

Writing Trans-Saharan History: Methods, Sources and Interpretations Across the African Divide

GHISLAINE LYDON

For ages, the Sahara has been portrayed as an ‘empty-quarter’ where only nomads on their spiteful camels dare to tread. Colonial ethnographic templates reinforced perceptions about the Sahara as a ‘natural’ boundary between the North and the rest of Africa, separating ‘White’ and ‘Black’ Africa and, by extension, ‘Arabs’ and ‘Berbers’ from ‘Africans’. Consequently, very few scholars have ventured into the Sahara despite the overwhelming historical evidence pointing to the interactions, interdependencies and shared histories of neighbouring African countries. By transcending the artificial ‘Saharan frontier’, it is easy to see that the Sahara has always been a hybrid space of cross-cultural interactions marked by continuous flows of peoples, ideas and goods. This paper discusses a methodological approach for writing Saharan history which seeks to transcend this artificial divide and is necessarily transnational. As a scholar of nineteenth and early twentieth century trans-Saharan history, I retrace the steps of trading families across several generations and markets. This research itinerary crisscrossed Saharan regions of Western Africa from Senegal, the Gambia and Mali, to the Islamic Republic of Mauritania and the Kingdom of Morocco, with stops in archival repositories in France. With specific reference to the art of writing African history, I discuss how my own path into the African past was shaped by *ad hoc* encounters with peoples, their memories and texts. But if the facts, perspectives and narratives that form the evidence I rely upon to reconstruct trans-Saharan history were collected on an accidental trajectory, the interpretation of this data followed a deliberate methodological approach. I explain how orality permeated the process of my historical investigation and I argue for a recognition of the centrality of orality in the creation and interpretation of all forms of historical evidence.

In preparation for the beginning of the caravan season of 1925, Muḫāy al-Maḥḍi sent his envoy to collect a debt in silver coins from a trading partner located some 500 miles away on the southern desert edge.¹ He also entrusted him with money to purchase ostrich lard in that distant Malian market of Nara. Muḫāy al-Maḥḍi, a resident of Shingīfī, was a Tikna trader originally from the Wad Nun region of present-day southern Morocco. He had settled in the northern Mauritania oasis in the late nineteenth century, joining a small Tikna community that thrived on the organisation of trans-Saharan trade between northern and western African markets. At age eleven, his son, Muḫāy Ḥāshim, was initiated on his first caravan to the family profession.² In 1936, when the French colonial economy offered better opportunities

Ghislaine Lydon is Assistant Professor in the Department of History at UCLA. She received her PhD from Michigan State University for a thesis entitled: ‘On Trans-Saharan Trails: Trading Networks and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Western Africa, 1840s–1930s.’ She has undertaken fieldwork in Mauritania, Mali, Morocco, Senegal and the Gambia and has several publications based on her research in these regions.

The Journal of North African Studies, Vol.10, No.3–4 (September–December 2005) pp.293–324
ISSN 1362-9387 print/1743-9345 online
DOI: 10.1080/13629380500336664 © 2005 Taylor & Francis

than caravanning, the teenager migrated to neighbouring Senegal. Over the course of fifty years there, he rose from peddling cigarettes in the countryside to owning several wholesale stores and managing a gas station in the capital city of Dakar. When I first interviewed Mulāy Hāshim, he still regretted that the only thing he took with him, when he was deported during the conflict between Senegal and Mauritania in 1989, was his identity card and a wad of currency he had collected since the introduction of paper money.

The historian, Peter Novick once wrote, is 'like a witness to what has been found on a voyage of discovery.'³ 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 recent presidential address to the American Historical Association. 'History', he submits, 'ultimately fails as "science", since historians can assemble only random evidence from the debris of the past that reaches them through processes far beyond their control.'⁴

My own path into the African past was shaped by *ad hoc* encounters with peoples, their memories and texts. As a scholar of nineteenth and early twentieth century trans-Saharan history, I retraced the steps of families across several generations and markets to understand the rapport between Islamic practice and cooperative behaviour in long-distance trade networks.⁵ It was a voyage that crisscrossed the several regions of Western Africa from Senegal, the Gambia and Mali, to the Islamic Republic of Mauritania and over to the Kingdom of Morocco, with stops in archival repositories in France. This research 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 upon to reconstruct trans-Saharan history were collected on an accidental trajectory, the interpretation of this 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.'⁶ 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 Michel de Certeau's sense.⁷ Like most historians of Africa, I base my writings on both oral and written information. But in combining sources to decipher the particulars of any given historical situation, I emphasised 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, such as Mulāy Hāshim, 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 for decoding the Saharan past.

The history of the Sahara is marked by the constant flux of peoples and caravans linking the shores of a seemingly intractable terrain. In the same way that recent scholars have tackled the concept of liquid continents by historicising the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans, as Fernand Braudel did decades earlier for the Mediterranean,

one must think of the Sahara as a deep space with a long history.⁸ It was a contact zone where the movement of the ships of the desert 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 traditions of scholarship typically landlocked in the area-studies paradigm. Historically, the Sahara has been perceived as a natural barrier dividing the continent. Indeed, this land is hardly of interest to scholars of ‘Sub-Saharan’ Africa who prefer to think of themselves as specialists of an Africa located ‘south of the Sahara.’ Concurrently, their colleagues who work on North Africa generally ignore the peoples living on the desert edge or in the less populated regions further south, while they tend to disregard their own African roots. The region stretching from the Atlantic coast to the Red Sea therefore remains largely unappreciated by 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 like Mulāy Hāshim’s, 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, and the Sahara as sealing the continent rather than dividing it. By ‘western Africa,’ I invoke a geographical space that includes what is typically referred to as West Africa, as well as the Sahara, stretching to its northwestern (south of Morocco, southern Algeria) and central (Niger and Chad) edges. This article discusses a methodological approach for writing Saharan history. It seeks to contribute to an understanding of a people typically left out of historical studies about Africa through an examination of the methods and sources I rely upon to interpret trans-Saharan history. Because I traced the migration patterns of families involved in long-distance commerce in a region not ruled by a single state and bridging North and West Africa, I naturally engaged in transnational research. This article begins with a review of the ways in which the Sahara has been misperceived by outsiders, then I discuss how historians of Africa have defined their craft, before examining local and external sources.

Saharan History and its Misperception

The notion of an Africa divided by the vast Sahara Desert was not a product of the post-WW2 geopolitics, which 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 characterising the area to the south as ‘the ridge of sand.’⁹ Muslim geographers, who named the great desert (*Saḥrā*), viewed it as an intermediate zone beyond which was the “Land of the Blacks” (*Bilād al-Sūdān*). In an attempt to describe a land they barely understood, such an expression enabled early Muslim writers to discriminate between Africans so as to differentiate ‘Blacks’ from ‘Arabs’ and ‘Berbers’ of the Islamised North Africa, recently incorporated into *Dar al-Islam*. 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 towards the southern desert-edge. Ironically, some of these groups began identifying themselves as *Bidān*, or 'Whites', and speaking of a *Trāb al-Bidān* or 'Land of the Whites' united by the use of a common language (*Hasaniya*).¹⁰ European explorers, and later colonial rulers, reinvented Africa on their own terms by also imposing a colour line on their racial mappings of the continent. For them, the Sahara was a mysterious and impenetrable land inhabited by indomitable veiled Tuareg. Not surprisingly, it was the last chunk of the African continent to be carved out by European conquest. For the most part, this region was less affected by colonial rule than other more accessible and more affluent African regions.

Once lush and sustaining a diverse ecosystem and human environment, the Sahara experienced irreversible desertification from 3000 BCE. Two events occurring much later in the Common Era would profoundly influence the history of Saharan societies. The first was the introduction of camels sometime after the second century and the other is the spread of Islam from the eighth century onward. The adoption of the 'ship of the desert' revolutionised the nature of long-distance transportation in terms of endurance, volume and efficiency, while stimulating nomadic and pastoralist life-styles in the region. Adherence to Islam, and its code of law, favoured the development of scholarly and commercial networks connecting Muslims across the desert and beyond. The pursuit of gold and other goods encouraged waves of migrations of North Africans into desert oases. A political economy of violence, patronage and protection was negotiated between nomadic herders, semi-nomadic oasis residents in charge of organising camel caravans, and sedentary farmers.

The region now divided between Mali, Mauritania and Senegal was central to the great West African 'medieval' empires of Ghana, Mali and Songhai. The Almoravid movement in the eleventh century was the first attempt at religious reform in the Sahara. To be sure, these Muslim invaders were interested in controlling a share of the gold trade as much as in proselytising. From then onward, trans-Saharan trade thrived, with salt mined from Saharan deposits becoming the single most important trade item.¹¹ By the fourteenth century, the ostentatious pilgrimage to Mecca of the Emperor of Mali, Mansa Mūsa, alerted the wider Muslim world to the gold riches of Western Africa, and attracted many more Muslim visitors to the area. In the late sixteenth century, after fending off a Portuguese invasion of his kingdom, the Moroccan Sultan Aḥmad al-Mansūr, attempted to take over trans-Saharan trade by securing the principal salt mine of Taghaza. He then sent a contingency armed with muskets to conquer the Songhai empire, namely the centres of Gao and Timbuktu. Due to 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.¹²

In this area flourished some of the oldest traditions of Islamic scholarship in Africa with men and women transmitting learning in oral and written form one generation to the next.¹³ Through their enterprising commercial activities, African scholars purchased books and paper, and built private libraries. They used writing paper for scholarly works, correspondence, rulings, amulet-making and 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

institutions upheld by religious scholars. By the eighteenth century, the reputations of notable thinkers from centres of learning such as Timbuktu, Walāta, and Shingīrī reached the Middle East by way of pilgrimage caravans. The significance of scholarly networks and trans-Saharan trade to the spread of Islamic knowledge and Arabic literacy in the region cannot be underestimated. Caravaners relied on their literacy skills for correspondence, record keeping and drawing legal agreements in accordance with Islamic law.¹⁴ It is no coincidence, therefore, that scholars often performed as traders and vice-versa. Moreover, Saharan towns tended to be governed by Muslim scholars who functioned as regional judges ruling on all matters: civil, commercial, political, as well as religious. These semi-sedentary scholarly communities maintained alliances with nomadic groups who provided protection services to town dwellers, farming communities and trans-Saharan travellers. Although at various points in time, regional kingdoms, Islamic states and mobile emirates controlled certain key markets, the Sahara was never ruled by a single nation despite attempts by Morocco to extend its power to the southern desert-edge.

