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978-0-521-88724-3 - 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.

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To the People of the Sahara

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On Trans-Saharan Trails

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

GHISLAINE LYDON

University of California, Los Angeles



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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 Arwīlī 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

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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

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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>Hespéris: 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>

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<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</i> <i>Mémoires</i>
<i>SI</i>	<i>Studia Islamica</i>

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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.

‘Aghrayjūt: 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.

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Glossary

‘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.

baysa: 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.

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

dhimmī: 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 (*fuqāḥā*): 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.

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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., Ṭāreg), 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.

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mudārāt: Tribute exacted by *ḥasānī* from *zuwāyā*. 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.

Ni'ma: 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.

qādī (*quḍā'*): 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 (*rafa'ig*): 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-Ḥamrā': Northwestern desert region in present-day western Sahara.

shigg (*shgūg*): Half a camel-load.

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

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Shurfā (*Shurafāʾ*; 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.

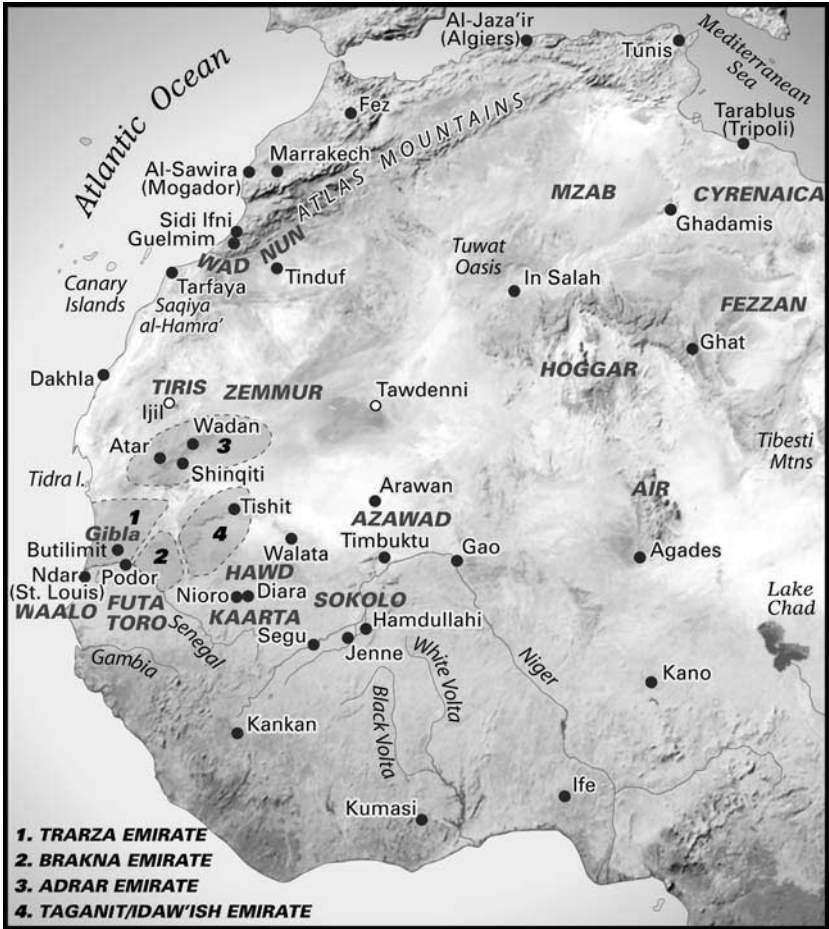
wangāla: Traditional rotating lunch association.

zakāt: Islamic tithe paid after Ramadan.

