chronicles the Tarikh al-sudan and the Tarikh al-fattash, both completed in the mid-17th century. Before this period, the only known written sources for the history of West Africa are by medieval Arab authors from North Africa, al-Andalus and Egypt. Such texts have many weaknesses. Their authors for the most part lacked first-hand knowledge of West Africa. They betray racial prejudice against black Africans, partly derived from the close relationship between blackness and slavery in the Arab world at the time. Their knowledge of geography was flawed: they referred to the River Niger as the Nile, assuming these two rivers had the same source. However, crucially, they did have access to first-hand sources. A number of Arab Muslims crossed the Sahara and made visits to West Africa, probably to trade, and on their return provided information to Arab writers and geographers.

Four authors in particular benefited extensively from reports gathered from visitors to the region, or from West Africans who visited the Arab world. One of them, al-Bakri, lived in al-Andalus and compiled information from Andalusian and North African merchants who had travelled across the Sahara through what is now Mauritania. This includes a precious description of ancient Ghana written in 1068. Soon after, in 1134, al-Idrisi, a geographer probably born in Morocco, wrote about areas of West Africa from what is today Senegal to Lake Chad.

The Syrian historian al-Umari wrote in early 14th-century Egypt an encyclopedia for bureaucrats that included a description of the Malian Empire, which established itself as the leading power in the region during the 13th century. Ibn Khaldun, the great North African philosopher and historian who died in 1406, gave a brief dynastic history of the Malian Empire in his general history of Islamic civilization.

To these we should add the first-hand account of the great 14th-century world traveller Ibn Battuta from Morocco, who besides visiting and writing about the Middle East and China during his lifetime, visited Ancient Mali and the Middle Niger in 1352–53 and described these regions
from the point of view of a tourist. He stayed six months with the ruler of the Malian Empire, Mansa Sulayman, and afterwards travelled to the Middle Niger, visiting Timbuktu. His account includes a description of his return journey on which he accompanied a caravan taking six hundred female slaves across the desert to Morocco.

Another important North African who visited West Africa in the 1490s was the scholar al-Maghili, who came from Tinmenc near the Mediterranean coast. He first spent time in the oasis of Tuwat, in present-day Algeria, and then crossed the Sahara, teaching in Takedda and then Kano and Katsina. From there he moved on to Gao, where he provided advice on several issues to the ruler of the Songhay Empire, Askia Muhammad (see pages 54–55).

Shortly after that time, the Songhay Empire was visited by Leo Africanus, a Muslim of Spanish origin whose parents had moved to Fez. He travelled throughout North Africa and twice through West Africa in the early 16th century. In 1518, on his return to Morocco after visiting Egypt during a pilgrimage to Mecca, he was captured by Sicilian corsairs in the Mediterranean. They took him to Rome where they presented him to Pope Leo X as a slave. Within a year, the Pope had baptised him under the name Johannis Leo de Medicis. He remained in Rome for some time, and wrote a book published in Italian in 1550 called Descrittione dell'Africa (Description of Africa), including a section on Timbuktu. He came to be known as Leo Africanus.

THE PEOPLE OF THE NIGER BEND
The ethnic make-up of the Niger Bend area today is extremely complex, and is a testament to the rich and turbulent past of the region. Its populations can be placed into three broad categories according to their economic and ecological base. These have been relatively consistent over time. Along the desert fringes are pastoral nomads; nearer the river live sedentary hunting and agricultural populations, segments of which engage in inter-
A ruler of Timbuktu has a number of occasions when the city's overlords fell away and left a political vacuum.

Regional trade; and along the River Niger and the lakes are populations that engage in fishing and hippopotamus hunting, and provide water-borne transportation for people and goods.

Around the year 1000, the pastoral nomads of this region consisted mainly of Sanhaja and other Berber groups, with an economy based on camel and sheep rearing, long-distance transportation, and raiding and extortion. By 1600 these had been largely overtaken in the west by Hassaniyya Arabs migrating through the western Sahara from southern Morocco, and in the east by Tureg groups migrating in from the northeast. The origins of the Tureg are uncertain, and have been the subject of much speculation; however, their earliest proven origins are in Libya, from where they moved south and west, occupying the massifs of the Adrar-n-Ifras in Mali, the Air in Niger, and the Hoggar in Algeria. They are known as the ‘Masters of the Desert’.

