

CSSH NOTES

Ghislaine Lydon. *On Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks, and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Nineteenth-Century Western Africa*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 468 pp. + xxviii.

doi:10.1017/S0010417510000393

Based on extensive fieldwork and pioneering research in public and (especially) private repositories of the Sahara, this work reconstructs the organization and development of a nineteenth-century trading diaspora in the northwestern Sahara. Allied with fellow Amazigh (“Berber”) clans as well as with Jewish merchants, traders moved cloth, ostrich feathers, salt, slaves and, most importantly for Lydon, paper, across the desert. Using family and court records, a breathtaking number of interviews, and a vast knowledge of Islam and northwest Africa’s religious cultures, Lydon’s lengthy book provides a wealth of information about the trans-Saharan trade on the eve of colonial conquest and will serve as a benchmark.

Lydon contributes to the burgeoning Saharan Studies movement. Illustrating just how productive conceiving of West Africa and the Maghrib as part of a single unit can be, she highlights the broader links between trade networks and household economies on the edge of the desert, thereby revealing the crucial role of women in long-distance commerce. Lydon’s reconstruction of family finances adds to an emerging consensus that while the dramatic caravans of tens of thousands of camels that attracted the attention of early modern observers may have died out in the nineteenth century, the trade itself continued in a more dispersed, opportunistic vein during a period of intense uncertainty and violence linked to religious transformation. Several scholars have identified the persistent connections between Muslim Sufi orders and the organization of the Saharan trade, but the precise nature of these links has remained debatable. Lydon suggests that the expansion of the paper trade associated with Islamic reform and revival movements of the time facilitated decentralization by improving record keeping even as the violence that often erupted during disputes over reform threatened the profitability of large ventures. This period may have also seen the emergence of a kind of identity consumerism among Muslims in which purchasing paper and funerary and personal cloths from desert merchants became intertwined with religious status.

These are enticing theories, though it may be difficult to distinguish actual changes from increases in the production of records, especially given the lack of quantitative data and continuing uncertainties about preceding

centuries. Lydon associates the expansion of record keeping with the expansion of Islam itself. Despite great progress in recent years, too little is yet known about the history and organization of pre-Islamic trade in the region to evaluate the effects of Islamization in the *longue durée*. To counter this, Lydon uses Islamic reform as a proxy for Islamization more generally; this is intriguing but does not fully assuage anxieties that the debate overly reifies Islam itself.

Two of the book's arguments will be of great interest to readers of *CSSH*. In suggesting that increases in paper trade transformed not just the organization of trade but also what it meant to be Muslim, Lydon attaches great importance to Arabic (and *ajami*) literacy. But an unresolved tension runs through the book between a Goody-esque or Ong-ian sense of writing as a coherent and dramatic causal force and an Illich-ian recognition that literacy is always embedded in a wider set of communicative practices. Paper stored the details of Saharan contracts, but whenever disputes arose (especially in settling estates) only the oral testimony of "trustworthy" witnesses was decisive. Historical anthropologies of Muslim societies have revealed a wide range of ways the authority of texts shifted during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and Lydon's account lies somewhere in the middle of a continuum. Texts mattered, but rather than serving as a technology for storing and preserving truth, writing provided *aides-mémoire* and graphic representations of the social networks that themselves generated truth through oral pronouncements. Yet despite this important insight and despite the extensive interviewing, Lydon's depiction remains an extraordinarily textual one, in which the self-representations of those who wrote are taken to stand in for the crucial processes of society as a whole. Nonetheless, Lydon's treatment of the social, material, and intellectual resources of this group is very convincing, revealing the practices that sustained an important nexus of social identity, practical bureaucracy, spiritual guidance, and institutional reproduction that constituted what she terms a "paper economy of faith."

The book also makes tentative contributions to theories of trade. Tempering "new institutionalism" with an analysis of "legal culture," Lydon joins those who seek internal characteristics of Muslim social institutions (and, behind those, religious institutions) to account for the specific evolution of regional economies. She considers the vesting of authority primarily in the trustworthiness (*amâna*) of the parties involved in agreements to be "an inherent problem in the practice and the precept of Islam" (382). Since the ultimate arbiters of *amâna* were religious specialists, the longevity of trans-Saharan trade reflected the resilience of what were essentially broadly shared religio-cultural attitudes. But the irreducible role of faith was also, she claims, responsible for the failure to resolve long-term information asymmetries, the tendency for factional conflict in times of insecurity, and the inability of traders to establish stable collaborative ventures along the lines of the European firm. Still, Lydon's important attempt to bring semiotics, psychology, epistemology, and religion into the analysis of economic rationality too often rests on undefined terms like "culture," "proof," "evidence,"

and “faith” that become placeholders for processes still imperfectly understood and insufficiently historicized. Those invested in formal models of economic activity may thus find Lydon’s revisions difficult to incorporate; those of a more constructivist bent may be frustrated by the uncritical use of concepts; and political economists may be unconvinced that significant causality lies in such local forces. Nonetheless, Lydon’s arguments are provocative contributions to evolving debates on Islamic economies and economic anthropology.

———Sean Hanretta, Stanford University

Ronald Niezen, *The Rediscovered Self: Indigenous Identity and Cultural Justice*. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009.

doi:10.1017/S001041751000040X

In *The Rediscovered Self*, Ronald Niezen builds on and extends his previous work (including *Origins of Indigenism* and *A World Beyond Difference*) analyzing the history, dynamics, struggles, and paradoxes of the transnational indigenous peoples movement. As with his earlier books, Niezen draws on his ethnographic research with Tuareg pastoralists in Mali and Cree Indians in Canada, as well as his repeated attendance at various United Nations meetings on the topic of indigenous rights, to provide a clear, compelling, and thoughtful analysis of the possibilities and predicaments produced by the rapid expansion of the global indigenous peoples movement.

In contrast to the sustained arguments of earlier volumes, *The Rediscovered Self* is a collection of thematically related essays (most previously published). They explore the conjunctures that contributed to the rise of transnational indigenism; the impact of information and communication technologies (ICTs) on indigenous identity and political mobilization; the limitations of judicial definitions of “culture” and “cultural rights” for aboriginal recognition in Canada; the justice-seeking strategies of two Cree communities trying to control the predations of extractive industries; the challenges of understanding, representing, and preventing teenage cluster suicides among Cree and other indigenous peoples; and the distinct approaches of scholars and indigenous activists to history. Together, these essays probe the intensified need for belonging and cultural continuity in a world of rapid change and increasing dislocation and the precarious politics of indigenous activism and appeals. As always, Niezen moves eloquently beyond the details of specific cases to distill and consider the epistemological, political, and theoretical assumptions, contexts, and consequences of the rise of indigenism as a platform for claiming cultural and social justice from states, the United Nations, and other institutions and organizations.

In the essays, Niezen elaborates on several key ideas discussed in earlier work and offers some new insights. These include an extended discussion of what he terms “the politics of indignation,” which he argues has “become *the* central