Gold, Islam and Camels: The Transformative Effects of Trade and Ideology

Alice Willard

The Johns Hopkins University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol28/iss28/6
GOLD, ISLAM AND CAMELS:
The Transformative Effects of Trade and Ideology

ALICE WILLARD

Introduction

One of the most nagging questions in world-systems theory, once you have accepted that precapitalist world-systems are possible, is simply how did they function? While scholars have reached some consensus as to how the capitalist world-system has developed and changed over time, there is still little consensus regarding precapitalist systems. To a large extent this is caused by the multiple disciplines involved in the research: the vocabulary of political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, historians and archaeologists may overlap in terminology, but fragments over meanings. The present work is an effort to synthesize the historical record for one particular state in West Africa, in order to examine the underlying social structures in a precapitalist world-system. The Sudannic Empires of Ghana, Mali and Songhai stretched over most of West Africa at their height, extending from Mauritania in the north southward to Niger, Mali and Guinea-Conakry. The time frame extended from their origin in the second half of the ninth century, to the 1591 conquest of Songhai by Moroccan troops. The analysis has three major parts: state formation, the process of trade, and the expansion and development of Islam.

Within the general objective of this paper two theoretical questions will be considered. The first concerns an ongoing debate between David Wilkinson (see especially Wilkinson, 1991a), and Christopher Chase-Dunn and Thomas Hall (1991a) regarding the nature of different types of systems, the conceptualization of core, peripheral and semiperipheral regions within world-systems, and the method of spatially bounding intersocietal systems. It might be useful here to provide a brief overview of the similarities and differences in their positions regarding these three points before proceeding with the Songhai case study, especially as this clarification will provide the definitions for the terms used in the analysis.
Wilkinson (1991a) defined a world-system as "... militarily closed, geotechnologically isolated social-transactional networks with an autonomous political history" (Wilkinson, 1991a p. 113). In a later paper, Wilkinson also defined civilization "as politico-social transaction networks of cities and their populations" (Wilkinson, 1991b, p. 3), rather than using the more traditional definition of cultural homogeneity. Civilizations and world-systems were used in his writing thereafter either interchangeably or as a compound noun. In this way, the possibility of a core, semiperiphery and periphery could be analyzed as part of trade or military networks, without requiring geographic (or state) borders. Civilizations contained a core, which is usually an urban area and its surrounding territory. Civilizations also included a semiperiphery and periphery, which Wilkinson defined through the expansionary logic of politico-military control. Semiperipheries were areas recently overwhelmed, and peripheries are those that were known but not yet beaten (Wilkinson, 1991a, pp. 121-2). The world-system was therefore bounded by regular military interactions, and areas connected by long distance trade were distinct and termed 'oikumenes.' His focus was on the political and military orders for defining both world-system and civilization, rather than the economic one, and this concentration requires the existence of states.

Chase-Dunn and Hall instead defined a world-system as "... intersocietal networks in which the interaction (trade, warfare, intermarriage, etc.) is an important condition of the reproduction of the internal structures of the composite units and importantly affects changes which occur in these local structures" (Chase-Dunn and Hall, 1991a, p. 7). Their definition of a world-system is more eclectic as it could contain pre-state systems in which trade was more important. Their definition of a world-system could also contain core/periphery relations, although not necessarily. Where these existed, one important condition of the world-system was the types of interactions between the core and the periphery, which might be either hierarchical or differentiated. Hierarchical interactions implied economic exploitation or political domination, while differentiation did not. While the most common form of exploitation would be of the periphery by the core, this was not
only possibility incorporated into their definition. Trade, in particular, is not necessarily exploitative, but this type of relation must be examined on a case by case basis, as their definition posited a more complex model than Wilkinson's. The argument of Chase-Dunn and Hall examined the complexity of the interactions, and the specifics of the relations (economic, military, et al.) for the different types of interactions. These intersocietal networks are nested within each other, as illustrated in Figure One, and the world-system must be analyzed as a function of all these different types of linkages. Figure One shows the first network of trade in bulk goods, the second as the sphere of politico-military control, and the third as trade in prestige goods.