The late nineteenth century saw the beginning of the end of the large camel caravan with smaller caravans becoming more frequent. Much of the trade was directed towards new centres of control located along the Atlantic coast and in key colonial outposts in the hinterland. Of all the European colonising powers in Africa, the French had the most enduring relationship with the Sahara. They were obsessed with the idea of conquering the unimaginable: The Sahara Desert. In the 1870s a handful of French officials, engineers and Saint-Simoniens promoted the idea that a trans-Saharan railway from Algiers to Timbuktu could spearhead France's ultimate conquest.¹⁵ This pipedream 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 Tuareg land. It is hardly surprising that the idea of creating Mauritania, the quintessential Saharan colony, would come from an Algerianist.¹⁶ But the Sahara would prove a difficult terrain to dominate not just because of Frenchmen's unfamiliarity with camels and sandstorms. Saharans presented the greatest challenge to European domination even after the French colonised Morocco in 1912. This was due to the shrewdness of Muslim leaders as much as the ruggedness of the terrain. Not until the 1930s, when they occupied Guelmim on the northern desert edge, a town locally known as 'the gateway to the Sahara' (*Bāb al-Sahrā*), did the French command the region, thereby joining Algeria, France's first African colony since 1830, to territories south of the Sahara starting with Senegal, their model West African colony. Two decades later, French fascination with the Sahara drove the Minister of Colonies, Ernest Bélième, 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, but the suggestion was never carried forward.¹⁷

For centuries, European accounts portrayed the Sahara as an inhospitable 'empty-quarter' where only nomads dared to tread. They perpetuated an image of the Sahara

as the ultimate no-man's land, deep, dry, deserted and impassable. Colonial ethnographic studies reinforced the perception of the Sahara 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* (hyphen) to legitimise efforts to connect their North and West African colonies. This contrived 'Western epistemological order' has propagated misunderstandings about the continent's history.¹⁸ In a recent visit to the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, President Jacques Chirac spoke about this 'hyphenated' country and the 'secret charms of the Sahara'.¹⁹ Today, the official tourist website of Mali advertises the 'Sahara, hyphen between Black Africa and White Africa'.²⁰ So entrenched is the notion of the Sahara as a historic barrier that it has led to a flawed characterisation of Africa as inhabited by two diametrically, racially and, by extension, culturally opposed Africans. The historical alienation of peoples across an artificially created racial divide is ultimately realised by the segregation of the continent into North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa, turning the Sahara into a blind spot, which consequently remains grossly understudied.²¹ These misperceptions undermine the history and cultures that unite the continent, and they have seriously influenced the way African history has been written and understood.

Africans, Arabs and the Art of Writing African History

When historians of Africa defined their craft in the Western tradition of writing history starting in the 1960s, they faced major difficulties accessing quality sources. Since Africans were thought to be predominantly oral and not scriptural, the record of their historical consciousness was *a priori* 'invisible'. The accounts of Portuguese, British, French, and other travelers, typically represent peripheral impressions of Africa and Africans. While these sources contained insights about peoples, routes and realms, they were generally 'Eurocentric' in nature as language and cultural barriers tainted the information they conveyed. Merchant, naval, consular and later colonial records, posed a similar set of problems. For, 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 uncover African agency through local historical sources.

Historians, therefore, set out to excavate the African past by innovating an unconventional method: the use of oral sources. Since many African societies relied on mnemonic devices to record the past, their oral histories and traditions had to be properly collected and critically subjected to the rules of evidence. The spoken word of 'the native' was not an 'exotic object' but an archival source *à part entière*.²² Based on the methodology of anthropologists (who, together with ethnographers, dominated the early field of African studies), historians of Africa would pave the way towards incorporating oral narratives into historical research. Indeed, proving the validity of oral sources *vis-à-vis* more conventional sources was tantamount to defining the field itself.²³ In many ways, engaging oral sources became synonymous

with writing a new kind of history. This methodological approach would include not just a systematic recording and analysis of oral evidence (formal oral texts, as well as the memory of the living for later periods), but other source material as well such as linguistics, palaeography, epigraphy, environmental evidence, archaeology and art.

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'.²⁴ As such, s/he becomes an archon, in Jacques Derrida's sense of the term. But 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 the oral material, the archon encodes it with meaning.²⁵ The 'fever' to collect and archive the oral record began in earnest in the 1970s. Armed with Jan Vansina's *Oral tradition*, 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.²⁶ But by the 1980s, such a project had proven too daunting a task, not only because recording, transcribing and archiving is 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, transmitted *texto* from one professional *griot* to another, the historical veracity is transformed according to the style, art and audience of the orator who embellished, adapted and otherwise manipulated the 'oral text'.²⁷ Critics of oral sources, starting with anthropologists, associated oral traditions with mythmaking.²⁸ 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*.²⁹ Nevertheless, the efforts of historians of Africa positively influenced the historical profession to the extent that oral sources of all kinds are now recognised forms of evidence. However one gleans and treats information derived from the spoken word, the rules of evidence apply to all sources that must to be weighed against others.

Undoubtedly, the most significant development in African historical methodology in recent years has been the growing use of untapped sources written by Africans themselves. Indeed, documents in original scriptural languages are increasingly appreciated. These include the Berber alphabets (Tifinagh and Libyan), the Ethiopic script (Ge'ez), the syllabic and consonantal scripts created much later in other regions such as N'ko (Guinea), Vai (Liberia), Nsibidi (Nigeria) and Bamun (Cameroon), to pictographic and ideographic meta-languages imprinted on textiles (Ghana).³⁰ What is more, scholars are becoming aware of the tremendous wealth of writings by African Muslims in Arabic and in African languages written in Arabic script (such as Hausa, Fulfulde, Tamashek and Swahili). Since it was not easily reconcilable with their *civilising mission*, French colonisers in particular often obfuscated Arabic sources, reportedly confiscating numerous manuscripts in Western Africa.³¹ In the post-colony, Africa's Muslim intellectual heritage continued to be ignored by Western-trained scholars who were conditioned to write off any material in Arabic as foreign to Africa itself.³² While historians recognised that many of the early written sources in Africa were in Arabic (from the ninth century onward), these were understood to be authored by 'Arab' and 'Andalusian' geographers who

either travelled to Western Africa or wrote accounts based on hearsay and interviews with trans-Saharan travellers. The better known sources are by Abu 'Ubayd 'Abdallah b. 'Abdalazīz al-Bakri, the globetrotter Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, and Al-Ḥasān Ibn Muḥammad al-Wazzāzi al-Fāsi (alias Leo Africanus).³³ Authored by foreigners who may have been prejudiced towards non-Muslims and Africans, these works could easily be dismissed on the same grounds as European sources. Moreover, it was erroneously believed that only a handful of Arabic documents, now well known and available, existed.³⁴

For lack of language training, or because of the Africanist's discomfort with the 'Arab', most historians were not prepared to recognise that there were Muslims in Africa with centuries-old institutions of learning. Such traditions included schools providing education in Islamic sciences, and vast scholarly networks with established reputations across the Muslim world.³⁵ 'Despite racist and colonial distortions to the contrary', John Hunwick affirms, 'Africa turns out to be a highly literate continent'.³⁶ In large part, the inability to recognise the achievements of Muslim Africans can be explained by the biases of Western scholars towards Islam. For many, the use of Arabic was equated with 'the Arab' and therefore the foreign, and for most there was failure to comprehend that Africans and Arabs could be one and the same. The pioneering studies of Nehemia Levtzion, Melvyn Hiskett and David Robinson on Muslims, Islamic governance and revolutionary movements in nineteenth century West Africa, went a long way towards addressing this knowledge gap.³⁷ John Hunwick and 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.³⁸ Increasingly, scholars with even minimal training in Arabic are able to decipher the '*ajamis* or African languages written in the Arabic script; a tradition predating the transliteration of these languages into the Latin script started by European missionaries in the colonial period.³⁹

In the past ten years, there has been a significant growth in scholarship on Muslim Africa, but still only a handful of scholars specialise in the history of the Sahara.⁴⁰ My effort to reconstruct trans-Saharan history focuses on researching the trade network of two groups, the Tikna and the Awlād Bū Sibā'. Multilingual caravaners originally from the northern desert region of Wad Nun (in what is today southern Morocco), 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 long-distance traders, who negotiated alliances with nomadic groups, tapped into local networks to transact in all kinds of merchandise and enslaved Africans. They used their multiple skills to manoeuvre across several states and currency zones, and engage in arbitrage between African markets. Because of their professional activities, these trans-Saharan traders formed diasporic communities in and around western Africa. Their histories had to be retrieved by engaging in transnational research which required a great deal of preparation, stamina and flexibility.⁴¹ It also entailed the adoption of a rather nomadic existence. Like a vagabond (*clochard*), as Michel de Certeau portrays the historian, I wandered from town to town, with longer stays in the capitals of Mauritania and Senegal, following clues

and collecting evidence in the footsteps of my historical subjects.⁴² This research itinerary was steered primarily by information derived orally from multiple sources.

The Centrality of Orality for Researching Trans-Saharan History

In the process of collecting oral sources, I came to rely on orality not simply as an ethnographic exercise, but as a method for interpreting all historical evidence. Oral sources informed my understanding of the past in myriad ways. Informants provided formative lessons in history, society, as well as cultural and religious practices. The details they shared on Saharan geography and spatial terminology drew my attention to environmental, political and economic landscapes, patterns of transhumance and trans-Saharan traffic. Data on genealogies, migrations and trading patterns could not have been obtained from any other source. Moreover, information-sharing directed me to other sources of historical documentation in formal archives as well as private collections. In the course of conversations and formal interviews, informants revealed details about faith-based behaviour and Islamic *weltanschauungs*, social order and ethnicity, as well as 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 memorised formal texts linked to legendary people and events (formal traditions).⁴³ These sources produced a set of oral 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 oral methods for recording history.

The inhabitants of several Saharan oases maintained written chronicles of major events dated in the Islamic calendar, such as the movement of nomads, natural disasters, as well as the births and deaths of notable personalities.⁴⁴ However, dates were remembered orally with nicknames that could vary across regions. The year 1887 (1304 *Hijra*), for example, is known in several northern towns as the year of the stars (*'ām al-nujūm*), presumably because of the occurrence of a remarkable meteoric shower. Frequently, a given name corresponds elsewhere to a different calendar year because the same event took place in certain regions at different times. For example, in Mauritania the year of the French colonial conquest is known as 'the year the Christians came' (*'ām jawu an-naṣāra*). But the French conquest started earlier in the south (H 1319; CE 1902), then in the middle of the country (H 1322; CE 1904-5), and much later in the northern region of Adrar (H 1327; CE 1909). Another example is *'ām al-kaīt*, a combined Hasaniya and Wolof phrase meaning 'the year of the paper', which marks when French paper money infiltrated western African markets beginning in 1919. The actual year of this event varies since banknotes gradually reached different markets. Being informed about these temporal markers and the corresponding calendar year allowed for the dating of events revealed in oral sources that otherwise would have been difficult to place in time.

When elders in Mauritania were asked about the history of trans-Saharan trade, they invariably replied that 'the first to bring *tijāra* [trade; read "international

trade”] to the area were the Tikna and the Awlād Bū Sibā’.⁴⁵ Because of the international nature of their connections, these traders imported luxury goods, such as books, tobacco, textiles, rugs and guns, and exported gold, ivory, ostrich feathers, gum Arabic, other commodities as well as slaves in response to North African demand. In fact, these two groups dispute the position as the first to introduce the region to green tea and sugar, together with the teatime ritual. This is no small claim because, by the first half of the twentieth century, drinking tea was a favourite pastime shared by Africans across the Sahara, from Algeria to Senegal and beyond. Just as this beverage was a luxury in England until the 1800s, so was it reserved for the wealthy in the Sahara until the beginning of the twentieth century.⁴⁶ Imported into Morocco mainly from China and India by British merchant ships, the consumption of tea gradually spread to the West African interior. According to an oral tradition among the Tikna, it was one of their ancestors located in Shingīfī who gave the Emir of the Adrar region his first taste of tea sometime during his reign (1871–1891).⁴⁷ As the tale goes, the following day the emir sent his slave with a wooden bowl instructing the Tikna to fill it with the wondrous beverage; a sign that the emir had no idea how to either brew or drink tea. As for the Awlād Bū Sibā’, they were importing green tea to Shingīfī long before this reported event, but mainly for private consumption until tea became popular.⁴⁸ Moreover, as early as the 1820s, Saharan traders were reportedly selling tea and sugar to the very wealthy in Timbuktu and Jenné (Mali).⁴⁹

While uncovering the migration patterns of Tikna and Awlād Bū Sibā’ traders living in diasporas in Mali, Senegal and Mauritania, I came to appreciate their respective outlooks. Because they were considered strangers outside the Wad Nun homeland, and they experienced short-term residency in a given place and time, they tended to have clearer and more salient recollections about people, places and events than locals. Minorities often possess sharp memories of the time when they, or their ancestors, migrated to a given market town. Because of their position as outsiders, Tikna and Awlād Bu Sibā’ interviewees described matters autochthonous people typically took for granted and they sometimes spoke more freely about local politics. Moreover, migration narratives, such as the story Mulāy Ḥāshim with which we begin this article, figured prominently in the oral histories of minorities passed down to the next generation.

