This paper explores an unusual set of sources found in Timbuktu (Mali) that reveal the existence of a literate, Muslim strata of slaves who played an important role in the functioning of trade in the nineteenth-century circum-Saharan world and in sub-Saharan West Africa. One slave in particular is at the center of this correspondence, a man named Anjay ʿĪsā, who appears to have grown up in the northern Saharan oasis of Ghadames (Libya) in the early to mid-nineteenth century, before being sent south to Timbuktu by his master to work as a commercial agent in the Niger Bend. This paper is a preliminary attempt to reconstruct details of the life and experience of one slave who appears in many of these letters as both the writer and the recipient. Anjay’s master was a man from Ghadames named ʿĪsā b. Aḥmayd b. Muḥammad b. Mūsā b. Muʿizz al-Sha’wānī al-Ghadāmisī. The master, who I will call ʿĪsā b. Aḥmayd, was the head of a commercial network that connected the Sahara desert with the Sudanic regions of the Niger Valley in present-day Mali. He established a household in the town of Timbuktu, from where he organized commerce that linked the Saharan sellers of products such as salt, tobacco, and textiles, with the Sudanic commerce in gold, foodstuffs, textiles, kola nuts, and slaves. The extant commercial correspondence includes letters between Anjay and his master, his master’s sons and other relatives, between Anjay and other merchants in the larger region of the Middle Niger, Niger Bend and Central Sahara, and even letters between Anjay and his brothers and sisters, who were also slaves, as well as with slaves.
belonging to other masters. There are perhaps two thousand Arabic letters written by
members of the Ghadames-Timbuktu commercial axis held in two libraries in Timbuktu,
and approximately two hundred of them were written by slaves such as Anjay ʿĪsā, or
addressed to slaves in their role as commercial representatives of their master’s families. ²
These letters were written in the second half of the nineteenth century and they open a
window upon relatively autonomous and high-status slaves living in the circum-Saharan
world. It is these letters and others like them that make it possible to add new kinds of
new stories to the history of slavery in West Africa.

The most striking thing about this correspondence at first glance is the degree of
rhetorical respect accorded to this slave by his interlocutors.³ One of his letters to Anjay
begins as follows: “From ʿĪsā b. Aḥmayd  with full and generous greetings (bi-ʾl-salām
al-atamm al-akram) to his slave (ghulām) Anjay…”⁴ In correspondence from his master’s
sons, written in the 1890s, there is the repeated usage of the following salutary formula at
the beginning of the letters: “From Aḥmad al-Bakkāy b. ʿĪsā b. Aḥmayd to his brother
and friend, and (only) then his slave (ghulām) Anjay, peace be upon you and upon your
family.”⁵ The language of greeting is even more familiar in some of the correspondence
with Anjay’s business associates in the Niger Bend region. One example is as follows:
“Full greetings and general respects from Bāba b. al-Shaykh Kumu to his beloved, and
his brother, Anjay…”⁶ In this last letter, and in others like it, there is no mention of
Anjay’s status as a slave. His status might be understood from the fact that no father or
lineage is invoked after his name, but this is not made explicit. Finally, Anjay is
represented as a paragon of virtue in letters written by other slaves. For example, in a

² The two libraries are the private Mama Haidara Library and the state-run Institut des Hautes Etudes et de
Recherche Islamique Ahmad Baba (IHERIAB), which was formerly known as the Centre de
Documentation et de la Recherche Ahmad Baba (CEDRAB). Abdel Kader Haidara, the director of the
Mama Haidara library, a private collection of approximately 5,000 manuscripts located in Timbuktu, Mali,
estimates the number of extant letters from the Ghadames network in his collection and in the collection at
IHERIAB to be approximately 2,000. Personal communication.
³ These letters were first pointed out to me by Yacine Daddi Addoun, who is a partner in the larger research
project about the Ghadames-Timbuktu commercial network. Yacine and I first came across examples of
letters from this correspondence in 2001 while at the Institute. Unless otherwise indicated, all manuscripts
(“ms.”) are from IHERIAB.
⁴ Letter from ʿĪsā b. Aḥmayd to Anjay ʿĪsā, IHERIAB ms. 5453
⁵ Letter from Aḥmad al-Bakkāy b. ʿĪsā to Anjay ʿĪsā, IHERIAB ms. 11690; there are many examples of this
formula used in letters written by Ahmad al-Bakkāy b. ʿĪsā.
⁶ IHERIAB ms. 10333
letter written by a certain al-Barka, slave of Shaʾbān, who is identified by profession as a cutler, we have the following elaborate greeting at the beginning:

> From the beloved and respectful brother al-Barka, slave of Shaʾbān the cutler, to his beloved, excellent, honored brother – the most blessed (al-abrak), the most refined (al-adīb), the most distinguished (al-nabīh), the most highly esteemed (al-aʿazz), he who has surpassed his mates, a shining light for the people of his time; may God help us and him – Unghī [Anjay] ʿĪsā. Peace be upon you and everyone with you.7

The tone here goes far beyond the formula of greetings and praises. There is no mention of Anjay’s status as a slave. However, the use of the language of “brotherhood” suggests that the writer, who identifies himself as a slave (ghulām), shares the same social status with Anjay. We see the same thing in a letter written to Anjay by a woman named Yājīda, who identifies herself as the concubine (surriya) of ʿĪsā and the sister of “the beloved and most-refined Anjay ʿĪsā.”8 (Judging from the hand-writing, the letter was most likely written on her behalf by a scribe.)9

These letters march us down the stairs of social status in the Ghadames commercial network. They are simultaneously friendly and familiar, frequently using the language of consanguinity, while also re-inscribing the servile status of those who are identified as slaves. As I suggested above, it is possible to see in some of these letters indications of the personal qualities of the recipients, at least in the minds of the letter-writers. So for example, it seems clear that both the slave al-Barka and the concubine Yājīda hold Anjay in high personal esteem (they both use the term “adīb,” which means “most refined” or “most well-mannered,” to describe him). The language that they use seems to be much more than formulaic flattery. However, in using the familial language of “brotherhood,” while at the same time identifying themselves as slaves, they are

7 IHERIAB ms. 10471.
8 Letter from Yājīda, concubine of ʿĪsā to Anjay ʿĪsā, IHERIAB ms. 10444.
9 One letter written by another slave of ʿĪsā b. Ahmayd, a certain Ibrāhīm ʿĪsā, credits the actual writing of the letter to a certain Muḥammad Yintāwū, also written and “Ṣintawu,” who is frequently saluted in other letters. The hand-writing of this letter is the same as a number of other letters, suggesting that he many have been one of the principal scribes used by these slaves. He is credited with being the scribe in a letter from Ibrāhīm ʿĪsā to Unghī [Anjay]. IHERIAB ms. 8593.
displaying a level of social familiarity that one would not find in letters written between social un-equals.

It is possible that the self-identification as slaves came not from the slaves themselves, but from a scribe who wrote some of the letters. In the case of Anjay’s sister Yājīda, if in fact she was his “real” sister, this seems likely. The hand-writing of al-Barka’s letter to Anjay also suggests that the writer was not al-Barka himself, but a copyist. Even in the case of the other prominent slave involved in the commercial affairs of the Ghadames network who appears to have been literate, a person named Ṣanbu ʿĪsā who belonged to the same master and who referred to Anjay as his younger brother, the reiteration of social status as a slave occurs. For example, in one letter, Ṣanbu ʿĪsā who, like Anjay, carried an apparently non-Muslim name followed by the name of his master ʿĪsā b. Aḥmayd with no other lineal marks of descent or belonging, identified himself as the older brother of Anjay, “slave of ʿĪsā.”

One letter written by another slave belonging to ʿĪsā b. Aḥmayd named Ibrāhīm ʿĪsā, credits the actual writing of the letter to a scribe named Muḥammad Yintāwū, whose name is often written “Ṣintāwū” in other letters, and who is frequently saluted in this correspondence. Judging from the hand writing, the same few scribes did much of the actual letter writing for some of these slaves. But it is clear that Ṣanbu ʿĪsā and Anjay ʿĪsā wrote their own letters, at least some of the time. In the case of Ṣanbu, e, there is a clear difference in hand-writing, language style, and uses of colloquial Arabic expressions, in the letters that he wrote himself, and those that were written by scribes. Ṣanbu’s written Arabic was much less literary than that of the scribes. Anjay, on the other hand, was a sophisticated writer of literary Arabic, and his letters do not betray colloquial expressions in the same way that Ṣanbu’s writing does.