![Diagram showing nested interaction networks](image.png)

Both Chase-Dunn and Hall and Wilkinson define world-systems in terms of interaction networks, but the major distinction between them was their emphasis on the relative importance of different kinds of interactions. Chase-Dunn and Hall have allowed the possibility of different types of cores (and, presumably, different types of peripheries) in a manner that Wilkinson’s definition would reject.
There were three major interactions in Chase-Dunn and Hall’s boundaries: 1) trade in bulk goods, 2) politico-military relations, and 3) trade in prestige goods. Wilkinson omitted the trade in prestige goods as part of the world-system, and instead bounded the world-system by its politico-military interactions.¹

One of the advantages with the nestedness of different types of interaction networks was as an analytical tool: it could make identifying the role of core, semiperiphery, and periphery somewhat easier at a given point in time, and allows for the possibility of those identifications changing over time. Using the interaction networks as a way to bound the components of a world-system might also illustrate the fall-off effect. This effect occurred when there might have been contact between systems, but where that contact was not sufficiently significant to shape events: the price of West African gold was neither necessary nor sufficient to matter to, for example, China.

The second question concerns the place of religion in a world-system: ideas have always accompanied the more physical aspects of intersocietal relations, but how these ideas might affect other types of interaction, and reshape system boundaries, have been largely ignored by both Wilkinson and Chase-Dunn and Hall. Understanding the influence of Islam as a political and ideological force² is critical to understanding the nature of West African civilization (using Wilkinson’s definition), that of the larger trade networks over the northern half of Africa, as well as the even larger prestige and ideological linkages with Asia and Europe.

Data Concerns.

Before launching into the detailed analysis of the Sudannic Empires, it might be useful to describe briefly some of the specific problems with the available data. There were three major areas of concern: the availability of the sources, synthesizing data from disparate disciplines, and language obstructions.

Records contemporary with the Mali and Songhai Empires were from two disparate groups of sources. The first group was medieval, written Arabic travel accounts by individuals who might or might not have actually seen all of the places they described. The persistent confusion regarding the direction of the Niger’s flow
was a case in point. The second group was a modern one, using the extensive local oral tradition. Both of these were useful separately, but they were more useful in conjunction with each other as a crosscheck, which could compensate for the different biases in each of the sources. For example, a bard recounting the Epic of Son-Jara today would produce a work similar in many respects to its fifteenth century version, but it would also incorporate five hundred years of minor changes that would make it different from the original. These minor changes would have come about due to shifts in the bard’s training, as well as specific historical alterations in the Epic: the context in which bards created these epics was very different from the modern context.

Current information involved a creative use of skills in order to combat the diffusion biases of both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: briefly put, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the French colonial sources implied that Arabic culture, diffused southward, created the Sudannic Empires. After independence, many written sources implied precisely the reverse, so the data must be weighed on their own merits and through the filter of the writer. Another problem involved the shift in disciplinary focus. Most ‘African history’ dated either from the colonial period or with independence, making it one of the newest area foci in history. West African archaeology was even newer, and research into historical sites was perhaps the newest branch, as much of the prior effort was on examining Neolithic settlements, spurred on by the Paleolithic research in East and southern Africa. The various bits of the mosaic are still being found and cleaned, which makes reassembling them into a coherent picture as speculative as Arthur Evans’ reconstruction of Knossos. The current work was based primarily on the historical sources.

The final problem was one of language. Many of the epics in the oral traditions were translated into Arabic from Mande or Soninke, and then retranslated into French or English. This led to problems in translation such as Ibn Khaldun translating ‘Mansa Uli’ as Sultan Ali, when the original Mande for uli meant red or fair-complexioned (Ki-Zerbo, p. 6). Also the Malinke languages have not been static: meanings in the fifteenth century might not be the same in the twentieth, even if the bard relating the epic was trained in the
same tradition. The context had shifted, which affected even more modern translations directly from Mande. A similar problem occurred with the written sources, which are in medieval and possibly idiosyncratic Arabic, which had been translated and retranslated into modern Arabic usage as well as modern French. Names posed a particular problem in this regard, as the spelling conventions for Arabic were extremely varied. The French terms were equally varied. When the terms were then translated and/or anglicized, there were further spelling changes and often different meanings resulted.

It was important to keep the linguistic and historical biases in mind when writing a case study. What was equally important was to realize that these biases provided an interesting palimpsest on Western perceptions of African in particular on whether or not there was a valid 'West African civilization' (Wilkinson 1991a, p. 3, refers to them as part of a group "of disputed level or autonomy, or unprepossessing size"). Using Wilkinson's definition, there was one: most civilizationists would dispute this. Most historians would, in their turn, describe the Sudanic Empires as secondary states. The precision in defining a world-system as an intersocietal network made a stronger case for studying Ghana, Mali and Songhai on their own merits, rather than eurocentric ones.