In the late nineteenth century, when Mulāy Ḥāshim’s father migrated to Shingīfī, oral informants concur that three Tikna traders resided there. The most prominent was Mḥaymad wuld ‘Abāba who claimed prime real estate next to the grand mosque of Shingīfī.⁵⁰ At the time, he commanded the largest Tikna caravans, connecting markets north and south, while collaborating with a relative located in Timbuktu. According to his great granddaughter, Mḥaymad wuld ‘Abāba migrated south to Shingīfī after raiders in Guelmim killed his cousin while they ransacked his house. As his great, great grandson explained, Mḥaymad wuld ‘Abāba then eighteen borrowed money in Guelmim to finance his first participation in a caravan.⁵¹ 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 caravaner.

Mḥaymad wuld ‘Abāba’s story belongs to narrative genre that extols the success and reputation of male entrepreneurs. The history of several notable women is also preserved in local memory. Mariam mint Aḥmayda is remembered as one of the few Tikna women directly involved in trans-Saharan commerce.⁵² After bearing seven of Mḥaymad wuld ‘Abāba’s children, she took over the business when her husband died from a sudden illness on his way back from Senegal.⁵³ Moreover, she played an active role in dealing with her father’s inheritance by corresponding with long-distance debtors. In a letter found by chance in Tishīt, Mariam mint Aḥmayda requested that a trader of that town reimburse a loan extended to him by her father. Having heard her story in Shingīṭī, I recognised by chance the name while reading private documents of a family in Tishīt.⁵⁴ What is most remembered about Mariam mint Aḥmayda, however, is her piety, mystical powers and ability to perform miracles. It is said that when she passed away, shortly after moving from Shingīṭī to Tishīt, her ghost was spotted counselling travellers arriving on the outskirts of Shingīṭī.⁵⁵ The memory of this extraordinary woman was transmitted by word of mouth across the dunes to several Saharan oasis towns.

As with all historical accounts of prominent people, the bigger the reputation the more visibly it survived in local memory. Mulāy Yazīd wuld Mulāy ‘Aly was a well-known figure in the early twentieth century whose interactions with the French are documented in the colonial archives. He too was from Guelmim, but it was the desire to collect his father’s inheritance that brought him to Shingīṭī. 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 natural flare for business:

It is said that once on route to the market of Nioro [in present-day Mali] with his salt load, 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 load 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 was so high that he obtained the best price for his salt.⁵⁶

When the French finally succeeded in conquering northern Mauritania, in the first decade of the twentieth century, they established their headquarters in Atar, a town twenty miles east of Shingīṭī. The French colonel Henri Gouraud then invited Yazīd to set-up shop so he may ‘teach the people [t]here how to trade’.⁵⁷ Eventually, Yazīd took the offer and moved from Shingīṭī to Atar, marrying a second wife and, in no time at all, he became the most successful trader in town. He continued expediting caravans to Senegal, Mali and Morocco, but now he branched out into the colonial economy renting out 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 Atar, and it soon became the place where many incoming caravans unloaded their cargoes.

The history of Yazīd is told by older generations of Mauritians and among some Senegalese elders.⁵⁸ 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 more, Yazīd is said to have been very pious and “*nāfiq fī Sabīlillah*”; a classic expression meaning that he was generous in the ways of God.⁵⁹ 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 Atar in the 1920s, large platters of food were placed in his courtyard. As the people ate, someone recognised the bracelet of a woman whose head was covered. That person decried 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 from that day onward food be served only in darkness so people would not fear being identified.

Undoubtedly, 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 the contradictions, repetitions, exaggerations and fabrications they may contain. Stories about prominent figures tend towards the hagiographic, emphasising positive greatness (Yazīd’s pious acts) while suppressing or misremembering controversial achievements (his collaboration with the French).⁶⁰ Counter-narratives must be obtained through other sources to form a 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.⁶¹ 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 devices to uncover structures of “encoded meaning” as opposed to factual evidence *per se*.⁶² Supernatural or esoteric accounts such as miracle-making and the presence of ghosts reveal mental landscapes which 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. Certainly, selective memory is a problem all historians face because prominence and posterity usually overlap in the historical record.

Aside from family narratives, professional caravaners provided vivid relations of their experiences on trans-Saharan trails. Whether successful or not, they are a dying breed; today only few inhabited oases of the interior are supplied by caravans. For this reason, these men and the rare women caravaners were eager to share details about their trade. Caravaners were extremely knowledgeable of people and places, including regional geography, topography and hydrology. A former nomad shared valuable advice regarding the issue of routes and itineraries:

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 puddles which formed in

known regions and so the crossing is done with full knowledge of the facts and so you must not be fixated on itineraries.⁶³

That environmental and political events determined caravan routes at any point in time was at variance with the notion of permanent trade routes conveyed in European sources.

Just as mariners sailed with full knowledge of the tides, caravaners also studied climate change to ascertain shifts in the desert landscape such as the movement of dunes. Like their seafaring counterparts, they plotted their course based only on few fixed reference points. They also relied on predictable astral positioning, possessing fine knowledge of astronomy so as to navigate with the constellations.⁶⁴ Fuījī b. al-Ṭayr, a retired accomplished caravaner of the Awlād Bū Sibā', was in his nineties when he explained the art of trans-Saharan navigation:

At night, there is a star that rises called *bilhady* [Pole Star]. If it was night, I would show it to you. All the stars move except *bilhady*, 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.⁶⁵

Throughout his life, Fuījī was a most active merchant who led caravans from Senegal to Morocco and back. His recollections captured the essence of both the excitement and the dangers of a caravanning life. Informants like him shared gripping accounts of death on the trail brought about by a surprise sandstorm, bad planning, encounters with pirates, disorientation, or simply thirst. For example, in the early 1900s a caravaner from Liksābi, a town near Guelmim, 'died of thirst coming from Mauritania with a caravan full of goods. He died of thirst in the sun. Only his arm was found, the rest of his body was eaten by wild animals.'⁶⁶

Personal recollections of an autographical nature posed similar challenges of interpretation as family histories, not least of which was the question of Saharan spatial terminology. For example, different Saharan groups used distinct concepts to refer to the four cardinal points. A classic misinterpretation concerns the word *Sahel* (*Sāhil*). European sources erroneously took the word to refer to the southern desert shore, whereas for Saharans it designates the North or North-West.⁶⁷ Residents of Timbuktu, for example, use the term *gibla* to designate west, whereas the same word means south (or southwest) to other Saharans.⁶⁸ Depending on positioning, the word *sharg* (Arabic for east) refers to either north or south.⁶⁹ Knowledge of spatial vocabulary, as well as experiences on trans-Saharan trails dealing with the first half of the twentieth century, informed my understanding of earlier periods. It enabled for a better appreciation of the complexity of caravan routes, cooperative behaviour among caravaners and the conditions they endured (from their frugal meals, their addiction to drinking green tea, how they entertained themselves, 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 this data is corroborated in a handful of captivity narratives and explorers' accounts discussed

further. For, aside from a handful of travelogues written by Saharans on pilgrimage to Mecca and the rare commercial registers, trans-Saharan traders did not keep diaries or logbooks.

African Written Sources for Trans-Saharan History

Saharan societies, especially the *zwāya* or clerical groups, tended to be literate and they used their skills professionally. Since it was not produced locally, scholars, religious and political leaders, as well as traders, went to great lengths to acquire writing paper.⁷⁰ It is important to point out that 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, rarely had access to education. Moreover, few women attained advanced levels of literacy. Women's voices did appear in the written record although most often interpreted by a male cleric or judge. In this respect, the nature of these sources is not unlike the European documentation discussed below which was produced almost exclusively by men.⁷¹ The researcher of Saharan history, therefore, is fortunate to have access to a wealth of local written sources contained in public and private libraries. Much of this material is either theological in nature or dealing with Islamic jurisprudence. For the nineteenth and early twentieth century, a fraction of Saharan historical manuscripts are now published and available.⁷² But besides the abovementioned regional chronicles, and the West African chronicles of Timbuktu for an earlier period, surprisingly few Saharans wrote histories.⁷³ Since it involved discussing various families and groups, historical reflection was considered contentious and potentially dangerous.⁷⁴ Moreover, mundane activities such as commerce were not subjects Saharans cared to write narratives about. For the scholar of trans-Saharan trade, therefore, three types of written sources are particularly useful: accounts of Muslim pilgrims (*riḥlas*), legal records and commercial correspondence.

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

Tālib Aḥmad b. Ṭuwayr al-Janna *riḥla* describes his roundtrip from Tishīt to Mecca between 1829 and 1834.⁷⁵ At each stage, 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 Sultan Muḥayy 'Abdarraḥmān with whom he had numerous exchanges and who assisted him in his journey. When he sailed back from Egypt, bearing 400 books, Tālib Aḥmad was interviewed by French and British officials in Algiers and Gibraltar, respectively.⁷⁶ He returned to his native

Wādān, near Shingīī, with over 30 camels loaded with many gifts, books, as well as commodities such as barley, tea and candles.

Some sixty years later, Muḥammad Yaḥya b. Muḥammad al-Mukhtār al-Walāī describes his pilgrimage (1894–1903) in similar fashion.⁷⁷ More than the previous traveller, however, he devotes many pages to religious exaltation, poetry and Quranic citations. While imparting few details about the passage from Shingīī to Wad Nun, he mentions the people encountered while remarking on the meals and tea provided along the way.⁷⁸ Especially insightful are his exchanges with various hosts, and the legal questions he sometimes was asked to deliberate upon given his manifest scholarly erudition. When in the Wad Nun town of Guelmim, 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 request a lengthy fatwa, or legal opinion, on whether it was preferable to hold the Friday prayer in the old or the new mosque.⁷⁹ Indeed, Muḥammad Yaḥya seems to have financed most of his pilgrimage with similar legal services. Upon his return from Mecca, with three camels loaded with newly acquired books, he made a lengthy stopover in the Saharan port of Tindūf. There, a trader asked Muḥammad Yaḥya to rule on a rather tricky question regarding foreign currency exchange.⁸⁰ The question concerned the repayment in Malī of a loan contracted in Morocco in one type of currency (Spanish Reál), with another (French Franc). In a fatwa he discussed the diversity of silver coins prevalent in western and northern Africa to conclude that such transactions were usurious and therefore forbidden. In accordance with Islamic law, he ruled that loans had to be reimbursed with the same currency in which they were contracted. This question coincided precisely with a hyper-devaluation of the Spanish Reál on the Moroccan market that was affecting trade across the Sahara.⁸¹ Because of its stable value and higher silver content, the French ‘piece of five’ fetched a higher price in western African markets. Aside from its worth as currency, silver coin was appreciated there for its intrinsic value and moulded into jewellery.

Much paper was expended on the subject of Islamic law. Legal documents, which tended to be preserved by families because of property rights issues, document Islamic practice and economic behaviour. The collections of fatwas, such as those written by Muḥammad Yaḥya and other distinguished Islamic jurists, are particularly informative. These documents bear witness to the intense discourse of Saharan legal experts who typically traded to finance their scholarly activities. Shorter legal responses (*nawāzil* or *ajwība*) to questions on multifarious matters were addressed to them by a general public in search of mediation and an Islamic ruling. Discussing similar legal records, Carlo Ginzburg explains that they represent dialogic or polyvocal texts because they tend to contain the voiced concerns of the common man or women as recorded by scribes.⁸² As such, these documents are interface texts where the questions of the unlearned are addressed and mediated by the learned.

