuld Yubba and Zīri Mint Yubaa (05/08/97), former
 caravaner
 Al-Ḥājī al-Bashīr Wuld Muḥammad (05/10/97), caravaner
 Dīdī Wuld ‘Abd al-Qādir (05/06/97, 05/07/97, 05/08/97), former caravaner
 Khadijatū Mint Khūna (05/10/97)
 Muḥammad ‘Abdallah Wuld Sīdī Wuld ‘Abda (05/09/97)
 Muḥammad Wuld al-Ṭālib and Makhala Wuld al-‘Amish (05/06/97), former
 caravaner

Tīshīt

- ‘Abdallahi Wuld Sīdī Wuld ‘Umar (04/27/97)
 ‘Abdarrahmān Wuld Jidduh (04/19/97), former caravaner
 Aḥmad Wuld al-Sharīf al-Mukhtār Wuld Mbacké (04/26/97) with Sharīf Wuld
 Shaykhna Sīdī Muḥammad Wuld Bāba Wuld Khaṭrī and Billa Wuld
 al-Sharīf Aḥmād Wuld Ābba (04/27/97), group interview
 Aḥmad Wuld Kubrān (04/19/97), caravaner
 Bāba Ghazzār (04/16/97, 04/25/97), former caravaner
 Bukra b. Muḥammad Sham (04/29/97), former caravaner
 Dāddah Wuld Idda (personal communications, 04/97)
 Falla Mint Būbū (05/01/97), caravaner

- Falla Mint Samba Djaye (05/03/97)
 Ḥamallah Wuld Bāba Mīn, Chief of the Māsna (04/15/97)
 Ḥamallah Wuld Mīn, Bāba Ghazzār, Aḥmādu Wuld Kubrān (05/02/97), group
 interview with caravaners
 Khalifa wuld al-Bashīr (04/30/97), caravaner
 Muhammadu Wuld Aḥamdī (04/14/97, 04/16/97, 04/30/97 with Muḥammad Wuld
 Mawlūd)
 Muḥammad al-Amīn Wuld Muissa “al-Mashbūḥ” (04/16/97, 05/03/97), former
 caravaner
 Taha Mint al-Khatābī b. Dawūd (05/01/97), former caravaner

Walāta

- Attu Mint Muḥammad Sālāḥ Wuld Bashīr Wuld Mbārak Wuld La‘abayd (04/12/98)
 Batti Wuld Bāba Wuld Mbuya (04/11/98)

B. Senegal

Ndar (Saint-Louis)

- Abdoul Hadir Aīdara (personal communications)
 Abou Latif Seck, Bu al-Mughdād (11/05/97)
 Amadou Sow (11/03/97)
 Cheikh Diop (11/01/97)
 Doudou Gueye (10/20/97, 11/03/97, 11/06/97)
 Madike Wade (10/31/97, 11/01/97)
 Maky Kane (08/95, 10/21/97)
 Mame Fatou Samb (08/95, 10/97)
 Ngor Sene (personal communications)
 Said Barrada (10/23/97)
 Souadou Seck, with Hilary Jones and David Robinson (06/30/97)
 Tonton Camara (08/95)
 Uthman Hammoudi (10/23/97)

Louga

- ‘Abd al-Fatāḥ Wuld ‘Abd al-Jalīl (07/06/97)
 Al-Hajj Abdou Kane Diop (07/08/97)
 Doudou Fall (07/04/97)
 Khatary Fall (07/08/97), former caravaner
 Mbarik Fall, Chief of Pallène neighborhood (07/08/97)
 Momar Gaye Diop (Talla) and Malick Diop (07/05/97)
 Mujib Diop, Imam of Grande Mosquée (07/06/97)
 Saliou Ndiaye (07/06/97)
 Samba Souna Fall (07/04/97)
 Seybou Niang (07/04/97, 07/05/97, 07/07/97)
 Sidy Diop (07/05/97)
 Youssou Mbargan Mbaye, Griot (07/02/97)

Podor

Demba Sy (10/30/97)
 Doudou Sow (10/30/97)
 Jambaru Niane (10/29/97)
 Jo Negri (10/30/97)
 Maoudou Diop (10/29/97)

Rosso (Sénégal)

Birame Diop, neighborhood chief, with Awa Mbodj (07/09/97)

C. Mali*Bamako*

‘Ā’isha Mint al-Kuttam (05/03/98)
 Al-Ghāly b. ‘Abd al-Wahāb (05/06/98), former caravaner
 Ṭayyib b. Barka (05/06/98)

Dogon

Chief of Banani (04/18/98)
 Dogolou Chief of Terely (04/18/98)