**State Formation in the Western Sudan.**

"By and large the Early Iron Age in sub-Saharan Africa was characterized by the presence of small, relatively dispersed settlements and not by the development of states, which first arose in the Late Iron Age" (Mokhtar 1990: 296). The earliest date for iron working in the Western Sudan was 80 A.D.: this was part of an explosive cultural change that included the Bantu languages and changes in agricultural techniques that swept the continent. One could measure the relative speed of the diffusion of these innovations by evidence that ironwork was present in Eastern Africa by 200 A.D., and in Southern Africa by 400 A.D.
Map One showed the estimated territories of the Ghana and Mali empires (as well as Songhai, which will be discussed later in this section) at the height of their authority, in 1000 and 1300 A.D., respectively. Ghana and Mali were distinguished by the relative stability of their alliances, and in the basis for their centralized control: that is, the trans-Saharan trade of gold for salt, the process for which will be described in a subsequent section. Based on Nehemia Levtzion’s analysis, it was the trade itself that created the need for "... a higher level of political organization, while the emergence of extensive states accorded more security to trade" (Levtzion. p. 10). While at first glance this seemed reminiscent of the chicken and egg conundrum, this analysis could be extended to incorporate the several elements of more stable polities. Both Ghana and Mali used iron weapons and settled agriculture, but the development of specific politics based on trade first required the development of a trade product. In both politics this was gold, first and foremost.3

The development of Ghana has been disputed, and further obscured by the particular biases of some of the Arab sources (Almoravid, in particular). As archaeological work on Kumbi Saleh continues, the dispute might be resolved. Based on the historical argument, a somewhat sanitized version would be of two powerful kingdoms existing in the second half of the ninth century with
vassal chiefdoms that merged in response to pressure from the Almoravid movement southward from Morocco. The Almoravids were a group of Sanhaja Berbers, primarily Sufis, who had split off from the northward expansion that ultimately resulted in the conquest of Spain. This same pressure also accelerated contact with Islam, although Ghana was not an Islamic state. There was an extensive tax base among both the residents of the capital region of Kumbi Saleh itself and of its vassal states: trade, tribute, artisanal products (especially ironworks and weaving), as well as agriculture. Most of the agricultural produce would have come from the forest fringes and from settlements along the banks of the Niger. Ghana also maintained a standing army, including cavalry units. The ruling group fostered the gold trade, and encouraged the flow of prestige goods back from the northern cities.

Mali, on the other hand, was largely a product of the success of Ghana's trade and successful alliances between groups further south and the Mali empire. Sundiata's reign began with both the destruction of Ghana in 1240, and the Malinke chiefs swearing fealty after the battle of Krina. This established what in European terms would be the House of Keita: a patrilineal royal lineage. Sundiata moved the polity's capital to Niani, which was considerably farther from the trade terminus of Timbuktu: the capital was primarily a royal compound. His reign also began an alliance system that still corresponds to family names in West Africa: an example is Traoré among the Bambara, which becomes Diop among the Wolof. The polity spread for the next two centuries, finally encompassing the area ... from the Lower Senegal and the Gambia rivers in the west to the Songhay country on the Niger below Gao in the east; from the Upper Niger in the south to the fringes of the Sahara in the north" (Levtzion, p. 73). The Mali Empire occupied the same function of trade route broker and supplier of gold that Ghana had maintained, but extended the trade routes to incorporate areas further south, and diversified the northern trade routes through alliances with the Tuaregs and Berbers throughout the Sahara.

The kings of Mali made pilgrimages to Egypt and Mecca, often with extensive retinues (one particular king had an entourage of 80,000 men). This is perhaps the best indication of the massive
surpluses created by the gold trade. Timbuktu served as one of the primary termini of the extensive trans-Saharan trade from the thirteenth century, as indicated by caravans of more than 12,000 camels. This, by no means among the largest of the caravans (some of which were reported to have more than 100,000 camels: see the end notes for a more detailed discussion of the number problem), which would have resulted in a massive flow of trade-goods and required corresponding logistical support for provisions all along the trade routes.

A distinct caste structure was created below the royal kin network separating the empire into smaller administrative divisions. Some castes included artisans, serfs, domestic servants (drawn from the available pool of slaves), and freemen. Merchants, soldiers and the remainder of the proletariat were drawn from the freemen caste. No money was minted, despite the extensive trade, and exchanges were based upon specific weights of minerals (salt, gold, copper), cowry shells or agricultural products (kola), although Egyptian dinars were occasionally used. Bards were responsible for record-keeping, and much of the history is therefore in a stylized oral tradition. Writing was seldom used, but occasionally documents were written by trading partners in Arabic. The standing army, which included both infantry and cavalry units, numbered more than 100,000 men at the height of the polity.