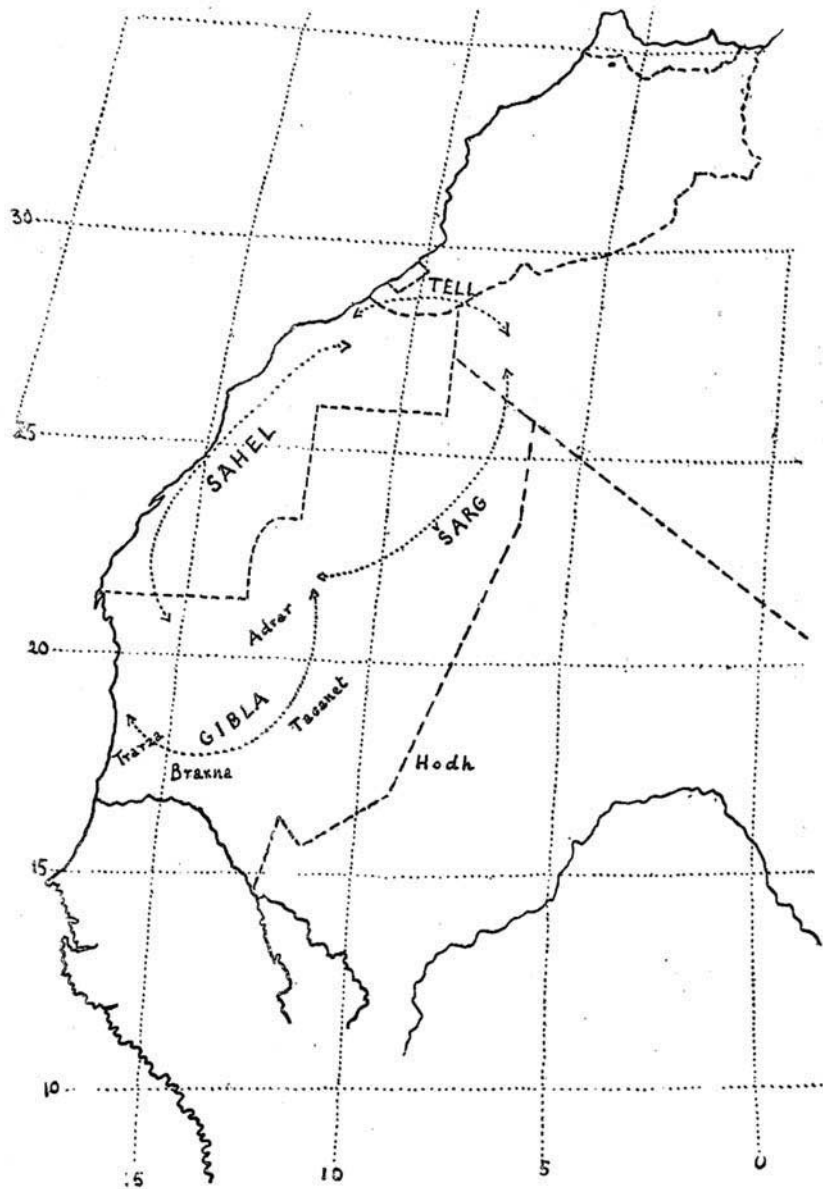
Znāga: Name of the “Berber” language prevalent in Mauritania before the spread of Hasaniya; also meaning tributary groups of the ‘arab or the *zwāyā* (sometimes also called *laḥma*).

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

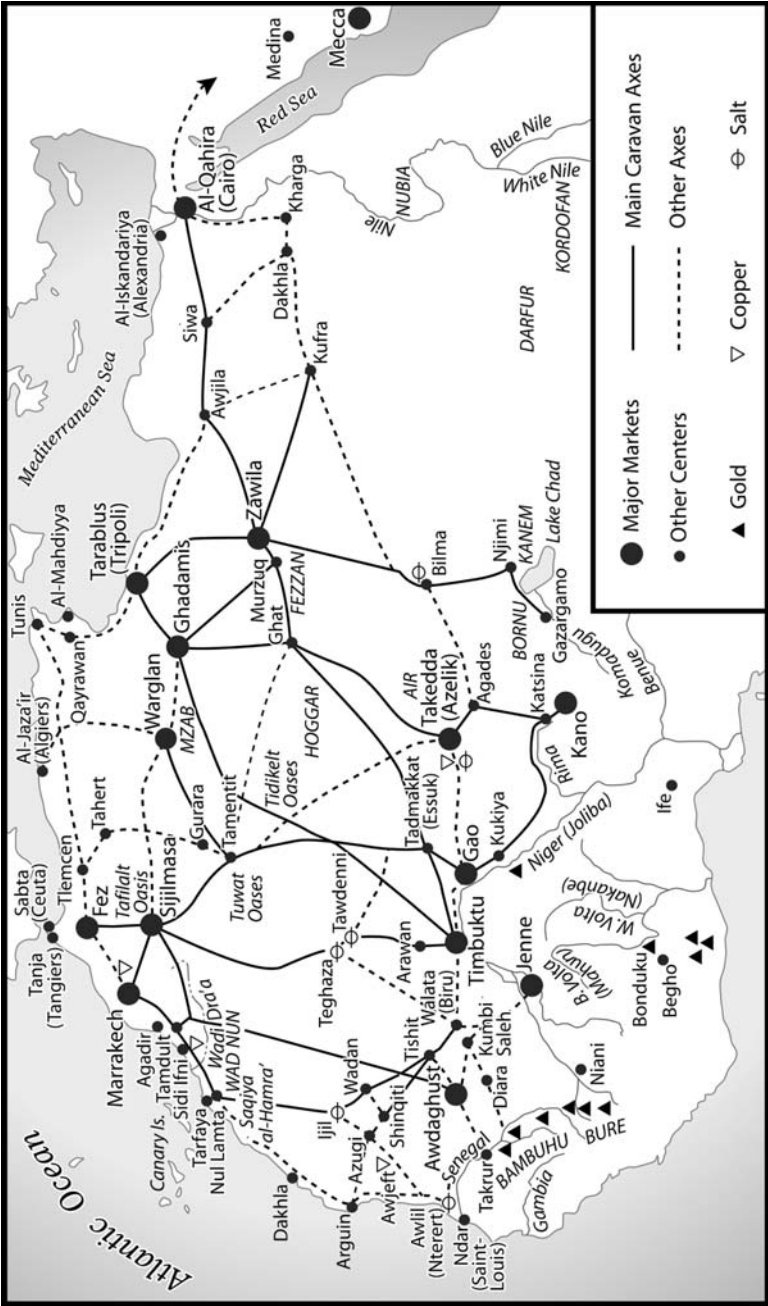
Maps



MAP I. Western Africa.