In the same letter written by Ṣanbu ʿĪsā mentioned above, he tells his younger brother Anjay to pass along a message to his wife named Kani, and to greet two brothers who presumably live with her or with Anjay, named Baniya and ʿUthmān. The personal names suggest something about social status. Ṣanbu’s wife is called Kani, which seems

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10 Letter from Ṣanbu ʿĪsā to Anjay ʿĪsā, IHERIAB ms. 10577.
11 An example of a letter where the scribe is named and credited is a letter from Ibrāhīm ʿĪsā to Anjay ʿĪsā, IHERIAB ms. 8593.
12 It should be noted that the fact that Ṣanbu and Anjay are brothers is confirmed by a letter written by one of ʿĪsā b. Aḥmayd’s sons Aḥmad al-Bakkāy to Anjay, ms. 10040.
likely to be an Arabization of the Songhay name “Kaan-ey” (which literally means “sweetness”). ʿUthmān of course is a common Muslim name, but Baniya (Bañña) is a Songhay name meaning “male slave,” and it appears quite regularly in nineteenth and twentieth century documents from Timbuktu. Such social connection to Songhay-speakers in Timbuktu raises the possibility that Ṣanbu and Anjay were actually themselves from the area of Timbuktu. Their names could be Arabized cognates for Songhay or Fulfulde names. Ṣanbu appears to be the Fulfulde name “Samba.” The name Anjay is actually written in different ways by different letter-writers. We have used the form “Anjay” based on the common spelling “A-n-j-y”, but there are other examples where a different spelling is used, and in the letter from Ṣanbu mentioned above, it is actually vocalized as “Unghī.” While the possibility at this point of a Songhay origin is not precluded, and there are indeed various possible cognates in Songhay, it does not appear to be a Songhay name. What seems more likely is that Anjay and Ṣanbu married and established families in Timbuktu with local women when they settled there.13

That Ṣanbu and Anjay, who was also married, to a woman named Bintu,14 were able to marry and establish families in Timbuktu raises certain questions about their social status as slaves. The terminology is important. The word that I have been translating as “slave” is “ghulām.” The other word that appears in the letter from Anjay’s sister to socially situate herself is “surriya,” which I have translated as “concubine.” These are not ambiguous or euphemistic words, but they do imply a level of relationship with the master that is greater than the bare legal terms for slaves such as “ʿabd,” (“slave”), “mamlūk,” (“person owned”), “ama,” (“slave girl”), etc.15 At the very least,

13 There is inconsistency in the way this name is spelled. In most letters, it is spelled “A-n-j-y.” However, it also appears fully vocalized in some letters as “Unghi,” elsewhere as “n-j-y,” “u-n-k-y,” and “jī.” (ms. 5510) These different spellings suggest possible cognates with local languages. Although unlikely, since these letters are written in Arabic, the name could be related to the name “Najīy” which means “intimate friend, confident.” It might also be a cognate of the Hassaniya Arabic words “ngi” which means “pure (of heart), sinless, or the word “Nājī” which is a term used in Timbuktu to indicate an Arab. See Jeffrey Heath, Hassaniya Arabic (Mali) – English – French Dictionary (Wiesbaden, 2004), pp.157, 166. I do not know of any Songhay cognates. We use the literary spelling “Anjay” in this paper only as a place holder until we learn more about the most likely pronunciation and origin of the name.
14 Letter from Ghalu Bubu to Anjay ʿĪsā, IHERIAB ms. 9311-30.
15 Ghislaine Lydon points out that in a similar context Mauritania, the term “ghulām” refers to slave boys between the age of ten and fourteen. As such, the use of the term here for adult slaves appears to be an epithet in her view. “Slavery, Exchange and Islamic Law: A Glimpse from the Archives of Mali and Mauritania,” African Economic History 33 (2005), pp.122-23.
these terms seem to indicate a level of acculturation into the master society and culture. They might be seen as equivalents to so-called “house slaves,” or even to groups of people called slaves in many West African societies who, by virtue of having been born into the status of slavery in the host society, cannot be sold. In the Songhay-speaking societies of the Niger Bend, these people were called “hosso” or “gaa-bibi,” and they formed a kind of caste of low status people within Songhay societies.\(^{16}\) In Saharan societies such as that of Ghadames, slaves of this sort might be described simply as slaves, or as so-called “ḥāraṭīn,” an often ambiguous category usually understood as freed-slaves or their descendants, although frequently applied to all “Blacks” in North Africa and the Sahara. As Ralph Austen has pointed out, it is difficult to ascertain with any precision the relative balance of slaves and non-slave “Blacks” in Saharan oases from our historical sources.\(^{17}\) European observers often assumed that all “Blacks” were slaves. In following the letters left to us by the people in the Ghadames commercial network, we face a similar problem because although Anjay and others are consistently referred to as slaves, they appear to have led lives that belie much of what we have tended to assume went along with this social status in the circum-Saharan world.