The Songhai Empire first appeared in the historical record between 700 and 900 A.D., which was roughly contemporary with the founding of the Ghanaian capital of Kumbi Saleh. Songhai was primarily a riverain kingdom that extended along a 1,000 mile stretch of the Niger. Three major groups comprised this earliest phase of the kingdom: hunters (near Gao), fisherman (the Sorko) and more settled horticulturalists. The capitol was initially at Kukiya, but moved to Gao around the 11th century. Islam was considered somewhat less ‘mainstream’ among the Songhai than in the Mali Empire, but they were more Islamic than their predecessors in the Ghana Empire. In the context of the Empire, though, it was possible to distinguish the less-Moslem Sonnis from the more-Moslem Askiyas. The administrative control at Gao consisted of two separate towns: the royal compound, and the merchants’ compound. This type of separation, far from being specific to the
Songhai, has been found throughout Africa north of the forest. It was, however, somewhat better documented among the Songhai through recent archaeological evidence, particularly from Djenné (see McIntosh & McIntosh).

The Songhai came under the control of Mai during the rule of Mansa Musa, shortly after his return from his much-celebrated pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324. This shift in power occurred after approximately three centuries of increasingly fierce trade competition between the two kingdoms, and, to a lesser extent, with Ghana.

With the recapture of Timbuktu in 1468, Sonni Ali gradually overthrew the Mali domination to re-establish Songhai as a separate empire. Sonni Ali died in 1492, and was succeeded in a coup d'etat by a former lieutenant who changed the royal title from Sonni to Askia. Askia Mohammed I oversaw a Muslim revival, and himself made a pilgrimage to Mecca (considerably less noteworthy to local historians in Cairo than Mansa Musa's a century earlier) consisting of an "escort of 500 cavalry and 1,000 infantry, and with him he carried 300,000 pieces of gold" (Bovill 1968: 137). Map One showed the extent of this empire, probably overrunning or operating in parallel with the remnants of the Mali empire towards the Atlantic coast, and to the east with the conquest of the Hausa states. At one point, the Mali empire sought assistance from Portuguese traders along the coast for help in fending off further Songhai aggression.

One key distinction between Ghana, Mali and Songhai was the use of slaves. While slaves were used in all of these, and became a major commodity, Songhai used them consistently, especially for agricultural labor. "We even have an example, in the great slave-worked Songhai state in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, of the emergence of a great landed estate in the bend of the Niger whose growth, aided by the flooding of the river and the availability of transportation, was solely to supply the needs of the administration and the army" (Coquery-Vidrovitch, pp. 118-9).

Askia Mohammed’s reign ended in 1528 when a rebellion led by three of his sons forced his abdication, but the Askias maintained control over the kingdom until the Moroccan invasion, instigated by the Sharif of Fez, Mulai Ahmed al Mansur, in 1591. Trade continued, but the control of that trade shifted north, to Fez. The
basic administrative units also continued, although there was increased fragmentation as the more peripheral areas reasserted themselves. In particular, the centers of Islamic learning along the Niger continued and flourished.

**The Process of Trade.**

For Ghana, Mali and Songhai, the control of trade routes was the primary source of wealth. This control was more important than the actual effort involved in mining the metal, although the kings of all three empires exercised control over the distribution of gold. Four factors combined to make this trade possible: the camel, Berber tribesmen, Islam, and strong empires (Levtzion, p. 124). In other words, camels provided the transportation, Berber tribesmen ensured the source of provisions, Islam provided some internal cohesion as well as an ideological link with other people in the Sahel, and the imperial structure supplied the politico-military organization that mandated and safeguarded the available resources.
Trade Routes & Networks. Systematic trade began in the eighth century, largely in response to the demand from the cities of Fez, Tripoli, and, most especially, Cairo, for the raw material for minting coins, as well as for jewelry and other luxury items. The gold supply was readily available, and its distribution northward could be controlled by a single authority.

Map Two showed the pattern of the trade routes across the Sahel that penetrated south into the forest zone. These trade routes covered all of the Sahara, in a more extensive network than the modern trade routes, and included both bulk goods and prestige items. While not all of the trade routes were equally utilized between the ninth to the sixteenth centuries, the route from Tripoli through Ghadames southwest to Awdaghost has the earliest mention in the literature. The routes from Morocco via Taghaza and Taodeni to Timbuktu were favored during the Mali Empire, while the western route through the Fezzan via Bilma, Agades and Gao was heavily used during the Songhai Empire.