Saharan scholars deliberated on all economic matters, from the numerous forms of usury, the status of salt or gum arabic as food or currency, to the use, inheritance and sale of slaves. In fact, the lawfulness of economic exchange, as in loans and sales, was a topic that consumed Saharan jurists and their Muslim constituents. A fascinating legal question they discussed was the return policy on the sale of defective goods.

Sīdi ‘Abdallah b. al-Ḥāj Ibrāhīm, a prominent early nineteenth century scholar, deliberated on such a matter that touches on the metaphysical. It concerned the sale of a property which, it was later discovered, housed several ghosts. These apparitions were witnessed according to the law, and since it was not disclosed beforehand that the house was so ‘defective’, the sale could be annulled.⁸³ Another remarkable legal document (which I found rather fortuitously buried in the sandy floor of the house of a *qādī*, or judge, in Shingīṭī), deals with an inheritance case from the 1850s involving both Tikna and Awlād Bū Sibā’ traders.⁸⁴ Penned by several jurists, it details the unravelling of extensive business arrangements between caravanners who met their deaths on trans-Saharan trails. It reveals how these men collaborated with one another to manage a complex set of relationships of credit and debt. Moreover, it provides unique evidence of the ways in which institutions such as trading networks were based on trust between partners and a reliance on Islamic law as defined by deliberating specialists. What the document also shows is the correspondence between scholars across the Sahara who consulted with one another at considerable distance to resolve legal and political disputes.

The Arabic sources I consulted in private collections also included commercial records such as registers, contracts and letters.⁸⁵ Most of these nineteenth and the early twentieth century documents were found after wading 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 and/or the 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. Indeed, unlike documents of a more legal nature, such as contractual agreements, letters often were not dated. So knowing the identity and genealogy of corresponding traders was necessary for dating purposes. Moreover, the assistance of elders was critical for translating vocabulary of goods and things 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 letters were difficult to come by as families usually do not preserve them, but they offer unique insights into the activities of trans-Saharan traders. Typically, correspondence would begin with salutations, then proceed with a review of recent business and political activity. A letter from a Tikna trader in Shingīṭī to his brother in Timbuktu, sent sometime in the late-nineteenth century, first summarised debt settlements between various partners before relaying the prices of common market goods.⁸⁶ In a dispatch from another brother residing in Walāta, political news as well as the movement of caravans was conveyed:

Be aware that a group of Reguibat (a nomadic group with close ties to the Tikna) from Guelmim arrived here in Walāta ... Among them is Ibrāhīm ... to whom you owe a debt. [This group and another] are not in the best of terms. May God assist them in their reconciliation ... The road is not safe ... Be aware that we have learned that the son of Al-Ḥāj ‘Umar has joined the Christians with numerous contingents of Futis.⁸⁷

Then, the brother provides the following market rates:

...the price of a *baysa* (basic unit of cotton cloth) is one and a half *mithqāl* (of gold) or three silver coins (fifteen French Francs) and the male slave (*al-khādim*) is now seven *baysa* when it was five *baysa* and the *baysa* in millet is eight *mudd* of Walāta [approximately sixteen kilograms].

Interpreting correspondence, and trade records generally, posed a number of difficulties not least of which was the matter of equivalencies. Conversions were complicated by the fact that certain weights and measures are no longer current. As in many parts of the Muslim world, the common unit for grain and dried foodstuffs was the *mudd* (divided into *naḥāg*) measured in tall wooden bowls. However, just like standard weights in most European countries before the nineteenth century, the size of the Saharan *mudd* varied from one to five kilograms depending on the market. While variations in certain measures rendered comparisons difficult, the gold weight or *mithqāl* was probably a standard 4.25 grams across Western and Northern Africa, and it served as a common unit of account from Marrakech to Kano.

Another level of difficulty for the interpreter of commercial records is that they tend to paint a picture of business behaviour that may only partially reflect actual trans-Saharan exchange. Indeed, it is important to recognise 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 Muslim judges or those in charge of defining the rules of lawful behaviour. While Islamic precepts influenced social and economic conduct in the Sahara, however, their enforcement was not easily realised. Moreover, 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.⁸⁸ Therefore, I would argue that the ‘informal economy’, operating beyond the purview of Muslim jurists or political authorities, and therefore 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 conservative representation and should be interpreted accordingly.

Furthermore, 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 reigns of social dominance. The voices of the oppressed or minority groups are muted, while only their labour or exchange value may be expressed in a letter or ruling. But it is important to recognise that those who left written records were not all prominent or wealthy. The Tikna in Shingīī, Walāta and Timbuktu whose letters are cited above, for example, were modest traders for whom writing paper was a necessary transaction cost. Finally, the political economy of violence which is the backdrop to all trans-Saharan exchange is not

always documented by these writers for whom peril, violence and warfare belonged to the natural order of things. To complete the picture, some Western sources are fortunately available to the interpreter of Saharan history.

Interpreting the Sahara with 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 region epitomised by its mystical city, Timbuktu.⁸⁹ Ultimately, the French succeeded in nominally 'pacifying' the region following a secret deal with the British in 1890.⁹⁰ Meanwhile, after a long series of negotiations with Morocco, and with the endorsement of Europeans obtained at the Berlin conference in 1884–1885, Spain also gained an additional North African colony by securing a strip of desert facing the Canary Islands. The Spanish named it *Africa Occidental Español*, but their colonial presence there remained weak and mainly confined to the littoral. Consequently, perhaps more than any other region of Africa, the Sahara was the subject of numerous writings by Westerners (Europeans and Americans). 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 recognise that the historical information contained in many of these documents oftentimes was derived from oral sources. In fact, both Western travellers and colonial administrators were guided by interpreters and cultural brokers who sometimes produced accounts of their own.

Travelogues and captivity narratives belong to a once popular literary genre that fed a Western fascination with the Sahara while disseminating lasting stereotypes about the region and its inhabitants.⁹¹ European explorers, who either travelled in the Saharan or participated in the conquest, left some valuable records. A handful of relations were written by accidental visitors such as the so-called 'white slaves' seized by maritime pirates off the infamous 'Coast of Barbary', 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.⁹² The writings of those who survived the ordeal are not always useful, for many were preconditioned 'to consider [Saharans] the worst of barbarians'.⁹³ But they are particularly relevant for documenting the activities of the Tiknas and the *Awlād Bū Siba'*. Indeed, Tikna chiefs in the *Wad Nun* 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 Siba'* who, together with the *Awlād Dīlīm*, 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' narrative sheds some light on the Sahara in the 1810s.⁹⁴ A sailor of African descent, Adams was enslaved for several years during which time he learned the local Arabic dialect (most probably *Hasaniya*). His testimony, collected in London by

British merchants of the African Company, contains observations on caravan organisation, market goods, slavery and the slave trade. Moreover, the text includes supporting evidence from the British consul who ransomed Adams. Other similar sources provide more ethnographic detail such as *An Authentic Narrative of the Loss of the American Brig Commerce* by James Riley, a sea captain from Connecticut shipwrecked in 1815.⁹⁵ The most interesting section is Riley's interview with Sidi Hamet, his Awlād Bū Siba' captor, which he transcribed with the help of an interpreter who translated into Spanish 'such parts of the narrative as [Riley] did not perfectly comprehend in Arabic [*sic!*]'.⁹⁶ Even if some information may have been distorted or lost in translation, Sidi Hamet's report of two commercial expeditions from Wad Nun 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.⁹⁷ This interview, which corroborated more recent information derived from the recollections of caravaners discussed above, contained observations about life on the trail, the harshness of the desert environment, as well as 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.⁹⁸ Charles Cochelet provided one of the earliest descriptions of the Guelmim market and the Tikna chief, Shaykh Bayrūk, who negotiated the ransom of his party.⁹⁹ His depiction of the dark-skinned chief's dress, including his indigo blue bandana of West African origin, as well as the musical performance of African dancers in his home, point to the cultural markers which link African societies across the Sahara.¹⁰⁰ Because of the language barrier, however, it is even more difficult to rely on the information Cochelet derived from his interlocutors; besides, much of it appears to be plagiarised from the two previous narratives.¹⁰¹

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 doctor who attempted to cross the desert.¹⁰² Laing's letters are laconic, but Davidson's journal, which was auspiciously salvaged, contains daily entries about his four-month sojourn in Guelmim in 1836. Because he witnessed a period of intense caravan traffic and several regional fairs, he documented the commercial exchanges between Wad Nun, Morocco, Mali and Senegal.¹⁰³ Better known travelogues were written by the Frenchman René Caillié (1820s), who succeeded as the first European to safely return from Timbuktu, and two German explorers, Heinrich Barth (1850s) and Oscar Lenz (1880s).¹⁰⁴ All three 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. Less known is the first relation documenting a trans-Saharan crossing along western routes by Léopold Panet, an 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.¹⁰⁵ Unlike most foreign travellers, Panet spoke African languages, including some Hasaniya, and he was very keen on reporting trading activities. Particularly important is his interview with the aging Shaykh Bayrük who revealed the secret of his commercial success.¹⁰⁶ Other intrepid Frenchmen would follow in the footsteps of these explorers, but Spaniards also joined in writing about their Saharan adventures.¹⁰⁷ In the 1870s, a Scott named Donald Mackenzie, in partnership with the Tikna of Wad Nun, sought to 'flood the Sahara' with British products by establishing a trading post on the coast. Although his plan failed, his report on international trade in Africa compliments information contained in other late nineteenth century sources.¹⁰⁸

While explorations allowed for a better understanding of the area, the Sahara proved a difficult world for the French to grasp. As explained in the first part of this article, the French misperceived the Sahara as a continental divide between 'Black' and 'White' Africa. This racial mapping was reinforced when they refined colonial constructs in the early twentieth century.¹⁰⁹ 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 local knowledge. As Edward Said, and more recently Abdelmajid Hannoum, explain, the tradition of Orientalism came out of France's encounter with North Africa.¹¹⁰ Steered by influential colonial ethnographers such as Charles de Foucauld and Robert Montaigne, the North African version of Orientalism exaggerated dichotomies between Arabs and Berbers.¹¹¹ In turn, French soldiers and colonial officers trained in the Algerian school would apply these racial templates to interpret their colonies further south. Indeed, it is extremely significant that some of French West Africa's most influential administrators, Général Léon Faidherbe and Lieutenant Xavier Coppolani, the architects of colonial Senegal and colonial Mauritania, respectively, were trained in Algiers.

