

“BONDS OF TRADE: SLAVERY AND COMMERCE IN THE 19TH-CENTURY CIRCUM-SAHARA”

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In the circum-Saharan region of Africa, long-distance commerce came to rely on slaves, not just as human commodities or as coerced commercial laborers, but also as skilled workers responsible for organizing and carrying out the commercial transactions themselves. Based on more than a thousand Arabic letters exchanged by members of a single commercial firm between 1850 and 1900, this research explores the details of the lives of these traders, the struggles, negotiations and accommodations made between masters and their slaves, and the importance of slavery to the functioning of pre-colonial commerce in the circum-Saharan region of Africa. I argue that commercial strategies employed by these traders were bound up with the social logics of unequal status among the different participants. The correspondence makes clear that the slaves who acted as commercial agents for their masters were highly risk averse, but also responsive to the same kinds of incentives to act honestly on behalf of their masters as other working partners. The correspondence that is the basis of this paper is held in archives and libraries in Timbuktu, Mali, where I carried out more than a year of research.