Camel caravans from Mogador to Timbuktu, for example, could take up to 70 days, and generally started out to Timbuktu in September/October, and returned in the spring (Schroeter, pp. 93-105). Moroccan merchants jointly financed one very large caravan annually, often with as many as 10,000 camels. The process of trade along the route was just as important as the goods which arrived in either terminus, as the trip required purchasing foodstuffs and water along the route, and, indeed, most of the profit in Timbuktu would come from the sale of salt purchased along the caravan route. The sequence began in Mogador with only about a fifth of the camels loaded with trade goods. The merchants would load another fifth to a third of the unladen camels in the caravan with salt obtained in exchange for trading, provisions and safe passage in cities along the route, such as Taghaza or Taodeni. Then the caravan would continue to Timbuktu. The goods that had been loaded in Mogador, along with the salt from Taghaza, and often some of the camels themselves would be traded over several months, in exchange for goods to be carried back to Mogador.

The Berber territories of Fezzan, Hoggar and Tuat were important intermediaries both for the general logistics of the trade routes and the basic dynamics of the trade itself. With their date...
palm oases needed for reprovisioning the caravans, these areas were the medieval Saharan equivalent of truck stops. They served as a long semi-permeable membrane between the northern trade system of the Mediterranean littoral and the more southern trade system of the Sahel and its southern forest zone.

Of equal importance for the flow of goods was the water transport along the Niger. This had been the heart of the Songhai territory, and provided a quick method of transportation. Goods would be offloaded from camels onto either donkeys or boats at Timbuktu where they traversed a 500 mile corridor, either upstream between Timbuktu and Djenné or downstream between Timbuktu and Gao.

One factor to consider in terms of the volume of trade was the relative transportation costs: it is likely that the long-distance costs of the trans-Saharan trade were equivalent to more 'efficient' methods of transportation, given that water transport along the coast of West Africa was not possible until the late fifteenth century. The high labor costs of overland transport were balanced out by the relatively high return on investment. The absence of wheeled transport limited the volume possible, but the relatively small population in the Sudannic empires only produced a fairly small demand for goods. The exchange of gold for salt looked unequal given the place of gold on the prestige goods network and salt on the bulk goods network, but this was only until one took into account two factors. First, this was not an equal exchange of gold for salt (i.e., a pound of gold for a pound of salt: the relative values were negotiated and then enforced at both ends of the trade route). There were also other items included on the prestige goods network going north, such as ivory, ostrich feathers and slaves in exchange for the southward traffic in salt, horses, cloth, and art. Second, salt was an item on (eurocentric) bulk goods networks because it had historically been readily available: from evaporation of sea water, or mineral deposits. Salt was a rare commodity in West Africa, but one vital to human survival.

Transport. Camels had been known throughout the Sahara for more than five hundred years when they became the principle pack animal for the long distance trade. Many of the Berber tribes raised
racing camels (*meharis*), which were longer-legged and better adapted to desert conditions than other types of dromedaries. These animals were used in preference to oxen for transporting goods, as well as for cavalry units. They were generally saddled in front of the hump in the Western Sudan. Camels had distinct advantages in the Sahara over other types of pack animals. Probably the key was their ability to go up to twenty days without water, but crucial was the amount of weight a camel could carry, the distance it could travel daily, its catholic eating habits and general low maintenance requirements.

Camels usually carried about 300 pounds over long distances, but were capable of carrying 500-600 pounds for shorter periods. The average distance a loaded camel could travel comfortably was about twenty miles a day. Of perhaps equal importance, from a structural standpoint, was the camel’s ability to travel over rough terrain. Roads, and, as a result, wheeled vehicles, were largely absent from the trade routes throughout the Sahel. The one major drawback to the camel was their susceptibility to sleeping sickness. This weakness limited their use below the Niger and left their breeding to the Berbers.

**Means of Exchange.** Most of the gold in West Africa was mined in shallow placer mines, although some was panned and there were a few deeper shafts (about 150 feet). Map One showed some of the areas where ore has been found. Most of the production was done by small independent groups. There was no indication that the Sudannic Empires exercised any type of local authority over the gold deposits, as the focus for control was primarily over its distribution. Only gold dust could be traded without royal approval and nuggets were a royal monopoly, in much the same way that sugar is today in Morocco. The actual quantity is in some dispute, but "output is commonly assumed to have reached a peak in the late Middle Ages, when West Africa became the principal source of supply for Western Europe" (Hopkins, p. 46). Estimates of the actual quantities of gold exported range widely. Anthony Hopkins conservatively estimated the gold exported to be 3.5 tons annually, which would equal the total output of French West Africa in 1937. The modern output might actually be close to the medieval reality.
through two countervailing tendencies. The first tendency involved the fluctuations in the value of gold (as the source of monetary value), which actively encouraged/discouraged production simultaneously. Overproduction could drive down the exchange value, but production, and finding new sources of both production and new groups with which to trade, have been consistently encouraging factors for exploration and exploitation since gold first achieved its status value, and clearly continued through the present day. The second tendency concerned the change in the use value of gold as a tool for supporting and reinforcing state formation. Specifically, the modern political authority over the mineral was much more diffuse than historically, as there were more states in the modern Sahel. This also simultaneously encouraged/discouraged production through regional competition and regulation, as the variety of authorities tried to keep production down so that value would remain high. In addition, the modern locus of production was much more specific, as many of the historical gold sources have been significantly reduced or exhausted.