In the process of 'orientalising' the Sahara, the French perpetuated misunderstandings about its inhabitants. Indeed Saharans, who were of mixed African origin, proved difficult to categorise in the French ethnographic grids of 'scientific racism.'¹¹² Naming their last African conquest Mauritania ('the land of the Moors'), the French proceeded to favour the *Biḍān*, whom they had long labelled 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 which would profoundly influence their segregationist Muslim policy in the region.¹¹³ In obvious and subtle ways, the works of colonial ethnographers, such as Maurice Delafosse, Paul Marty, Vincent 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 Africans.¹¹⁴

Much has been written about the Eurocentric nature of colonial sources, and how problematic they are for documenting African agency.¹¹⁵ To be sure, the French

rarely had even rudimentary understanding of the languages of the people over whom they ruled. While there were many prolific French colonial administrators specialising in multiple scholarly disciplines, most 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 recognise, as David Robinson does, that most colonial records were ‘mediated’ by Africans and that this mediation was ‘especially true for the “frontier” – areas that the French hardly knew’.¹¹⁶ Indeed much of the colonial record dealing with the Sahara was mediated 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 Bu al-Mughdād family of Ndar (Saint Louis, Senegal) was extremely influential in brokering their relationships with the Saharans and the French. Bu al-Mughdād, the son of a Wolof Muslim intellectual who was educated in the southwest part of what became Mauritania, was a respected notable who served the French for over three decades as an interpreter, translator and Muslim judge.¹¹⁷ In 1860, the French financed his pilgrimage, and his report on the voyage from Senegal to Morocco, and over to Mecca, appeared in a major colonial journal.¹¹⁸ The written records of Bu al-Mughdād and his sons represent invaluable sources for the history of the region.¹¹⁹ In the early twentieth century, his son Doudou Seck, or ‘Bu al-Mughdād II,’ who replaced him as the chief colonial interpreter for Mauritania, wrote an important essay on the history of Franco-Saharan relations at the turn of the century.¹²⁰ The French archives are filled with the translations, advice, and ‘framing’ presence of the Bu al-Mughdād family.¹²¹ 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 Atar, the economic capital of colonial Mauritania. He went on to write several reports for the French, including a series of historical essays on Mauritania based on oral interviews as well as local written sources.¹²²

The most notable sources produced by interpreters were the translations of letters exchanged between the French and their African correspondents, usually catalogued in the colonial archives under the rubric *correspondence indigène*.¹²³ Just like in North Africa, Arabic was the language of communication used by the French administration in Senegal, the Mali (French Soudan), Mauritania, and the Saharan regions extending eastward to Chad. Official correspondence between the French administration and African Muslim merchants and leaders (such as the emirs and the marabouts, or heads of Sufi orders), was in Arabic. In fact, since the early nineteenth century until 1911, when the new Governor General, William Ponty, forbade the use of Arabic in the French administration starting with colonial tribunals, Arabic was the language of diplomacy in Western Africa.¹²⁴

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

including statistics on the movement of caravans, prices, and merchants, which were useful for reconstructing the history of trans-Saharan trade. Dialogic records produced by colonial tribunals documented a space of intercultural mediation which offers unique insights into power relations, as well as interpersonal exchange and negotiation. Indeed, many of these written sources were initially based on information obtained orally, and contain the muffled, distorted, misquoted or 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 deconstruct these documents to ascertain both the evidence presented and the orality upon which it was based.

Conclusion: Bringing the Written Word to the Elder

The 'debris of the past' with which I sketched a reconstruction of trans-Saharan history was collected on a 'voyage of discovery' that was guided by oral information and trans-literal encounters in archives and private collections. As much as possible, I strove to interpret these documents within their original habitat, without 'displacing' them or 'carving them out from their sphere of use'.¹²⁵ This method was afforded through contact with the families who shared their records, as well as elders, the custodians of the ways of the past. Oral sources, from caravaners' descriptions of the challenges involved in navigating between sandstorms and brigands, to the recollections of supernatural occurrences such as the presence of ghosts, were critical loci of interpretation. These sources were invaluable not simply for the clues embedded in the detail of the picture, but because they conveyed the way people imagined the past to be, their 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, such as the ostrich lard, unknown to current generations. Bringing the written word to the elder, who could translate foreign and obsolete vocabulary, identify names and explain contemporaneous legal, social and economic practices, was integral to my methodological approach. The written record would have made little sense without the interpretations of informants. Moreover, I have argued for an appreciation of the oral dimensions of written documents, from the dialogic nature of legal texts, to the oral sources informing the colonial record. In other words, orality permeated the process of a historical investigation based on the multiple voices of informants and those imbedded in the archives. It goes without saying that such a discursive approach to historical sources is meta-disciplinary in orientation.

Historians of Africa have made significant contributions to historical methodology. Most notably they are innovators in extracting meaning and establishing roadmaps for the treatment and interpretation of oral sources. Moving beyond a fixation with Africa's orality, scholars are now uncovering sources expressed in other media, including writing and art. But too few have come to appreciate the tremendous wealth of documents in Arabic, a language of communication used for centuries in Africa. Moreover, there is a general failure among Africanists to properly perceive

the Sahara as a transnational region. Yet, the field of Sahara studies is gaining ground, not because it is attracting a growing number of scholars, inasmuch as desertification is claiming an increasing portion of the African continental landmass.

When considering trans-Saharan trade, 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 widespread and multifaceted. They involve demographic, political and economic exchanges, as well as cultural connections (from knowledge and religious praxis, to consumer behaviour and artistic expression). To be sure, Moroccans, Senegalese, Mauritians, Algerians and Malians share much more than an addiction to drinking green tea. Moreover, trans-Saharan trade was indeed part of the international trade system and was directly connected to, and at times dependent upon, the Atlantic world.

Still a glaring knowledge gap currently impedes our understanding of African continental history and its place in world history. The African divide, product of division and conquest, is only now being questioned in the context of a current rethinking of African history.¹²⁶ Ultimately, new meaning-making terminologies are necessary not only to bring the Sahara back into African Studies, but also to transcend the colonial legacy of ethnographic labels which have divided the continent between 'white' or North Africa, and 'black' or so-called *Sub-Saharan* Africa. It is lamentable that most Africanists, like their Middle East counterparts, remain ill-prepared to understand, yet alone explain, the so-called 'Arab-African dichotomy' in situations such as the violent repression of Darfurians in the recent history of the Sudan. The areas studies paradigm has its antecedents in antiquity but came to the fore in the cold war era and is a statist view of the world. Because of Africa's particular circumstances as a continent with eighty percent of its national boundaries drawn artificially by competing European powers oblivious to African political landscapes, engaging in transnational research takes on an even more urgent calling. Just like Miller lamented that African and African American studies are split into two separate scholarly fields,¹²⁷ we also should regret that Muslim Africa remains misunderstood and that the study of Africa has been divided for so long. New cultural models for rethinking spatial relationships developed in anthropology in the last few years will prove useful for writing the history that unites Africans across the continent.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article is dedicated to Fuḡī b. al-Ṭayr (c.1903–2004), an extraordinary Saharan whom I had the privilege of knowing. The oral history and empirical knowledge he shared about camel caravans and long-distance trade have forever shaped my understanding of trans-Saharan history. Research was made possible through generous grants provided by the Social Science Research Council, the Department of Education (Fulbright-Hays), the Council for American Oversea Centers, Michigan State University and the University of California, Los Angeles. This paper was first presented at

the UCLA History Department Faculty Colloquium (May 2003). I would like to thank my colleagues for their insightful comments. I am very grateful to Ralph Austen, Tricia Hepner-Redeker, David Robinson, Samy Chouia and Matt Connelly for their advice on this article.

NOTES

1. Contract between Mulāy Maḥdi wuld Mulāy ‘Abdalqādir and Muḥammad Fāl wuld Arwīlī (27 November, 1925). Hammuny Family Library, Shingitī (Mauritania).
2. Based on information derived from numerous interviews with Mulāy Ḥāshim, family members and others in Mauritania (1995–2003).
3. *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1988), p. 220 cited in Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria’s Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press 2002), Preface.
4. Joseph Miller, ‘Africa in History – History in Africa’, *American Historical Review* 104:1 (1999), p. 27.
5. Lydon, *On Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Practice, Trade Networks and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Western Africa* (manuscript in preparation).
6. Jan Vansina, *Living in Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 1994).
7. Michel de Certeau, *L’écriture de l’histoire* (Paris: Gallimard 1975), pp. 53–65. For him 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’. Ibid, 64 n. 5 (trans. mine). For an excellent discussion of De Certeau’s position on the scientific nature of the discipline of history see Wim Weymans, ‘Michel de Certeau and the Limits of Historical Presentation’, *History and Theory*, 43 (May 2004), pp. 162–278.
8. *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin 1949). Since Paul Gilroy’s pioneering publication, *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1993), there has been a growing body of literature on the subject. The most recent addition being Bernhard Klein and Gesa Mackenthun (eds.) *Sea Changes: Historicizing the Ocean* (New York: Routledge 2004).
9. Herodotus, *The Histories*, I, 67 and IV, pp. 181–185.
10. Admittedly, this expression, and the *Biḍān* ethnonym, are problematic. Yet it is undeniable that this region of the Western Sahara, where *Hasaniya* is the lingua franca, continues to be relevant as a culturally homogenous space. Terms such as *Sūdān* or *Biḍān*, John Hunwick submits, are ‘referents of cultural practices rather than of skin colours’, *Timbuktu & the Songhay Empire* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 2, fn 3.
11. E. Ann McDougall, ‘Salts of the Western Sahara: Myths, Mysteries and Historical Significance’, *International Journal of African Historical Sources*, 23.2 (1990), pp. 231–257.
12. When the French were preparing to invade Timbuktu in 1894, the notables there would appeal to the Moroccan Sultan for support.
13. For a discussion of the spread of Islamic knowledge and scholarship in the area see Lydon, ‘Inkwells of the Sahara: Reflections on the Production of Islamic Knowledge in *Bilād Shinqīt*.’, in Scott Reese (ed.) *The Transmission of Learning in Islamic Africa* (Leiden: Brill 2004), pp. 39–71.
14. I take the liberty of translating the French word *caravanier* here to mean those who outfit and run caravans.
15. This movement was initiated by the publication of Alphonse Duponchel’s, *The Chemin de Fer Trans-Saharien* (Paris: Hachette 1879).
16. While in the midst of organizing the conquest of the Saharan colony that he would name, Xavier Coppolani was assassinated in 1905 by a Saharan resistance fighter. Mohamed Said ould Ahmedou. ‘Coppolani et la conquête de la Mauritanie’, *Maṣādir: Cahier de sources de l’histoire de la Mauritanie*, Cahier no.1, 1994, pp. 101–114.
17. This project was based on misinformation about the untapped mineral resources of this ‘empty’ land. A Saharan colonial entity was even more unrealistic without inclusion of Morocco and Tunisia. The plan labeled a *Sahara “Alaska” français*, along with a map of the planned colonial project, was advertised in *Le Figaro* (08/01/51). 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'. See the critique by French ethnographer and expert Saharanist Théodore Monod 'Notes et Documents: Autour de l'Alaska Saharien', *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Afrique Noire* 14/2 (1952), p. 683.
18. Valentin Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa of Africa: Gnosis Philosophy and the Foundation of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1988), p. x. It is erroneous, however, to attribute this 'invention of Africa' to European templates alone. As explained in the beginning of this section, the expression *Bilād al-Sūdān* or 'the land of the blacks' gained currency in medieval times among Andalusian and Maghrebi geographers to designate 'black Africa' or what is also commonly referred to as Sub-Saharan Africa. Europeans would build on these notions to reinvent Africa on their own terms.
 19. <http://www.elysee.fr/documents/discours/1997/MAUR972.html> for Jacques Chirac's speech in Nouakchott.
 20. <http://www.maliturisme.com>.
 21. That I. William Zartman recognized this problem more than forty years ago is emblematic of how deep-rooted this perception remains. *Sahara: Bridge or Barrier?* (New York: International Conciliation, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, no. 541, January 1963).
 22. De Certeau (note 7), p. 216.
 23. The father of oral history, Jan Vansina, explains that his main purpose in writing his autobiography of a 'life of learning' genre, was to show 'how the practice of African history often differs from others'. *Living with Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 1994).
 24. Philip Curtin 'Field Techniques for Collecting and Processing Oral Data', *Journal of African History* 9/3 (1968), p. 369.
 25. Jacques Derrida, *Mal d'archive: une impression freudienne* (Paris: Galilée 1995), p. 13.
 26. Vansina, *Oral Tradition. A Study in Historical Methodology*, translated into English by H. M. Wright (Chicago: Aldine 1965) was originally published in French (*De la tradition orale: essai de méthode historique*, Tervuren: Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale 1961), Curtin.
 27. A *griot*, in the French language, is a professional oral historian and praise-singer. As Joseph Miller explains, some oral traditions can contain outright fabrications. For a useful discussion of the various layers of useful of oral traditions see his 'Introduction: Listening for the African Past', In *The African Past Speaks: Essays on Oral Tradition and History* (Kent and New York: Dawson and Archon 1980), pp. 1–59. Also the seminal work of David Henige, *Oral Historiography* (London: Longman 1982); Karin Barber and P. E. de Moraes Farias (eds.), *Discourse and its Disguises: The Interpretation of African Oral Texts* (Birmingham: Centre for West African Studies, University of Birmingham 1989); Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Past: The Social Construction of Oral History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992); Carolyn K. Adenaike and Jan Vansina (eds.), *In Pursuit of History: Historical Method in Africa* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann 1996) and Luise White, Stephen Meischer and David Cohen, (eds.), *African Words, African Voices: Critical Practices in Oral History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2001); Part IV 'Oral Tradition' in Toyin Falola & Christian Jennings, (eds.) *Sources and Methods in African History: Spoken, Written, Unearthed* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press 2003), pp. 239–328. Luise White provides an excellent discussion of oral history and methodology in *Speaking with Vampires. Rumor and History in Colonial Africa Studies on the History of Society and Culture* (Berkeley: California University Press 2000). On the silences or misremembering in the oral record, see also Richard Roberts, 'Reversible Social Processes, Historical Memory and the Production of History', *History in Africa* 17 (1990), pp. 341–349.
 28. B. Jewsiewicki and V. Mudimbe 'African's Memories and Contemporary History of Africa', *History and Theory* 32/4 (1993), pp. 1–19.
 29. *Oral Traditions as History* (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 1985); 'Memory and Oral Tradition', in *The African Past Speaks*, pp. 262–279; and 'On Combining Evidence', in Nkparom Ejituwo (ed.) *The Multi-Disciplinary Approach to African History. Essays in Honor of Ebiegberi Joe Alagoa* (Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press 1998), pp. 45–57.
 30. Jack Goody, *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990), especially chapters 9 & 10; Henri Lhote, *Les Touaregs du Hoggar* (Paris: Gallimard 1984); Ayele Bekerie, *Ethiopic: An African Writing System, its History and Principles* (Lawrenceville, NJ: African World View Press 1997); Maude Southwell Wahlman, *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African American Quilts* (New York: Tinwood Books, 2001); Diane White Oyler, 'The N'ko Alphabet as a Vehicle of Indigenist Historiography', *History in Africa*, 24 (1997), pp. 239–256; Jean-Loup Amselle, *Branchements: anthropologie de l'universalité des cultures* (Paris: Flammarion 2001).