Tureg society was traditionally divided into four hierarchical groups: warriors, scholars, artisans and slaves. Slavery has long been abolished, though remnants of the old system remain. All these Tureg groups refer to themselves as ‘Kel Tamasheq’ or speakers of the Tamaseq language. Tureg women, according to Ibn Battuta’s description from the mid-14th century, were ‘the most beautiful of women and of the most pleasing appearance, being very white and plump.’

The Tureg are most renowned for their warriors and their artisans; less is known of Tureg scholars, called inesemen in Tamaseq. In fact the Tureg seem to have been the first people in the region to master writing. Their alphabet, tifinagh, which is often found inscribed on rocks in the desert, was probably already developed by the end of Neolithic times. It is still used today by some Tureg for letter writing and has even been adapted to communications on the internet.

In the area stretching northwest of Timbuktu were Hassaniyya-speaking Arabs who linked the territories of the Niger Bend with those of
the Moroccon sultanate. They too were a population characterized by a hierarchy of warriors, religious men, tributaries, slaves and artisans, and their scholars in neighbouring Wadan and Walata shared much with the learned elites of Timbuktu.

To the south was another pastoral nomadic people of the Middle Niger, the Fulani, cattle herders who had moved from the edge of the southern Sahara in the 11th century down into the Inland Delta of the River Niger.\(^9\) While descendants of these Fulani continue to herd cattle in the area today, other groups spread southwest to Futa Toro (in the Senegal River valley) and Futa Jallon (in the Guinea Highlands), where they became known as the Tukulor.\(^1\) Other groups continued eastwards into what is now northern Nigeria and on to Chad and Darfur.

The Songhay are a sedentary agricultural and trading population originating from the Dendi area by what is today the Niger–Benin border. They moved northwards well before the year 1000 and made Gao their capital, living along stretches of the Niger Bend. It was during the period of the Songhay Empire in the 15th and 16th centuries that Islamic scholarship in Timbuktu was at its height. Many of the Timbuktu scholars were Songhay, including Abd al-Rahman al-Sadi, author of the *Tarikh al-sudan*.

The Bozo and the Sorko are both populations that engage in fishing. The Sorko were amongst the earliest inhabitants of the Middle Niger region, whose traditional role of providing water-borne transportation made them ‘Masters of the Water’. Further south were the Mande groups, many of them traders, including the Sorinike, Malinke, Bambara and Wangara.

The fact that the ethnic groups in the Middle Niger region were to a large extent distinguishable by their different occupations and adaptations to their surroundings made for precarious and shifting relationships of interdependency, cooperation, alliance and conflict.\(^1\) Most of these groups at one time or another exercised considerable control over the

\(^9\) Muslims.

\(^1\) Many of them are still known as ‘Kare’ in the name of the province of Kano in northern Nigeria.

\(^1\) Most of these groups at one time or another exercised considerable control over the...
RIGHT Tuareg nomad with camel. The Tuareg call themselves ‘Kel Tamasheq’ or ‘those who speak the Tamasheq language’; the name ‘Tuareg’ is a term used by outsiders. The Tuareg were originally a Berber people whose traditional economy was based on raising cattle, camels and goats, and providing security to the great trading caravans passing through the desert.

region: the Soninke in the time of ancient Ghana, the Malinke during the Malian Empire, the Songhay at the time of the Songhay Empire, and subsequently the Bambara of Segu, the Fulani of Massina, the Kounta of Arawan, the Tukulor under the empire of Umar Tall, and the Tuareg who jostled for control whenever there was a political vacuum.

THE SPREAD OF ISLAM
From its very earliest days as a seasonal camp, Timbuktu was an Islamic settlement. Islam reached the African continent about 1400 years ago. The first Muslims to enter Africa sought refuge in Christian Ethiopia in about the year 615 ce. Just a quarter of a century later many more Muslim Arabs pushed their way into Egypt during the great movement of conquest and expansion. By the end of the 7th century they had taken over all lands of North Africa to about 240 km (150 miles) south of the Mediterranean coast, all the way from the Red Sea to the Atlantic. Although some exploratory thrusts were made into the Sahara, no actual conquests were made; instead expansion turned northwards across the Mediterranean and into the Iberian Peninsula. Arabic became the dominant language of all these territories within decades, and Islam was gradually adopted by the conquered peoples.