The impact of West African gold was significant, however, which indicated that the quantities were also significant. Mansa Musa’s pilgrimage to Mecca illustrated the effects of this abundance, as the passage of his retinue through Cairo actually destabilized the local economy with the influx of so much additional gold, devaluing the local system of weights and values. Several contemporary accounts related how his entourage paid five dinars for items selling for one. Clearly, bargaining in Cairo has not changed significantly for tourists in the past half millennium.

The Process of Islam.

Islam spread and established communities along the Mediterranean during the 7th century. By 7734, the Arabic author al-Fazari was writing about Bilad al-Sudan (the land of black men), and references began to appear in the literature with increasing frequency. The connection between Islam and trade was very evident along the trans-Saharan trade routes: along the southern fringe of these routes, the Hausa word for Moslem was the same as the one for trader. By the ninth century, regular trans-Saharan trade had been established, which continued uninterrupted through the
nineteenth century. Travel accounts written by Ibn Battuta, Leo Africanus, and Ibn Khaldun alluded to the wealth of the empires and to the creation of Islamic centers of learning, especially at Timbuktu.

The Berbers were key for both the use of camels and the dissemination of Islam. This group of people included the Tuareg, as well as the Moroccan dynasties, with the result that there was an especially heterogeneous range of economic and religious social organizations. This heterogeneity both illustrated and complicated the concurrent impacts of trade and Islam.

North African Islam was, in itself, a competing system of influences. There were three types of Islam that exerted influences at various times along the trans-Saharan routes: Sunnism, Sufism, and a popularized form of Sufism. The seventh and eighth centuries were distinguished primarily by a westward movement along the Mediterranean littoral, with such success that by 740 A.D. most Berbers had embraced Islam. Most were attracted to the Kharijyya sect of Sufism, which was a somewhat more puritanical interpretation of the Shari'ya.

The earliest influences on the Sudan were filtered through the Berber groups in the desert, and especially the Sanhaja Berbers towards the west. This group tended towards a somewhat more intellectual form of Sufism, at the same time extending their influence "to conquer the trade route cities of Sijilmasa and Awdaghust." (Hiskett, p. 7) The Almoravids were part of this group of Berbers and extended the range of Islam both north into Spain and southward, past Marrakesh, into the desert by the early twelfth century.

The penetration of many different social levels by Islam meant that the strong Sufi mystic tendencies were often emphasized rather than the more 'intellectual' aspects; a phenomenon comparable to the spread of Christianity several hundred years earlier. This more popular form of Sufism was part of the Almohad and Marinid periods in Morocco, and shaped their contacts with the Western Sudan from around 1274-1465 (Hiskett, p. 8).

Two traditions - the intellectual man (awliya) and the wandering preachers (murabitun(l) - combined during the Marinid period to form the marabouts who became instrumental in both the penetra-
tion and politicization of Islam in the following centuries. The more popular Sufism relied on its emotional experience, together with a use of Koranic charms: the physical connections familiar to their animist contacts, such as charms and place spirits. The politicization of the brotherhoods (turuq) in North Africa itself grew as well in response to increasing pressure from Spanish and Portuguese attacks throughout the fifteenth century.

Islam in Egypt followed a different path, remaining primarily Sunni and exercised in their turn, considerable influence over the most extreme Berber groups, especially the Tuareg.

It was the more popular Sufism and Sunnism that had the most impact on the Western Sudan. The city of Timbuktu was an important center for the 'ulamā (the Moslem judicial court and university): during the fourteenth century, this was one of Ibn Battuta's stops in the Mali Empire. By the time of Sonni 'Ali in the second half of the fifteenth century, the influence of the 'ulamā was sufficient to obstruct his empire-building. It was sufficient to foster the rival claims of Askia Mohammed within fifty years, on the grounds that Sonni 'Ali was more of an animist than a good Muslim.

The connections between the political impact of Islam and its economic role were also interesting, especially as they demonstrated that this was scarcely a unilateral transfer of ideology. All of the groups in the Western Sudan shaped Islam to a degree.