31. Some of these manuscripts were taken to Paris, and can be consulted at either the Institut de France (Fonds Gironcourt; Fonds Terrier) or the Bibliothèque Nationale (Fonds Archinard).
32. 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 (Falola & Jennings, *Sources and Methods in African History*, p. xx). Even Joseph Miller, in his presidential address, failed to acknowledge the intellectual traditions of Muslim Africans ('Africa in History', note 4). He mentions the spread of Islam in Africa from the eighth century onwards only in passing (p. 19) and notes that Muslim merchants or 'foreign visitors also left the documentary records from which historians can now derive evidence of African agency' (p. 21). But while he recognizes that written sources available to historians are not just 'European documents', he only discusses in a footnote (fn 66) documents in other languages, namely Ethiopian sources and 'Arabic-language documentation' referring the reader to the works of Nehemia Levtzion and John Hunwick.
33. Excerpts of their descriptions of Africa were published in the seminal volume of works by North Africans, Andalusians and Muslims of Africa and the Middle East: Nehemia Levtzion and J. F. P. Hopkins (eds.) *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1981).
34. For example, David Henige claims that 'Historians of tropical Africa are favored neither with an abundance of good primary sources, nor with reasonable expectations of uncovering many more, at least for the [precolonial] period with which we are concerned', in 'The Race is not Always to the Swift. Thoughts on the Use of Written Sources for the Study of Early African History,' *Paideuma*, xxxiii (1987), p. 54.
35. For an overview of these Islamic traditions in Africa see *The Transmission of Learning*.
36. Hunwick, 'The Islamic Manuscript Heritage of Timbuktu'. Unpublished paper given at Vassar College, November 8, 2002.
37. Levtzion, *Muslims and Chiefs in West Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1968); Hiskett, *The Sword of Truth* (New York: Oxford University Press 1973), Robinson, *Chiefs and Clerics: Abdul Bokar Kan and the History of Futa Toro*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1975).
38. Hunwick's exceptional travails to promote the study of Arabic sources for Africa are well-known. These include excellence in scholarship – *Shari'a in Songhay: The Replies of al-Maghili to the Questions of Askia al-Hajj Muhammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1985) and *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire* (Leiden: Brill 1999) – as well as a tireless effort to build scholarly institutions (from the 'Centre for Arabic Documentation' at University of Ibadan in the 1960s to his recent 'Institute for the Study of African Islamic Thought in Africa' at the Program of African Studies, housed at the Program of African Studies of Northwestern University. Sean O'Fahey's seminal work focuses on the East African history – *State and Society in Dar Fur* (London: C. Hurst & Co. 1980); *Enigmatic Saint: Ahmad ibn Idris and the Idrisi tradition* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1990). Both Hunwick and O'Fahey have published three volumes of *Arabic Literature in Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 1994, 1995, 2003).
39. An excellent example is Jean Boyd and Beverly Mack, *Collected Works of Nana Asma'u* (Lansing: Michigan State University 1995) on Nana Asma'u, the scholar of early nineteenth century Sokoto (Northern Nigeria) who wrote poetry and treatises in Arabic and several African languages including Hausa and Tamachek using the Arabic script. See also White Oyler's work on N'ko ('A Cultural Revolution in West Africa: Literacy in the Republic of Guinea Since Independence', *International Journal of African History* 34/3 (2001), pp. 585–600.
40. E. Ann McDougall, a pioneer in the economic and social history of the region which concerns us, discusses the state of the field in a review article 'Research in Saharan History', *Journal of African History* 39 (1998), pp. 467–480. Most historians at the history department of the Université de Nouakchott (Mauritania) specialize in the Sahara. The most accomplished Mauritanian scholar is Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh, now teaching at the Université de Metz (France). In Europe, most Saharanists work out of France. In June 2004 an exceptional conference entitled 'Sahara Past and Present' was hosted by University of East Anglia (Norwich) which brought together over 50 international scholars. In North America, scholars of the Sahara tend to be members of the *Saharan Studies Association* founded by John Hunwick and Ann McDougall in 1992.
41. I visited five national archives and about thirty private libraries. Over two hundred interviews were conducted in several languages including Hasaniya, classical Arabic, Wolof and French (with some assisted interviews in languages foreign to me such as Songhai, and Fulfulde). It is important to note that less than half of the interviewees belonged to the two targeted groups (Tikna and Awlād

- Bū Sibā'). Most informants agreed not to be anonymously cited. For a more detailed discussion of my oral history methods, see Chapter One of *On Trans-Saharan Trails* (manuscript in preparation).
42. Weymans (note 7), p. 174.
 43. For a useful discussion oral sources see Curtin who recognizes that there could be overlapping of categories (1968, p. 374). In his esteemed *Oral Tradition*, Vansina establishes an alternate categorization in which he focused on oral tradition (as different than 'eyewitness accounts' and 'rumors'), p. 21. In a revision of this work, Vansina expanded his definition of oral tradition to: 'verbal messages which are reported statements from the past beyond the present generation', *Oral Traditions as History*, 27.
 44. For a discussion of Saharan chronicles, see my 'Inkwell of the Sahara', (note 13), pp. 63–64. On the chronicle of Wadān, see Aḥmad b. Aḥmad Sālim (ed.) *Tārikh Ibn Ṭuwayr al-Janna* (Rabat: Centre d'Etudes Africaines 1995). On the Walāta chronicle, see Timothy Cleaveland, *Becoming Walāta: A History of Saharan Social Formation and Transformation* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann 2002), pp. 169–173. Some Saharan chronologies are published in French translation (Paul Marty, 'Les Chroniques de Oualata et de Néma', *Revue des Etudes Islamiques*, Cahier III (1927), pp. 355–426 & Cahier IV (1930), pp. 531–575 and Vincent Monteil, 'Chroniques de Tichite (Sahara Occidental)', *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Afrique Noire*, tome 1, no. 1 (1939). The Mauritanian Ministry of Economic Planning, Office of Statistics, has compiled lists for 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 David P. Henige, 'Oral Tradition and Chronology', *Journal of African History* 12 (1971), pp. 371–389.
 45. This opinion was repeatedly stated in interviews and is a fact most Mauritians agree upon. This critical piece of information obtained orally determined the focus of my research project. That the Tikna and Awlād Bū Sibā' played such an important role in trans-Saharan trade was only recently recognized. See anthropologist Pierre Bonte's 'Fortunes Commerciales à Shingīṭi (Adrar Mauritanien) au Dix-Neuvième Siècle', *Journal of African History* 39/1 (1998), p. 9.
 46. James Walvin, 'A Taste of Empire, 1600–1800: Tea, Sugar and Tobacco Trade and Britain', *History Today* 47 (January, 1997), pp. 11–16; Jean-Louis Miège, *Le Maroc et l'Europe (1830–1894)* tome II *L'Ouverture* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1961), pp. 71–74.
 47. Most oral sources confirm that the event occurred during the 'peaceful reign' of the Emir Ahmad wuld Lamḥaymmad. For variants of this oral tradition see Albert Leriche, 'De l'origine du thé en Mauritanie', *Bulletin de l'Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire*, t. 13, no.3 (1951), pp. 868–871 and Chapter 6 of my *On Trans-Saharan Trails* (manuscript in preparation).
 48. According to one source, the Awlād Bu Sibā' were the first to import tea, but the Tikna were responsible for spreading its use. Interview in Shingīṭi with Abdarraḥmān wuld Muḥammad al-Ḥanṣhi (02/29/97). The Senegalese explorer Léopold Panet (discussed below) visiting Shingīṭi in 1850 described tea making implements in the house of an Awlād Bu Sibā' trader. *Première exploration du Sahara occidental: relation de voyage du Sénégal au Maroc 1850* (Paris: le Livre Africain 1968), p. 45.
 49. Their identities are not specified, but at least one of these traders was originally from Tafilalt (Morocco). René Caillié, *Journal d'un voyage a Temboctou et a Jenné, dans l'Afrique Centrale, Tome II* (Paris: Imprimerie royale 1830), pp. 212, 223–224. This intrepid traveller, who was served tea in the Sahara, will be discussed below. But, according to James Riley's narrative (also discussed later) tea was unknown to inhabitants in Wad Nun region in 1815. *Sufferings in Africa: Captain Riley's Narrative: An Authentic Narrative of the Loss of the American Brig Commerce Wrecked on the Western Coast of Africa, in the Month of August 1815*. Edited and with an Introduction by Gordon H. Evans (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc. 1965), p. 187. Four years later, Charles Cochelet was offered tea in Guelmim, the largest town in the Wad Nun. Cochelet, *Naufrage du Brick Français La Sophie* (Paris: Librairie universelle de O. Mongie Ainé 1821), vol. I, p. 309, and vol. II, pp. 37 and 45.
 50. Interviews in Shingīṭi with Abdarraḥmān wuld Muḥammad al-Ḥanṣhi (02/27/97), Muḥammad al-Amīn wuld Mamad wuld 'Abāba (02/27/97), Ruqāya mint Taqla wuld 'Abāba (10/03/97), and in Tamshakatt with Abdawa wuld 'Abāba (05/21/98; 05/22/98; 05/24/98).
 51. Interview in Shingīṭi with Muḥammad al-Amīn b. 'Abāba (02/27/97–02/28/97). Mḥaymad was the youngest on the caravan he joined from Gulmīm to Ndar (a town the French would name St. Louis du Sénégal). Somewhere on route, he purchased ostrich feathers and when he arrived, the price of feathers was very low on the Ndar market. His fellow caravaners poked fun at him along the way by arguing that the demand for ostrich feathers was very low in this region as they were usually sold in Morocco. Rather than despair and sell at a loss, Mḥaymad decided to head further south to

Dakar, then a small trading port (it became the largest city and capital of Senegal in the twentieth century), where he received a great price for his feathers.