Although the invading Arabs had made no immediate attempt to enter or cross the Sahara Desert as they penetrated North Africa, over the coming centuries Islam was introduced to some of the nomadic peoples of the Sahara, and to some of the black African kingdoms along its southern borders. This came about not through conquest or political domination, but through the agency of Muslim traders, whose primary objective was to obtain the gold that was mined in parts of West Africa, largely in territory that now lies in the Republic of Mali but by the 15th century from gold fields as far south as present-day Ghana. By the end of the 11th century a number of African rulers in this region were Muslim, and the majority populace of the Berber tribes of the western Sahara adhered to Islam.
In the mid-11th century there arose among the Sanhaja nomads of the western Sahara the militant Islamic movement known as the Almoravids. The Sanhaja had originally migrated from the south of what is now Saudi Arabia across North Africa all the way to the Atlantic coastline of present-day Mauritania. During the second half of the 11th century, branches of the Almoravid movement destabilized ancient Ghana, then conquered and unified Morocco and the Arab regions of the Iberian Peninsula. Another Sanhaja group, known as the Massufa, moved south, first to what is now the town of Walata in Mauritania and then on towards the River Niger in search of pasture and water for their camels. There they established the camp that was to become the city of Timbuktu, bringing with them Islamic culture and learning, as well as the Arabic language.

Africans who converted to Islam soon learned the Arabic language so that they could read the Koran and properly offer its verses in their five daily prayers. Although Arabic did not become their main language of speech, as it had in North Africa and the Middle East under Arab rule, many sub-Saharan Africans soon adopted Arabic as their language of writing. Indeed Arabic can fairly be described as ‘the Latin of Africa’, for it played a role in Africa south of the Maghreb and Egypt over the past millennium comparable with that of Latin in Europe in the Medieval era. Just as the spread of literacy in Latin went hand in hand with the spread of Christianity, and as many Europeans also adopted the script of the Latin language to write their own native languages, so some Africans used the Arabic script to write their native languages.

The most dynamic and popular force to channel Islamic practice throughout the Muslim world has been Sufism or mysticism as promoted by the Sufi brotherhoods or orders. Two Sufi orders or tariqas came to wield strong spiritual influence over Western Africa. The first was the Qadiriyya, originating in Baghdad in the 12th century in the teachings of Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (1077–1165), and later adopted in North Africa and by-Saharan
tribes such as the Kounta (see page 57). A second ṭariqa, the Ṭijaniyya, overtook the Qadiriyya in the 19th century, though not among the Kounta. Its founder, Ahmad al-Tijani (1737–1815), was born in the Algerian oasis of ‘Ayn Madi, and then moved to Fez in Morocco. His teachings were adopted by the Idaw Ali tribe of what is now southern Mauritania, and then promoted in Futa Jallon in today's Guinea by Umar Tall, who went on to conquer much of present-day Mali (see pages 59–60). The Ṭijaniyya ṭariqa was adopted by many West Africans in the 20th century.

Since the second half of the 20th century, however, Sufi ṭariqas – especially the Ṭijaniyya – have been opposed by Africans who have spent time in Arabia and come under the influence of the Wahhabiyya movement. The official doctrine of the Saudi Arabian state, this encompasses a strict and literal interpretation of the injunctions of the Koran, and opposes many Sufi practices, in particular the Sufi reverence for saints (awliya).

**TRANSSAHARAN TRADE**

The people of Timbuktu were always dependent upon local trade for acquiring day-to-day provisions, and all ethnic groups were in one way or another involved in trading activity. However, the city flourished on the profits of transsaharan trade. To control the trade routes it was necessary to control the means of transportation, including those groups who made transportation possible. The Tuareg and other nomadic groups protected (or raided) trading caravans, and it was essential to have them on your side when crossing the desert. The Sorko were masters of that great lifeline of the region's consecutive empires, the River Niger. Under the Songhay Empire, they were considered a socially inferior group, who were 'owned' by the king or askiya; that is to say they had an absolute obligation of service.