Successful integration required a formal moral code to sanction and control commercial relationships. The 'blueprint' for the formation of a moral community of businessmen was provided by Islam, which was closely associated with long distance trade in West Africa from the eighth century onwards. Islam helped maintain the identity of members of a network or firms who were scattered over a wide area, and often in foreign countries; it enabled traders to recognize, and hence to deal readily with, each other; and it provided moral and ritual sanctions to enforce a code of conduct which made trust and credit possible. (Hopkins, p. 64)

Islam clearly played a strategic role for the local rulers. It gave them access to markets, technologies and a convenient ideology, but
was also manipulated locally. While the *jihads* of the early nineteenth century provide the most vivid illustration of this manipulation, it is likely that this would also have occurred in the earlier phases of Islam's contact with the Western Sudan.

This has been a somewhat schematic overview of the different variations of Islam: the picture was much more complex in terms of the relations between and among the Berbers themselves, and their shifting relations with the urban centers.

**Conclusions**

Of the two theoretical perspectives, Chase-Dunn's nestedness of complex intersocietal networks provided a better framework for explaining the socioeconomic aspects of both trade and Islam. Wilkinson's definition could be incorporated within this framework, and indeed served as a way to mark the boundaries of a particular state's second network, as it was especially useful given the incorporative and expansionary tendency of the three succeeding West African empires. The key similarity in their definitions of world-systems as intersocietal networks made it possible to include the West African case, as opposed to a more culturally homogenous definition of civilization. Ghana, Mali and Songhai all met the criteria for cores: standing armies, bureaucracies, and urban centers fed by peripheral rural areas. The shift in control over the trade routes showed a progressive centrifugal movement over more and more territory. At the same time, the locus of control moved eastward, away from the sources of gold and closer to a more central position geographically, controlling more trade routes. The relations of the Sudannic Empires with Fez and Cairo were those of cores within the third interaction network of prestige goods.

Three major conclusions were drawn from this study, concerning the role of the trade routes in the world-system, the function of gold as part of, yet distinct from, the prestige goods interaction network, and the role of ideology as a possibly more extensive interaction network than the previously identified ones.

While trade and Islam were both clearly spread by core states, the routes themselves were the product of neither a centralized hierarchy, nor a uniquely natural phenomenon. No single centralized hierarchy controlled all of the routes, or even any one route.
for its entire length, as was the case for some of the European powers that exercised a monopoly over that route. Nor was the process of trade dependent on control over some specific natural phenomenon, like a seaworthy harbor. The process of control over the trade routes was one of shifting alliances regarding both the trade goods and the religious affiliations of the groups, and the multiplicity of the routes provided tremendous flexibility in core/semiperiphery relations.

Prestige goods, which comprised Chase-Dunn’s third network, widened the system, but still only partially captured the impact of the trade in gold, as opposed to other prestige goods. The use of gold pervaded all social levels and was not limited to the elite, even though its use changed, and its quantity both created and destroyed hierarchical control. Gold was the necessary component in state formation, in permitting the rise of specific castes dedicated to particular tasks, and served as the primary unit of value for both the Sudannic Empires and their trading partners to the north. At all levels of society, gold was an integral part of marriage negotiations, and its display as jewelry was not simply a matter of individual taste, but rather family wealth and status. While control over production was a source of competition among the West African states, control over its exchange north and the distribution of salt southward was the final measure of achieving core status. At the same time, no single state ever achieved monopoly control over all of the trade in the Sahara: there were too many routes, and too many different sources for commodities. The Sudannic Empires controlled the southern termini of the trade system, and the goods that could be traded there. This was the primary source of their wealth.

Islam also pervaded all social levels, ranging from a more populist Sufism, demonstrated by charms, through the more intellectual Sufism, and to the most orthodox Sunnism. The extent of Islam’s influence range became key at the second interaction network of politico-military control, and frequently became an instrument for one core to expand its range. This particular ideology extended throughout the prestige goods network, but not always as the major ideological influence. It also went considerably beyond the prestige system network in the Sahel and North Africa,
interacting with many other world-systems. While first contact might have been through the prestige system, it was often incorporated into the second interaction network through a process of comparative advantage with the local elites. The alliance between one ethnicity and control over trade associated with trade diasporas was quickly replaced in the Sudannic Empires by the penetration of Islam, which made it no longer necessary to limit trade to one particular group.

