must consider Willemse’s as another narrative within all the other narratives, and Willemse’s presence in the text can sometimes come between the reader and the people of Darfur and Sudan we are learning about. The book is a revised doctoral thesis, and this shows in things like the heavy-handed reviews of literature that pop up at every turn. Scholars of gender and Islam certainly will find this book of interest. But it seems a missed opportunity to reach a much wider audience, given the notoriety of Darfur. One can only hope that Willemse will do this in a subsequent publication, pursuing some of the lines of analysis she illuminates so brilliantly in the “Epilogue.”

Victoria Bernal, University of California, Irvine


Not unlike the weather in the old vaudeville line, the historic trans-Saharan trade is a subject often lectured about, but remarkably little has been done about it, at least until Ghislaine Lydon took on this project. And in this massive study she tries, with considerable success, to do it all: Saharan trade is integrated into the story of global/cross-cultural exchange; the traditional divisions of “North” and “West” African history are repositioned by a focus on the Saharan commerce that unites them; and a remarkably lucid tale is told of Wad Nun (southern Moroccan) economic (and social, and legal) links in the nineteenth century, south through Tawdenni and Arwan to Timbuktu, then back north through Walata, Tishit, Shinqit (with a brief excursion to the coast at Arguin), Wadan, and Ijil. The Islamic legal infrastructure that buttressed these links (effecting credit, contracts, and caravans) is demonstrated; the importance of orality is exposed, in tandem with the written word that glued all this together and documents the tale; the significance of paper and a “paper economy” which recorded partnerships and networks is highlighted; and underlying it all is the significance of literacy and learning. And the bookends, in this breathless run of themes, unpack a set of inheritance cases from nineteenth-century Tikna merchants whose story well illustrates much of the above.

If there is a problem with the book it is that it is at least two books,
together with the thesis that launched these studies. The thesis focused
on the Tikna merchants/Wad Nun story and included research that dates
back to 1995, but was mainly done a dozen years ago; woven throughout
is another book on the historic background to nineteenth-century Sahar-
ran trade, contextualized in the larger, global literature on trans-regional
commerce; and embedded in all of this is yet another book on the Islamic
legal culture of the Sahara with particular attention to economic matters.
In her effort to be thorough Lydon becomes almost encyclopedic, sacrific-
ing historical narrative to the delivery of multiple themes and, probably,
too much material. But what a lovely problem to confront. Fortunately for
those easily overwhelmed, the punch lines for about half the chapters have
appeared in previous articles and book chapters, so the impressive, broad
range of Lydon’s interests will be familiar to those who have followed
her writing. The book contextualizes her previously published work, pro-
vides infinitely more detail and supporting material, and includes exten-
sive methodological background.

For a reviewer with limited space, the problem is which book in this
volume to take up. For me, the most compelling story is the one which I
suspect triggered Lydon’s own passion for the topic: a Tishit merchant
with Tikna and Wad Nun roots, Muhammad b. Mbarik, known as “the pot-
bellied,” or Baghlil. She introduces her book with Baghlil’s departure on
his last caravan trip, and in chapter 7 she tells his story, or rather the story
of the aftermath of his death. His death in the mid-nineteenth century was
followed by the demise of three other Wad Nun merchants, some possibly
from foul play on the trail, and this triggered a complicated, extended,
and apparently interconnected set of inheritance cases. The inheritance is-
issues, in effect, are Lydon’s punch line as she unpacks the legal jostling and
economic affairs detailed in a “parchment” that she was shown in Shinqit
twelve years ago and that was meant to settle the four merchants’ affairs.
This is an exceedingly rich document that does not just list the merchants’
debs and credits due, but documents futures trading and, behind it all, the
significance of Islamic law and jurists, to say nothing of a certain tension
between the written-word/paper-based economy and the spoken word. In
light of its centrality to the conception of this volume, it is a shame not
to be able to see the document (the author photographed it in twelve seg-
ments) beyond the background for the dust jacket. We are tempted by se-
lections that are translated throughout chapter 7, which make the larger
document all the more critical. I did miss discussion of why (beyond their
common Wad Nun, Tikna, and Tichit connections) this particular set of