52. *Mint* is the Hasaniya equivalent of the Arabic *bint* meaning 'daughter of'.
53. Khnātha mint Aḥmayda (with her two daughter Fatimatu and Mariam daughter of Muḥammad al-Farha) in Atar (10/5/97). On the Saharan women and commerce, see *On Trans-Saharan Trails* (manuscript in preparation).
54. Private library of Dāddah wuld Idda in Tishīt.
55. Stories about her reputation were collected in Mauritania and Mali where interviewees often referred to her as a 'saint' (*sāliha*).
56. Compiled from interviews in Nouakchott with Mulāy Ghaly wuld Yazīd wuld Mulāy 'Aly (07/24/97) and in Atar with Sidi Muḥammad wuld Daydī wuld al-'Arabi wuld Mulāy 'Aly (10/20/97).
57. Archives Nationales de la République Islamique de Mauritanie (hereafter ANRIM), Série Militaire, N92 (Carnet de Route, Colonel Gouraud).
58. I discuss the history of this important figure and his involvement with the French conquest of Mauritania in 'On Trans-Saharan Trails: Trading Networks and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Western Africa, 1840s–1930s' (Ph.D. Dissertation, Michigan State University 2000).
59. It is worth pointing out here the convergence of prescribed Islamic practice and economic behavior. The Arabic word *nafaqa* meaning charitable gift, handout, also translates into expenditure, allowance, while the derived word *nāfiq* means selling well, easily marketable. J. M. Cowan (ed.) *Arabic-English Dictionary: The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*. 4th Edition (Ithaca: Spoken Languages Services, Inc 1994), p. 1158.
60. Hagiographic is used in the sense of a 'discourse of virtues', De Certeau, (note 7), p. 282.
61. For example, a descendant told me the same story about Mḥaymad wuld 'Abāba. In such instances, the historian must obtain a sufficiently varied source-base to determine the origin of tropes. Another common trope, or 'cliché' to use Miller's language ('Introduction', pp. 7–8), is the successful story of the search for water, when an animal (sometimes a horse, other times a camel) miraculously scratches the sand's surface to reveal a source, saving a caravan expedition from thirst. This cliché originated from the epic of 'Uqba ibn Nāfi', the seventh century Muslim conqueror of North Africa, and is repeated by individuals to color their past.
62. Following Miller, 'Introduction', pp. 50–51.
63. Interview in Nouakchott with 'Abdallah b. Muḥammad Sidiyya (10/16/97).
64. It must be noted that astronomy was one of the favorite subjects of scholars of the Sahara who collected books on astrology. The Ḥabḥuḥ library of Shingīṭi holds many such manuscripts which contain colorful diagrams of the constellations.
65. Interview in Atar with Fuṭūjī b. al-Ṭayr (10/09/97).
66. Interview with Kara Jamī'a mint 'Abaydna b. Barak, Liksābi (08/01/99). Kara Jamī'a was born to two slaves and stolen when she was very young by the Aḥlād Djarrir, then sold in Morocco to the Hāhā before the family of al-Mukhtar b. al-Nājjim bought her. She is in her late 80s.
67. It is ironic that Western geographers would imagine the Sahel (from the Arabic for shore) to be located on the southern desert edge, when the inhabitants clearly know it as the north, with the 'ahl Sāhil' designating the nomadic groups circulating in the northern region of Western Sahara. Such a misunderstanding warrants a rethinking of the continent's geographic regions.
68. This orientation of the *gibla* is even more unique, since for most Arabs it points to Mecca; a decidedly easterly direction. Likewise, the Berber word *till* refers to the north for some, while for others it designates a northeastern direction.
69. For the people of the Adrar region (Northern Mauritania) the Pole Star is 'the star of the East' (*najmat al-sharg*). Note that the letter *qāf* tends to be pronounced as a 'g' in the Sahara.
70. For a discussion of the trade in books and paper see my 'Inkwell of the Sahara', (note 13) pp. 54–56.
71. There are, of course, little known exceptions, including Denise Maran Savineau who was in charge of a mission of inquiry in 1937–1938 and Odette Du Puigaudeau who wrote ethnographic reports in the same period mainly on Morocco and Mauritania. See my 'The Unraveling of a Neglected Source: Women in Francophone West Africa in the 1930s', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, vol. 147, XXXVII (1997), pp. 555–584.
72. Notable examples include: the turn of nineteenth century prosopography of over 200 Saharan scholars by Al-Ṭālib Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr al-Baddīq al-Baritallī al-Walāī, Muḥammad Ibrāhīm al-Kattānī & Muḥammad Ḥājji (eds.) *Fath al-Shakūr fī ma'rīfat a'yān 'ulamā' al-Takrūr*. (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī 1981); the classic nineteenth century historical account by Aḥmad b. al-Amīn As-Shinqīṭī, *Al-wasīṭ fī tarājim udabā' Shinqīṭ* (Cairo: Maktaba al-Khājī 1911); 'Abd al-Waddūd b. Aḥmad Mawlūd b. Intahā's history of the Adrar region compiled in the 1930s (copy of original manuscript

- in author's possession) translated by H. T. Norris, *Saharan Myth and Saga* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), pp. 126–159; and the *Ḥayāt mūrītāniya* encyclopaedic collection of Mukhtār b. Ḥamidūn, of which three volumes are published. The notes of this eminent twentieth century historian are archived at the Institut Mauritanien de Recherches Scientifiques (Nouakchott). For an overview of Saharan sources and literature see my 'Inkwells of the Sahara' (note 13).
73. Maḥmūd Ka'atī's *Tārīkh al-fattāsh* and Al-Sa'adi's *Tārīkh al-sūdān*. See Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, for a translation of the latter and discussion of the former.
 74. Even today, scholars in Mauritania, for example, censor their own writings for fear of reprimand. In the 1990s, a female scholar who mentioned a contentious historical event was physically assaulted after the publication of her work.
 75. *Rihla min al-qarn 13 H./19 M. li-jāmi'ha wa munshi'ha al-Ṭālib Aḥmad b. Tuwayr al-Janna*, 'Abdal-qādar Zamāmiḥ, (ed.). *Majalla al-Baḥṭh al-'ilmī*, vol. 28 (1977), pp. 291–304. H. T. Norris, who photographed the original manuscript in Wādān in the 1960s, wrote a very useful annotated translation: *The Pilgrimage of Ahmad Son of the Little Bird of Paradise, An Account of a 19th century Pilgrimage from Mauritania to Mecca* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips 1977). Note that the regional pilgrimage caravan, organized regularly until the late 1870s, used to congregate either in Shingīṭī or in Tishīt. It would then connect with other pilgrims along the way before their meeting point in Morocco. See A. Coyne, *Journal de route des Adrariens, étude géographique sur l'Adrar et une partie du Sahara Occidental* (Alger, 1889), p. 1.
 76. Norris provides copies of the European newspapers which reported these encounters (pp. 91–93, pp. 101–102).
 77. Muḥammad Yahya b. Muḥammad al-Mukhtār al-Walāṭī, *Al-Rihla al-Ḥijāziya*, edited by Muḥammad Ḥajjī (Beirut: Dar al-gharb al-islāmī 1990).
 78. It is interesting to note that by this time, tea was being served in several Saharan encampments between Shingīṭī and Wad Nun and not just exclusively among wealthy Moroccan urbanites as during Ṭālib Aḥmad's trip. But the fact that, especially in the very beginning of his travelogue, Muḥammad Yahya noted each time they were offered tea seems to indicate that such indulgences were less common for a Saharan resident of Walāta.
 79. Muḥammad Yahya, (note 77), pp. 87–100. In sum, he opined for the use of the older more historic mosque on Fridays, and the use of the newer mosque for regular prayer. Upon his return from Mecca, Muḥammad Yahya again stayed in Guelmim with Daḥmān b. Bayrūk, who asked him to issue a second fatwa on the matter. It would seem that the ruler of Guelmim there was having trouble imposing his will on the people with regards to where they all should congregate for the Friday prayer (Ibid., pp. 388–396).
 80. This fatwa on the exchange of coins which covers southern Morocco, western Algerian and northern Malian markets, is an extremely important document which was unfortunately left out of the publication of al-Walāṭī's *rihla*. I thank Professor Muḥammad al-Mukhtār b. Sa'ad of the Department of History of the Université de Nouakchott for alerting me to the existence of this fatwa. Its transcription and commentary was the subject of his student's master's thesis named Mariam bint 'Abaydallah ("Fatwā al-Walāṭī bi Sha'in al-tafāādil bayna al-Sakk fi al-Sūs wa Tindūf wa Arawān" (MA thesis, Université de Nouakchott, 1993–1994).
 81. Miège, *Le Maroc et l'Europe*, pp. 117–119. The devalued Spanish coin imported *en masse* into Morocco in the 1880s and 1890s further destabilized an already depressed regional economy.
 82. *Myths, Emblems and Clues*. Translated by J. and A. Tedeschi (London: Hutchinson Radius 1986), p. 159.
 83. Sīdī 'Abdallah b. al-Haj Ibrāhīm *Nawāzil* (personal manuscript copy).
 84. Shaykh b. Ḥammūny library (Shingīṭī).
 85. The doors of these libraries were opened to me as a result of chance meetings with library owners or their relatives, as well as through the guidance and assistance of several Mauritians. I am especially grateful to Abdel Wedoud oud Cheikh, Mohamed Said oud Hamody, Deddoud oud Abdallah, Mohamed Yehdih oud Tolba, Mohamed al-Mokhtar oud Saad and Mohamed oud Mohamedan.
 86. The following examples come from the private papers of the Buḥay family in Shingīṭī (Mauritania). I am extremely grateful to the family for sharing these informative commercial letters.
 87. By 'Futis' is meant the Halpulaar inhabitants of the Futa Toro region at the confluence of present-day Senegal, Mauritania and Mali. Al-Ḥāj 'Umar Tal was a well-known Muslim leader of the nineteenth century who organized a prolonged jihad. He has commercial and political relations with the French, located in Senegal. But the rumor that he has joined them was not entirely accurate. See David Robinson's *The Holy War of Umar Tal* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1985).