This paper is an effort to begin the un-packing of some of the meanings given to these terms of social inferiority and slavery in a nineteenth-century circum-Saharan trading network. I will argue that the respectful language evident in so many letters from master to slave does suggest a relationship of some degree of intimacy and confidence born perhaps out of shared lives and experiences. However, I will also suggest that as in other commercial diasporas, social bonds were essential to managing the vicissitudes and uncertainties of sending commercial traffic across such potentially dangerous territory as the Sahara Desert. Like other long-distance trading networks, Ghadames traders relied on the hierarchical ties that held together their social units. In the case of trans-Saharan traders, and of other trading networks in sub-Saharan West Africa, slaves were essential


to the functioning of the commercial houses because they were such perfect clients, so
dependent on their masters that they could be counted on with the utmost confidence.
Finally, this paper will open to scrutiny a site of sub-Saharan African diaspora and return.
However imperfectly Anjay’s life story is understood at the moment, it seem clear that he
was a person who moved into and out of the institution of slavery and relocation in the
Sahara, and who then moved back to the world of sub-Saharan Africa as a slave, before
finally achieving manumission at the end of his life. But Anjay was, as we will see, a
slave who was able, to some extent, to reconstitute himself as a social being, to borrow
Orlando Patterson’s phrasing. What this meant for the development of what we might call
“diaspora consciousness” is a question will be kept in mind as the letters that constitute
the sources for this paper are examined.

II

My ability at this point to reconstruct the life story of Anjay is limited. What
follows is a discussion of the pieces of evidence that I possess. I will attempt to be
explicit about what I have evidence for, and what are assumptions and guesses.

I do not know whether Anjay ʿĪsā was born into slavery, whether he was
enslaved as a young child, or whether he was enslaved at some later point in his life. It
appears that he grew up in Ghadames, where he would have learned how to read and
write in Arabic, presumably as a child. He was a Muslim, and by the end of his life in
Timbuktu at the turn of the twentieth century, he owned Islamic books which he used for
both pious and commercial purposes. The executers of his possessions after he died listed
thirteen Arabic books that were found in his house. While such a collection is hardly
unusual or outstanding for its time and place, it does indicate that Anjay had a level of
sophistication in the areas of Islamic law, Arabic grammar and devotional literature.18
Compared with his brother Ṣanbu and other literate slaves, Anjay’s letters demonstrate a
much greater command of literary Arabic. The following works were recovered from his
house in Timbuktu:

