Ghislaine Lydon, *On Trans-Saharan Trails Islamic Law, Trade Networks, and Crosscultural Exchange in Nineteenth-Century Western Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 496 pages + Bibliography and Index. ISBN # 978-0521887243. Hardcover $99.00.

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Ghislaine Lydon's *On Trans-Saharan Trails* is one of a small number of historical works to focus on the Sahara; it fills a very important spatial gap in the historiography. One of the most provocative contributions of her work is the way she challenges us to reconfigure our understanding of Saharan space and its relationship to the rest of Africa. In brief, her monograph synthesizes an impressive breadth and depth of research and displays an argument of great acuity; as a result, she questions fundamentally the common divide between West and North African history. Indeed, Lydon redefines the region in a manner with which historians must reckon: "I treat West and North Africa as one region with the Sahara sealing the continent rather than dividing it. In this book 'western Africa' includes what is typically referred to as West Africa in addition to the Sahara, stretching to its northwestern (southern Morocco, Western Sahara, southern Algeria) and central (Niger, southern Libya, Chad) edges" (p. 5). She provides compelling evidence for the wide circulation of persons, ideas and goods through this region over a period of many centuries, with a focus on the traders who made that circulation possible and the strategies that served them.

If we are to follow her lead and so redefine "western Africa," what are the implications for scholars working in these areas? At the very least, it seems that the geographic and intellectual terrain covered by Africanists in their training and their professional capacities needs to be enlarged to encompass the entirety of the African continent, not just north and south of the Sahara but in the Sahara as well. Unfortunately, because the majority of Africanists have little familiarity with Africa north of the Sahel, they are in a fairly weak position to evaluate the very claims to regional cohesion Lydon is making.

However, Lydon's claims are not without controversy, or at least

qualification. Ralph Austen argues in his 2010 book, *Trans-Saharan African in World History*, that while the great desert has acted as a crucial trade highway for approximately a thousand years, prior to the second millennium BCE there is little evidence that people of the Sahara were in active contact with, or acting as trade and cultural facilitators for, the North African coast and the sub-Saharan region.[1] While, for lack of expertise in this area, I am not in a position to side conclusively with one opinion or the other, it is worth noting that Lydon's argument for continuity of trans-Saharan movement over millennia is tenuously sourced.

In any case, that is a quibbling point for it is clear that over the past thousand years the desert has acted as a great crossroads, and the results of Saharan exchanges can be observed in the societies on every side of the desert. These remarkable exchanges and crossings are fascinating and important not only for how they affected North African and Sudanic cultures, but also because they concern people who crossed the borders of cultures and states regularly. On this topic Lydon asks a crucial question: how did they do so in the face of political instability, crossing through varied polities, cultures, languages, and landscapes? Her conclusion is a useful illumination of the way they depended on paper, literacy and religion to form networks and create stability and accountability in their economic transactions across huge spaces and time periods.

While for the most part I agree with Lydon and find her reformulation of western African history provocative, I nonetheless perceive a few loose ends or profitable avenues of future research. One question that remains unanswered is: If West and North Africa are one area bound by the Sahara rather than two regions divided by it, then where does this geographic entity end on its southward edge? Her point that all of the cultures on the Sahara's edge share important characteristics, such as the threefold ritual of tea preparation, and that this has obvious implications for neighboring societies, is provocative,

[1] Ralph A. Austen, *Trans-Saharan Africa in World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

but there remains more work to be done in order to convincingly argue that the Sahara "seals" the region as she describes.

Similarly, I wonder how she might account for the way notions of identity and difference are imagined by peoples along the littoral and the interior of the Sahara, with reference to race or ethnicity. Do Sahelians identify with North Africans, for example, and does that matter in how we intellectually and conceptually carve up the continent? My fieldwork in Bamako, particularly during the Arab Spring in 2011 and the early months of the 2012 Tuareg rebellion, points to important perceptions of difference on the part of southerners towards both Saharan Malians and North Africans, and a sense of being perceived by those groups as an Other. Given the importance of race in Saharan and Sahelian societies, this is a subject in need of more scholarly attention before the meaning of a trans-Saharan community can be adequately understood.[2]

Such criticism should in no way obscure the fact that this is a fine book. Indeed, Lydon's fieldwork is staggering: more than two hundred interviews in Mali, Senegal, Mauritania, and Morocco, and the collection of a large number of Arabic manuscripts. However, as she notes, "[t]he easy part was engaging in fieldwork; the challenge was making sense of the written and oral source material that it generated" (ix). This is surely true and she has risen to the challenge with a book that pushes the boundaries of African history in new, exciting ways.

[2] Bruce Hall's, *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa, 1600-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) is an excellent entry-point into this discussion.