88. To be sure, there existed several secret alphabets in the region used for the purposes of producing amulets or talismans, and for writing encrypted messages. Since traders were often scholars, they may have used cryptography to communicate sensitive or precious information. On this fascinating subject, see Vincent Monteil, 'La Cryptographie chez les Maures; note sur quelques alphabets secrets du Hodh', *Bulletin de l'Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire* 13/4 (1951).
89. 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).
90. 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 Lac Chad.
91. Three anthologies on this subject are particularly useful. For the British captives of the eighteenth century: Daniel J. Vitkus (ed.) *Piracy, Slavery and Redemption: Barbary Captivity Narratives from Early Modern England* (New York: Columbia University Press 2001). For the American captives in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, excluding Riley's narrative: *White slaves, African masters: an anthology of American barbary captivity narratives*, edited and with an introduction by Paul Baepler (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1999). For an excellent collection of biographies and excerpts from a selection of travelogues, including captivity tales, see Maurice Barbier (ed.), *Voyages et Explorations au Sahara Occidental au XIXe siècle* (Paris: l'Harmattan 1985).
92. Cochelet, *Naufrage*, pp. vii–viii. He explains that in 25 years he knew of thirty vessels from various nations that shipwrecked on the Saharan coast of Africa. Moreover, Cochelet counted over 50 graves of Christians buried in Guelmim, where many 'white slaves' were sold and ransomed (p. 322).
93. Riley, *Sufferings in Africa*, p. 209. It is interesting to note that, unlike New England captivity narratives, or the *rihlas* of Muslim pilgrims, these accounts contain surprisingly little religious interjection.
94. Samuel Cook, *The narrative of Robert Adams, a sailor who was wrecked on the western coast of Africa, in the year 1810, was detained three years in slavery by the Arabs of the Great Desert, and resides several months in the City of Tombuctoo* (London: William Bulmer & Co. Cleveland-Row 1816). 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, for instance, Cochelet, *Naufrage*, vol. I, pp. ix–x and vol. II, p. 24. See also the critique by Jacob Graberg as relayed in W. W. Riley, *Sequel to Riley's Narrative* (Columbus, OH: George Brewster 1851).
95. *Sufferings in Africa*. It would be difficult to overstate how the popularity of the countless editions of Riley's account contributed to propagating negative stereotypes about Africans, Arabs, Muslims, and the Sahara. It is interesting to note that this was one of Abraham Lincoln's favourite books and may have influenced his position on slavery (Baepler, *White slaves*, p. 2). Riley described the hardships endured by Saharans, and provided evidence that tea was unknown to many of the inhabitants of the Wad Nun. However, 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 soon resumed his merchant career and made Mogador (Morocco) one of his primary ports of trade. Riley's son, named after the British consul in Mogador who ransomed him and would become his business partner, published a most informative annotated anthology of his father's letters. William Willshire Riley, *Sequel*.
96. *Ibid.*, pp. 262–293. Also, for a critical evaluation of Sidi Hamet's narrative by Jacob Graberg, see W. W. Riley, *Sequel*, pp. 413–434.
97. *Sufferings in Africa*, pp. 268–272. In the end, out of a caravan numbering over 1000 men and about 4000 camels, only 21 men and 18 camels finally reached Timbuktu.
98. For most of his captivity, Cochelet was in the hands of Sidi Hamet and his brother Seid, the very same Awlad Bū Siba' nomads who captured Riley's crew. Cochelet, *Naufrage*, vol. II, p. 25–26.
99. *Naufrage*, vol. I, especially pp. 239–241 and p. 267 et sq. Like Riley, Cochelet claims to have held unproblematic conversation with Saharans in Arabic. See, for example, his transcriptions of discussions with Shaykh Bayrūk (vol. I, pp. 332–333 and vol. II, pp. 59–63).
100. *Ibid.*, vol. I, pp. 239–240, 336.
101. Like Riley, he transcribed (in a conversation based on gesticulations and use of a few words in Arabic) an interview containing secondhand knowledge about Timbuktu which resembles both Sidi Hamet's and Adams' accounts. *Ibid.*, pp. 342–344 and *Naufrage*, vol. II, pp. 1–26. Cochelet was familiar with both these previous narratives and goes as far as to claim that neither Adams, nor Sidi Hamet (!) actually visited Timbuktu, but that their information was based on hearsay (pp. 24–26).
102. Only the letters of Laing, who was murdered upon his return from Timbuktu, are available. For Laing's records see E. W. Bovill, *Missions to the Niger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1964),

- pp. 121–365 and Théodore Monod, *De Tripoli à Tombouctou: le dernier voyage de Laing, 1825–1826* (Paris: Société Française d'Histoire d'Outre-mer 1977). John Davidson's very detailed travelogue was published by his brother. *Notes Taken during travels in Africa* (London: Cox & Sons 1839).
103. Moreover, like Cochelet before him, he also described the arrival of a party of West African musicians from Timbuktu who entertained in Shaykh Bayruk's house. Davidson, *Notes*, pp. 109–110.
104. Caillié, *Journal*; Heinrich Barth, *Travels and Discoveries in North and Central Africa in the Years 1849–1855*, 3 volumes (New York: Harper & Brothers 1859); Oskar Lenz, *Timbuctou: Voyage au Maroc, Au Sahara et au Soudan*, 2 volumes translated by Pierre Lehacourt (Paris: Librairie Hachette 1887).
105. Excerpts of his travelogue were published that same year in the *Revue Coloniale*, vol. 5 (November and December 1850). Later it was republished in book form thanks to the initiative of Robert Cornevin (Panet, *Première exploration du Sahara occidental*).
106. Panet, *Première exploration du Sahara occidental*, pp. 155–156.
107. Notable examples include: Capitaine Henri Vincent, 'Voyage dans l'Adrar et Retour à St. Louis', *Tours du Monde* (1860); Camille Douls, 'Cinq mois chez les maures nomades du Sahara Occidental', *Tour du Monde* (1888), pp. 177–224; Gaston Donnet, *Une Mission au Sahara Occidental du Sénégal au Tiris, Chargé de mission du Ministère des Colonies* (Paris: Augustin Challamel 1896). The most notable Spanish traveler was Joachin Gatell who served in the Moroccan army in the 1860s in order to visit the Sus and Wad Nun regions, published several decades after his death. Joachin Gatell, *Viajes por Marruecos, el Sus, Uad-Nun y Tekna*. (Madrid: Memorias de la Sociedad Geográfica de Madrid 1882). An excerpt was later published in French 'L'Ouad-noun et le Tekna, sur la côte occidentale du Maroc', *Bulletin de la société de géographie* (October, 1889), pp. 257–287.
108. Donald Mackenzie, *The Flooding of The Sahara: An Account of The Proposed Plan For Opening Central Africa to Commerce and Civilization from the North-West Coast, with a Description of Soudan and Western Sahara, and Notes of Ancient Manuscripts* (London: S. Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington 1877).
109. In the words of Valentin Mudimbe, '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'. *The Invention of Africa*, 1. Pathé Diagne has a similar argument in 'Introduction to the study of ethnonyms and homonyms', *African Ethnonyms and Toponyms* (Paris: UNESCO 1984), p. 11.
110. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books 1978); Hannoum, "'Faut-il Brûler L'Orientalisme?": On French Scholarship of North Africa', *Cultural Dynamics* 16 (July 2004), pp. 71–91.
111. 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-šiba*). For a discussion of this dichotomous colonial construct see Edmund Burke III, 'The Image of the Moroccan State in French Ethnographic Literature', in Ernest Gellner and Charles Micaud (eds.) *Arabs and Berbers*, (Lexington, MA: Lexington Publishers 1972), pp. 175–200 as well as other articles in this seminal volume.
112. Blacks appeared at the bottom of this racial grid, followed by Moors, Arabs and then Berbers, considered closer to Caucasians in physique and intellect. David Robinson, 'Ethnography and Customary Law in Senegal', *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, vol. 126, XXXII–2 (1992), p. 223.
113. First devised by French colonial ethnographer and *islamologue* Paul Marty (*Etudes sur l'islam maure, Cheikh Sidia, les Fadelia, les Ida ou Ali* (Paris: Editions Leroux 1916), this classification would profoundly shape colonial racial constructs in francophone Africa. David Robinson *Paths of Accommodation: Muslim Societies and Colonial Authority in Senegal and Mauritania, ca. 1880–1920* (Athens: Ohio University Press 2000), pp. 941–995.
114. For a discussion of Delafosse's legacy see Jean-Loup Amselle & Emmanuelle Sibeud (eds.) *Maurice Delafosse. Entre orientalisme et ethnographie: l'itinéraire d'un africaniste 1870–1926*, (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose 1998), especially the article by Jean Schmitz, 'L'Afrique par défaut ou l'oubli de l'orientalisme', pp. 107–121.
115. For example, Joseph Ki-Zerbo (ed.) *Unesco General History of Africa Volume 1: Methodology and African Prehistory* (Paris: UNESCO 1980).
116. Robinson (Note 113), p. 50.
117. Interview in Ndar (Senegal) with his great grandson of Bu al-Mughdād, Abou Latif Seck (11/05/97).
118. 'Voyage par terre entre le Sénégal et le Maroc', Bou-el-Mogdad, assesseur au cadî de St. Louis, *Revue Maritime et Coloniale* (mai 1861, 1er trimestre), pp. 477–494.

119. Saharans composed numerous poems about Bu al-Mughdad family. Several poems were shared by Mauritians including Muḥammad Yaḥḍī wuld al-Ṭolba, Nouakchott (05/97), others were collected in Senegal. For instance, a poem describes his home in St. Louis which was never empty as the cracks in the walls attest (created by the crowds that leaned against them). In fact most notable Muslim visitors – especially those from the Trarza region – would stay there when visiting the French capital. In another *gāf*, or praise poem, Bu al-Mughdād is described as a thin man who serves all his food and ‘eats’ with his ears (i.e. he lives on the information which circulated through the mouths of his numerous guests).
120. ANRIM, E1/3. ‘Mémoires de Bou el Mogdad jusqu’en 1903’. It is important to note that since my first visit to the Mauritanian national archive in 1996, this document has vanished.
121. For a discussion of the structure and composition of the colonial archives of French West Africa see Robinson, *Paths*, pp. 37–57.
122. Interview with Mohamed Said ould Hamody in Nouakchott (1997). Most of Ba’s articles were published in the French journal *Renseignements Coloniaux*. See, for example, ‘Une Grande Figure de l’Adrar: L’Emir Ahmed ould M’Hamed, 1871–1891’, *Renseignements Coloniaux* 10 (October 1929).
123. In the highly disorganized and dilapidated national archive of Mauritania, these letters are scattered across the numerous files. See ANRIM Série E1, especially E1/73 and E1/100 for the largest collection of letters translated by Bu al-Mughdād II and his assistant Hamet Fall. In the Archives Nationales du Sénégal, the ‘native correspondence’ is located in the Ancienne Série 13G (Senegal) and 15G (Soudan).
124. William Ponty, ‘Circulaire no. 29 au sujet de l’emploi de la langue française dans la rédaction des jugements des tribunaux indigènes et dans la correspondance administrative, Dakar 8 mai 1911’, *Journal Officiel du Sénégal et Dépendances* (18 Mai 1911), pp. 346–7 (‘L’arabe... langue étrangère à notre pays... est pour le noir la langue sacrée. Obliger même indirectement nos ressortissants à l’apprendre, pour entretenir avec nous des relations officielles, revient donc à encourager la propagande des sectateurs du Coran.’). The wide-ranging implications of Ponty’s radical decision, which was taken in the context of a French fear of a Pan-Islam, surely deserve scholarly attention.
125. Indeed, it was important to understand primary sources not as “‘abstract” objects of knowledge’, ‘isolated’ and ‘denatured’, but within their organic setting. De Certeau (note 7), pp. 84–89, in reference to Jean Baudrillard’s (‘La collection’, in *Le Système des objets* (Paris: Gallimard 1968), pp. 120–150) discussion of the placement of documents in a ‘marginal system’.
126. In the past few years, several workshops and post-doctoral fellowships were organized at Columbia University, New York University, the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the American University in Cairo to promote this rethinking.
127. Miller (note 4), p. 24.