Mopti

Leila Mukarzel (04/20/98)
 Yaḥya b. al-Kuttām, known as “Quthm” (04/20/98)

Nioro

Al-Ḥājj Bakary Diagouraga (05/12/98, 05/13/98)
 Al-Ḥājj Bakary Diagouraga, Samba Daffé, and Gaye Nimaga (05/12/98), group interview
 ‘Amuy Traoré, daughter of Musa Jān Traoré (05/13/98)
 Hamet Diarra (05/15/98)
 Muḥammad b. Sharīf Aḥmad “Sufi” b. Sīd Aḥmad b. Shaykh b. Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl (05/16/98)
 Samba Fāl b. Sanaiba (05/15/98)
 Saydnā ‘Umār Dicko, son of ‘Aly b. Muḥammad al-Mālik (05/14/98)
 Shaykh Muḥammad b. al-Shaykh Ḥamallah (05/15/98)
 Shaykh b. Nāni (05/16/98), former caravaner
 Shaykh Niaba Haidara, Chief of Tīshīt neighborhood; in Bambara, translated by his great-grandson (05/15/98, 05/16/98)
 Shaykhnā Sibi (05/14/98)

Timbuktu

- ‘Abbās b. Barka (04/21/97, 04/22/97)
 Aḥmad al-Mawlūd Wuld Ḥilāl with Chendouk (04/26/98, 04/27/98)
 Aḥmaydī Wuld Muḥammad al-‘Arabī (04/28/98, brief conversation)
 ‘Ā’isha Mint Badi Wuld Bashīr and daughter Neina Mint Aḥmad Wuld
 ‘Adb al-Wahāb Wuld Sīd Aḥmad with Chendouk (04/25/98), group
 interview
 ‘Ā’isha Yaḥya Mint Barka (04/26/98)
 Al-Ḥājj al-Salām “Chenna,” teacher and local historian (04/26/98)
 Harbar Sabane, Mayor of Timbuktu (04/23/98)
 Khanātha Mint ‘Abd al-Qādar and Mariam Mint Yaḥya b. ‘Abd al-Qādir Barka
 (04/26/98)
 Muḥammad al-Amīn Wuld al-Nājim “Chendouk” (personal communications)
 Muḥammad Wuld Khaṭra (04/22/98), caravaner
 Muḥammad Yahya Wuld Aḥmad Būl‘āraf with Ṭayyib Wuld ‘Aly al-Sa‘adī
 (04/23/98, 04/27/98)
 Mūlāy Bāhah Wuld Mūlāy ‘Abdallah Wuld Mūlāy Aḥmad (04/24/98, 04/25/98),
 former caravaner
 Nāna ‘Ā’isha al-Hakūm (04/26/98)
 Sīdī ‘Amar Wuld Sīd Aḥmad Wuld al-Sulṭān, Qāḍī of Arawān (04/22/98)

D. Morocco*Guelmīm*

- ‘Ā’isha Mint Aḥmad Wuld al-Bashīr Wuld al-Ḥājj Bul‘īd (07/26/99)
 ‘Aliya Mint Bayrūk (07/24/99)
 ‘Aly al-Sālam b. Daḥmān b. ‘Abidīn b. Bayrūk (07/29/99)
 Bashīr b. Bakār b. Muḥammad b. Bayrūk al-Ghazāwī (07/21/98, 07/29/99)
 Bashīr Wuld Aḥmad Sālik Wuld Daḥmān (07/25/99)
 Ḥumayd al-Kūrī b. Bāba Aḥmad b. al-Qa’id Mukhtār al-Nājim (07/31/99)
 Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Sālam b. al-Ḥasnī b. Libūh (07/28/99)
 Muḥammad Wuld Hanūn Wuld al-Salām Wuld al-Masaīry (07/27/99)
 Yaḥdhih b. ‘Abdallah b. Bayrūk, with Khadaīja Mint Muḥammad b. Laḥbīb b.
 Bayrūk (07/31/99)
 Yaḥdhih Wuld Maḥjūb Wuld Ibrāhīm Wuld Laḥmayna Wuld Muḥammad
 Ibrāhīm Wuld Arshīshīn (07/27/99)

Āsrīr

- ‘Abdātī b. Hamdy (07/31/99), former caravaner
 ‘Ā’isha Mint Muḥammad al-Amīn b. ‘Umar (07/30/99)
 ‘Azīza Mint ‘Abd al-Mūlā (07/30/99)
 Ḥabūb b. Aḥmad b. al-Ma‘ṭī with Aḥmad Fāl b. Laḥbīb and Muḥammad b.
 Maḥjūb b. al-Jumānī (07/30/99), caravaners