Crossing the Sahara Desert was both dangerous and expensive and required great preparation including letters of introduction. Ibn Battuta describes how, on his way through the Sahara to Timbuktu, he hired a guide.
costing 100 mithqal of gold (a slave could be purchased in Timbuktu for about 80 mithqal). The guide was sent ahead with a letter to friends in the next town requesting preparations for their arrival, protection for their journey, and water. If the messenger had died on the way, the entire caravan risked a perilous fate. A small caravan consisted of about 80 camels, larger caravans up to 3,000 camels. Two camels could be purchased for about 37 mithqal. On the other end of the journey a fleet of boats awaited at the port of Kabara, 20 km (12 miles) south of Timbuktu, after having unloaded merchandise heading for the great North. Leo Africanus described activity at the port in 1506: 'Kabara is a large town...twelve miles from Timbuktu, on the Niger. It is from there that merchants load merchandise to go to Djenne and Mali... One finds there blacks of different races, because it is the port to which they come from different regions with their canoes.' The Tarikh al-Fattash describes a fleet of 400 large boats, as well as 1,000 large and 600 small dug-out canoes at the time of the Songhay Empire.

A great variety of goods were transported northward: slaves, ivory, grain, goat hides, ostrich feathers and cola nuts, among other items of tropical produce. There is little doubt, however, that it was the lure of gold that was the primary incentive for North African merchants to undertake the perils of a Sahara crossing. Gold dust was obtained from Bambuk, a region lying between two tributaries of the River Senegal, and somewhat later from Buru on tributaries of the Upper Niger. From the late 14th century Muslim traders also obtained gold mined in the pagan Akan forest areas in modern Ghana, bringing it up to Djenne and thence to Walata or Timbuktu, from where it continued north on camel back.

Myths circulated about the 'silent trade' and the 'gold plant'. Al-Umari was told: '[The gold-plant] is found in two forms. One is found in the spring and blossoms after the rains in open country. It has leaves like the najil grass and its roots are gold. The other kind is found all the year round at known sites on the banks of the Nil (Niger River) and is dug up.'
According to early Arabic sources from the 10th century, there was a careful avoidance of direct communication between gold traders from the southern regions of West Africa and traders coming from the North in order to keep the locations of gold production secret:

"They bargain with them without seeing them or conversing with them. They leave the goods and on the next morning the people go to their goods and find bars of gold left beside each commodity. If the owner of the goods wishes he chooses the gold and leaves the goods, or if he wishes he takes his goods and leaves the gold... From there the merchants carry goods to the shore of that river."

Gold was much in demand among traders in North Africa, notably in present-day Morocco and Algeria, and was also exported to Europe. Indeed almost two-thirds of the world’s gold in the late Middle Ages may have come from West Africa. The most important item exchanged for the gold was rock salt, obtained from pits in central Saharan locations such as Taghaza and Taoudenite. The historian al-Umari reported that the people of West Africa "will exchange a cup of salt for a cup of gold dust." Salt was as plentiful in the Sahara as gold was further south. Although various powers attempted to conquer and hold the areas where the salt was mined, the salt mines themselves were controlled by desert nomads and worked by their slaves. Travellers’ tales told of Saharan cities made of salt, just as myths spread about Timbuktu being an Eldorado paved with gold. Such fictions circulated throughout the Middle East and Europe right up to the 19th century. In reality gold, like salt, simply passed through the city; neither originated there.

Cloth, cowrie shells, tea and tobacco were also imported to the western Sahel from other parts of the world. Cloth was essential to the region’s strict dress code, particularly for the long embroidered robes or "boubous" and headdresses worn by both men and women. The tailoring industry of Timbuktu provided a livelihood for many of the students of the
city. Locally produced cloth was also used as a type of currency, as were cowrie shells brought from the Maldivian Islands in the Indian Ocean. The shells were used for smaller transactions, and there was a fixed rate of exchange between them and gold. Judging by the number of poems about tea one finds among the manuscripts of Timbuktu, this was an extremely cherished item, as it is today. Tobacco is the subject of many letters and treatises. The use of tobacco had been approved in a treatise by Ahmed Baba, one of the most respected legal authorities of the region in the 16th century, who declared it neither a narcotic nor an intoxicant. The prohibition of tobacco was later to be one of the main issues in the conflict between the Fulani jihadists and the Kounta in 19th-century Timbuktu (see page 58), highlighting the continued importance of tobacco in the society and economy of the region.