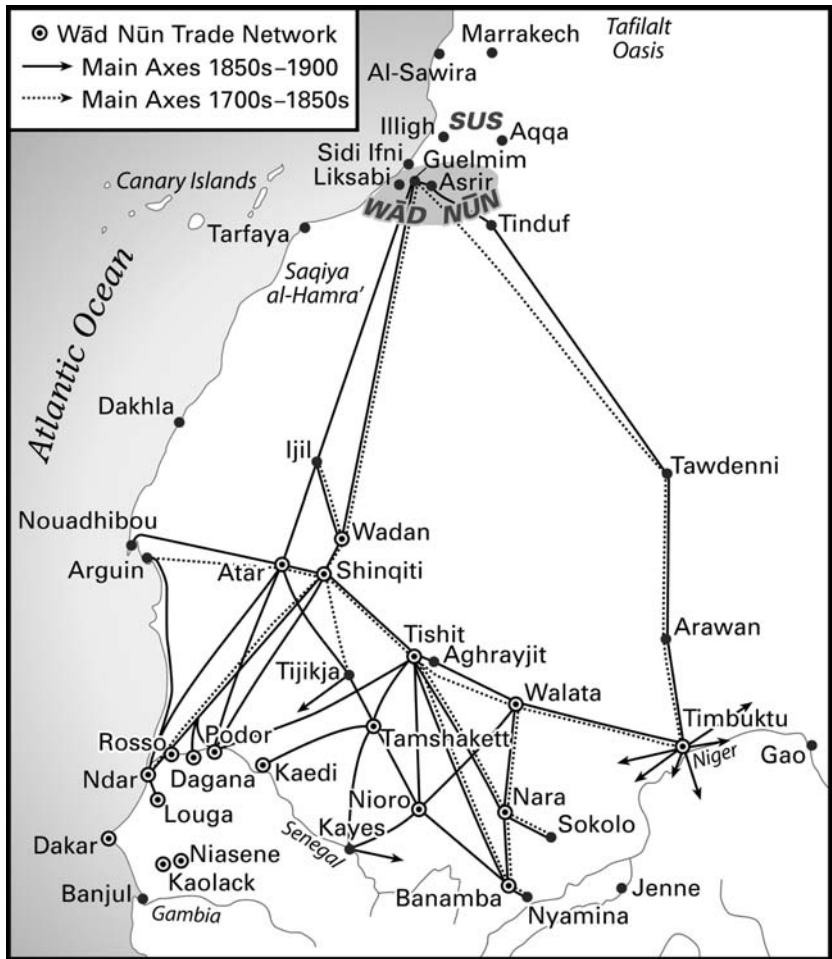
MAP 2. Saharan orientation.
Source: Julio Caro Baroja, *Estudios saharianos* (Madrid, 1955), 66.



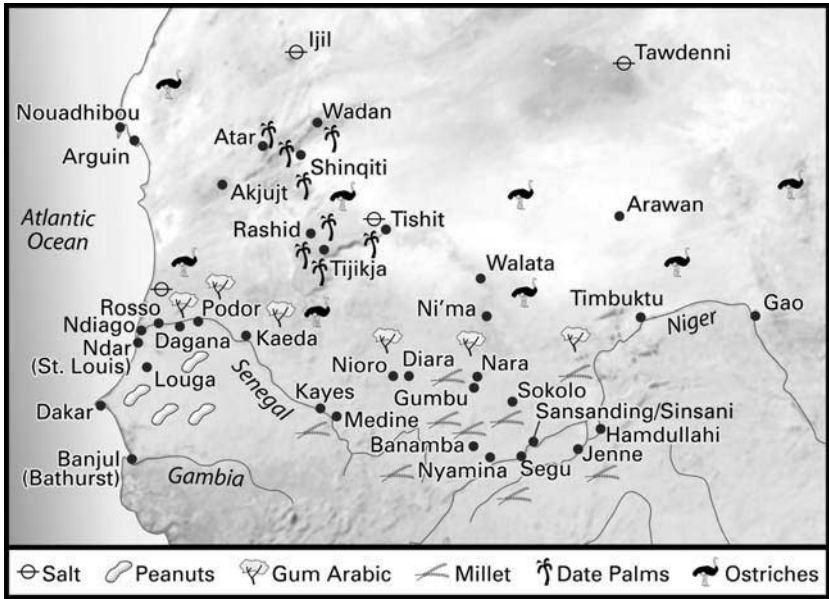
MAP 3. Trans-Saharan trade in the *longue durée* until the 1700s.
Source: Based on De Moraes Farias, *Arabic Medieval Inscriptions from the Republic of Mali* (Oxford, 2003), figure 2.



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.