This comparative advantage was due to the types of alliances Moslem peoples might be more likely to make with each other, rather than with the local animist peoples in terms of trading influence and weaponry. Among the Songhai, certainly the most obvious case was Askia Mohammed's use of Islam as both religion and political ideology contributed to the overthrow of the Sonnis: he could use the influence of the 'ulama to giving their support to his revolt, support that took the tangible form of proscribing assistance on the part of other Moslems to the Sonni dynasty. The impact of Islam on the first interaction network varied much more widely: the bulk goods system was much more resistant to its influence, and it was here that the older ideologies exerted the most control, especially with regards to reshaping Islam within local norms.

While Islam and trade are indeed closely linked, it was clear that what they shared in this case was the process of dissemination. The contact Islam had with, for example, East Africa, was basically limited to the coastal settlements, despite an extensive trade network with the interior. If the 'push' factors for Islam were relatively similar in both cases, such as expanding trade and spreading the faith, it seemed that the 'pull' factors of the local groups in East Africa and elsewhere varied more significantly. Was this due to the presence of strong states in the Western Sudan alone? When and how do ideologies penetrate different interaction networks, and what factors condition their acceptance or rejection by different levels of society?

The challenge now will be to define the ideological network, which appears to function differently from the other networks. There may be a fourth interaction network, which intersects with the other three networks, but does not exercise the same
incorporative structure as the first three, further complicating Figure One by making it three-dimensional.

Endnotes
1. Another important difference between Chase-Dunn and Hall and Wilkinson was the mode of production, the underlying systemic logic in a world-system. Chase-Dunn and Hall's emphasis on trade and their inclusion of pre-state world-systems made this crucial: this distinction is not addressed here because it formed the basis for a longer analysis elsewhere.
2. The term 'religion’ is often equated with ‘ideology’ in sociology, with ideology being the considered the more generic term, incorporating both its moral and political natures. Ideology is used throughout this paper to reinforce the political use of Islam within the Sudannic Empires.
3. This is not to say that other products were not an integral part of the trade networks. Slaves, kola nuts, ostrich feathers, among others, all went northward. But gold was the export that enabled both state formation and provided the most stable source of revenue for the Sudannic Empires. Control over this resource, as opposed to letting others gain control over it, was the pre-eminent reason for the formation of the Ghana Empire. This control was maintained by both the Mali and Songhai Empires until the cost of achieving control over the resource was less than the cost of trading for it: that economic equation, with the addition of the superior firepower of the Moroccan invasion, signalled the end of West African control over the resource.
4. Timbuktu served as a terminus for the trans-Saharan trade until the late nineteenth century, although the volume of trade had considerably diminished with the advent of water transport along the coast and thence upriver, which made the overland route less attractive. There are still caravans that go from Mogador to Agadez (in Niger), for example, as well as other locations. Many still transport salt to markets in the Sahel.
5. *Griot* is the French version of a Portuguese term, *criollo*, that the early explorers used for bard. I have avoided it here, as the definition of bard more accurately conveys its function, and reduces the number of language filters. Bards were not simply court poets,
recounting the praises of the current and previous rulers, but were also highly trained in memorization and used because of this skill (in place of writing) in negotiating and recording trade agreements.

6. This type of caravan continued throughout most of the nineteenth century. But the number of camels posed its own problem: a caravan of 10,000 camels lined up in a single file would stretch for more than thirteen miles, and security would have been impossible. Even bunching the camels closer together does not remove the question of adequate fodder, as well as water and provisions for the humans they carried. Two possible explanations are that first, the numbers related to a specific caravan were sometimes inflated, to glorify a particular reign, for example, and second, the departure dates were staggered over several weeks. The second alternative would imply a great deal of cooperation among the merchants.

7. There were no paved roads, and only infrequently marked paths, across the Sahara. Wheeled transport required oxen, mules or horse to pull: these animals could not survive on the available water and forage in the desert over a long distance. Camels, because of their anatomy and disposition, do not perform well harnessed to carts. The first motorized caravan across the Sahara was a French expedition in the late 1920s, and there are now both roads and regular truck runs to Mali and Niger from North Africa.

8. This is still the major mining technique for gold in West Africa, where significant deposits are found near the surface. The deposits are found in soft material, rather than in the quartz veins of the American West. As these are exploited, more complex engineering techniques may be used for deposits deeper in the earth. But panning for gold in the Niger and its smaller tributaries is one of the major sources of income for women in Mali, especially in the western cercles (administrative regions) of the country.

—The Johns Hopkins University
BIBLIOGRAPHY


History of European Expansion, Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme.


McIntosh, Susan K. and McIntosh Roderick. J. 1983. "Current
NB: Extrait du Bulletin du Comité d'Études historiques et scientifiques de l'Afrique Occidentale Française Tome XII, Nos. 3-4, Juillet-Décembre 1929.

Published by BYU ScholarsArchive, 1993