However, according to Leo Africanus, the single most profitable trade item in Timbuktu was books. The Tarikh al-fattash relates how a great dictionary had been purchased by the king for the equivalent of the price of two horses. Purchasing books was a source of prestige and a socially accepted way of displaying wealth, and scholars and kings alike would acquire books during their travels or from merchants coming from the north who would bring books for local sale.

Trade was characterized by significant geographical, seasonal and annual price fluctuations, and Timbuktu was often used as a depot for storing goods by merchants keen to maximize their profits. Goods were considerably cheaper before crossing the great desert as transportation costs were high; however, West Africans were known to pay high prices even before goods had traversed the desert. Al-Umari relates that: 'Merchants of Cairo have told me of the profits which they made from the Africans, saying that one of them might buy a shirt or cloak or robe or other garment for five dinars when it was not worth one.... They greeted anything that was said to them with credulous acceptance. But later they
formed the very poorest opinion of the Egyptians because of the obvious falseness of everything they said to them and their outrageous behaviour in fixing the prices of the provisions and other goods which were sold to them, so much so that were they to encounter today the most learned doctor of religious science and he were to say that he was Egyptian they would be rude to him and view him with disfavour because of the ill treatment which they had experienced at their hands."

Commercial systems depended on developing and maintaining trustworthy networks along the chain of local tradesmen from North Africa to the forest regions in the south. They were also reliant on the development of legal systems for regulating trade at every trading point as well as the documentation of practically every single transaction. The following correspondence conveys something of the complexity of multi-layered trading activities in Timbuktu, involving goods left in trust, currency exchanges and commercial agents:

'I have left with Ahmed Kawa two bars of salt which you remitted to me. On my return I found that he had sold them for 12 riyls because he is my representative at Sarafére and I do not live in that town. You will find the amount of which I speak with Maliki Hamma. He would like, together with Tat Kabara Farma, to take my two bars of salt which you know about. You can bring him the watermelon which is with her, to give it to Samba Oumran because he is coming to me. You can give to Samba the price of the metal knife. If possible, give Samba what is agreed between us.'

Customs of gift-giving also contributed to the movement of goods and people. Although the trans-Saharan journey was risky, the rulers of West Africa prided themselves on transporting gifts to the sultans of Morocco and Egypt. Ibn Khaldun wrote in the late 14th century about Sultan Abu al-Hasan, King of the Maghreb, who presented a gift to Mansa Sulayman, ruler of the Mali Empire. Mansa Sulayman wanted to show his apprecia-
tion by offering something strange and curious from his country in return. Thus a giraffe was transported from Mali over the Sahara to Fez.39

In times of conflict, plundered goods were also transported across the region. The Tarikh al-sudan relates that the Songhay Emperor Askia Dawud: 'fought the commander of the sultan of Mali...and defeated him. Whilst on this expedition he married Nara, the daughter of the Sultan of Mali, and despatched her to Songhay accompanied by a magnificent train containing jewelry, male and female slaves, furnishings, and household goods and utensils, all covered in gold leaf, as well as water vessels, mortar and pestle, and other items.79

THE SLAVE TRADE
The trans-Saharan slave trade ranked among the most significant commercial activities of the region. Most ethnic groups had their own slaves who were bought and sold locally, exported to North Africa and Europe, or eventually set free. Al-Idrisi reported that ‘Peoples of the neighbouring countries continually capture [the naked people south of the River Niger] using various tricks. They take them away to their own lands, and sell them in droves to the merchants.79

The earliest descriptions of the West African slave trade are from the mid-11th century, when Awdaghast, in present-day Mauritania, was a location for the buying and selling of slaves. The Andalusian geographer al-Bakri recorded that the main population of Awdaghast at the time consisted of North African Berbers, but he noted that there were also black women, who as good cooks were sold for 100 mithqal each (roughly 425 grams of gold).39 There were also light-skinned, very attractive slave girls, whose description implies that they were concubines. The slaves thus transported to North Africa were primarily used in domestic service including concubinage; however, the next most common usage was as soldiers. In the following century, black slaves were taken across the Sahara to