Liksābī

Ibrāhīm b. ‘Aly b. al-Ṭālib (08/01/99), former caravaner
 Kāra Jami‘ya Mint ‘Abayda b. Bārak (08/01/99)
 Muḥammad b. al-Nājim b. Muḥammad b. al-Nājim (08/01/99), former caravaner
 Muḥammad b. ‘Umar b. Laḥbīb b. al-Nājim b. Ḥamayd (08/01/99)

Marrakech

Al-Bāqīr b. Mūlāy ‘Aly (08/02/98)

2. ARCHIVES

National Archives

AMAE Archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Paris
 ANM Archives Nationales du Mali, Koulouba
 ANRIM Archives Nationales de la République Islamique de Mauritanie, Nouakchott
 ANS Archives Nationales du Sénégal, Dakar
 CAOM Centre d’Archives d’Outre-mer, Aix-en-Provence

District Archives

Aṭār, Shinqīti, Tīshīt, Rosso (Mauritania)
 Louga, Podor, Saint-Louis (Senegal)
 Nioro (Mali)

Documentation and Research Centers

CCF Centre Culturel Français, Nouakchott (Mauritania)
 CEDRAB Centre de Documentation et de Recherches Ahmed Baba, Timbuktu (Mali)
 CHEAM Centre de Hautes Études d’Administration Musulmane (Paris)
 CRDS Centre de Recherches et de Documentation du Sénégal, Saint-Louis (Senegal)
 EN Bibliothèque de l’Evêché de Nouakchott (Mauritania)
 IDF Institut de France (Paris)
 IFAN Institut Fondamental d’Afrique Noire, Dakar (Senegal)
 IMRS Institut Mauritanien de Recherches Scientifiques, Nouakchott (Mauritania)

HOSL Haroun Ould Sidiyya Library (Boutilimit, Mauritania),
Microfilm, University Archives, University of Illinois, Urbana-
Champaign

3. FAMILY ARCHIVES

A. Mauritania

Aṭār

Daydī Wuld al-ʿArabī Wuld Mūlāy ʿAly

Nouakchott

Aḥmad Sālam Wuld ʿAbd al-Wadūd
Muḥammad al-Amīn Wuld ʿAbdallah Wuld Bayrūk (Aṭār)
Muḥammad al-Amīn Wuld Sīdī Wuld Mūlāy ʿAly (Shinqīti, Aṭār)
Muḥammad Wuld al-Amīn (Aṭār)
Mūlāy Ghāly Wuld al-Yazīd Wuld Mūlāy ʿAly (Aṭār)

Shinqīti

ʿAbdarraḥmān Wuld Muḥammad al-Ḥanshī
Sīdī Muḥammad Ḥabbūṭ
Shaykh Ḥammuny (Wād Nūn trade records, Arwilī family)
Buhay Family Records
Mūlāy al-Mahdī

Tamshakett

Ahl Al-Namūḥ

Tijikja

Maktaba Ḥamūd Wuld al-Shaykh
Muḥammad ʿAbdallah Wuld Sīdī Wuld ʿAbda
Muḥammad Maḥmūd Wuld Laḥbib Wuld al-Ḥājj

Tīshīt

Ahl Bāba
Aḥmad Wuld al-Zayn
Al-Sharīf Wuld al-Zayn
Dāddah Wuld Idda
Fāḍal al-Sharīf
Ḥamallah Wuld Bū ʿAsrīya
Muḥammadu Wuld Aḥmadī

Muḥammad Wuld Aḥmād al-Ṣaghīr
 Sharīf Wuld Muḥammad al-Sharīf
 Sharīfnā Wuld Shaykhnā Būyaḥmad
 Shaykh ‘Abd al-Mu’min
 Shaykh Wuld Ibrāhīm al-Khalīl

Walāta

Al-Ṭālib Abū Bakr

B. Mali

Timbuktu

Muḥammad Maḥmūd Wuld al-Shaykh

C. Morocco

Guelmīm

Aḥmād Fāl Wuld al-Maḥjūb Wuld Mujīdrī (Ahl Ḥamdāt, Azwāfiṭ, Tikna)
 ‘Aly Sālam b. Daḥmān b. ‘Abidīn b. Bayrūk
 Bashīr b. Bakkār b. Muḥammad b. Bayrūk al-Ghazāwī
 Muḥammad Fāl al-Ḥayn-Ḥayn

D. Libya

Family Library of al-Ḥājj Ibrāhīm al-Anṣārī (Ghāt).
 Public Library of Aḥmad al-Nā’ib (Tripoli)

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5. PRIMARY SOURCES IN ARABIC

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