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18 Inventory executed by Shaykh Sīdī Ahmad al-Bakkāy in the presence of Sīdī Ḥamād b. Sīdī ʿArwah, no
date. IHERIAB ms. 10741.
1. a copy of the Qurʾān;
2. Ibrāhīm b. Marʿī al-Shabrakhītī’s (d.1697), Sharḥ al-Shabrakhītī li-Mukhtaṣar Khalīl,\(^{19}\) a commentary on the most important handbook of Mālikī jurisprudence, the Mukhtaṣar by Ishāq b. Khalīl (d. 1374);
3. an unnamed work of tafsīr [Qurʾānic exegesis];
4. a book by Shihāb al-Dīn [presumably Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. ‘Umar al-Khafājī’s (d.1659), Nasīm al-riyāḍ fī sharḥ shifāʾ al-Qādī ‘Iyād,\(^{20}\) a commentary on the popular biography of the Prophet Muḥammad by the Andalusian al-Qādī ‘Iyād (d.1149)];
5. an unnamed commentary on Khalīl’s handbook of Mālikī jurisprudence;
6. part of a dictionary;
7. a book of Mālikī fatwas [legal opinions];
8. a book by al-Ḥaṭṭābī [either Muḥammad b. Ṭāhir b. Abī al-Ḥaṭṭāb al-Ṭarābulsī (known as Ḥaṭṭāb) (d.1540-1), who wrote commentaries and hashias on Khalīl’s Mukhtaṣar, or more likely from the pairing after it, Ḥamd b. Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Khaṭṭābī’s (d.996), Bayān iʿghāz al-Qurʾān,\(^{21}\) on the incomparability of the Qurʾān to anything else]; and then ʿAbd al-Ghanī al-Nābulsī’s (d.1731) Badīʿa,\(^{22}\) on marvels;
9. a book called the Tahdhīb al-ustādh [probably Khalaf b. Abī Ḥāṣim Muḥammad al-Barādī’s (d.1039), al-Tahdhīb fī ḵaṭṣār al-Mudawwana al-kubrā or Tahdhīb masāʾl al-Mudawwana,\(^{23}\) which is a commentary on Mālik b. Ansâr (d. 796) Mudawwana [a foundational work of Mālikī law];
10. Al-Qasṭallānī’s (d.1517), Irshād al-sārī fī sharḥ Bukhārī, a commentary on Bukhari’s hadith collection;
11. a book on Arabic grammar;
12. a book on zakāt [Islamic alms-giving] in Khalīl’s handbook;
13. multiple tafsīrs [Qurʾānic exegeses].

That a slave would possess these texts is surely somewhat surprising. It suggests a level of education and sophistication well beyond what slaves would be expected to possess, even if the injunction to masters to educate their slaves in the tenets of Islam was well known in the nineteenth-century Sahara.\(^{24}\) So how did a slave achieve the level of status

\(^{19}\) Carl Brockelmann, Geschichte des Arabischen Litteratur [hereafter GAL] (Leiden, 1937-43), II 84, SII 98
\(^{20}\) GAL SI 631, SII 396
\(^{21}\) GAL SI 275
\(^{22}\) GAL SII 476
\(^{23}\) GAL I 178, SI 302
\(^{24}\) I base this on the number of times the issue appears in local fatāwā or nawāzil collections. For example, Shaykh Bāy al-Kuntī (d.1929) cites the following well-known nineteenth-century poem (al-Qaṣīda al-rāʾiya) by Ḥabīb Allāh b. Ǧaṭṭāb al-Mukhtar al-Kuntī:

\[\text{wa-ḥāfiẓ ʿalā ḥaqqi al-raqīqi fa-anna-hu * man awakkad amr al-dīni fa-iṣbir wa-ṣābir} \]
or wealth necessary to maintain his own house, marry and raise children (one son was named Baba),
and own even this relatively modest library? The answer is bound up in Anjay’s role in the commercial activities of his master.

Circumstantial evidence suggests that at some point, Anjay was sent by his master to Timbuktu to act as a commercial agent in the larger Ghadames-Timbuktu trade. We have a letter of introduction written by his master (and presumably carried by Anjay) meant to ensure his good treatment by an acquaintance. The letter is written to a certain Ubb Saʿīd, whom ʿĪsā b. Aḥmayd calls “his brother in Almighty God,” indicating the social distance between them and the fact that they are not related. The brief letter is as follows:

My slave (ghulām) Anjay has come to you so please ensure that no one treats him unjustly. I have ordered him to stay there and you will see that he is of the highest intelligence…

We know from other sources that slaves often played an important part in Saharan commercial networks. Nineteenth-century European travelers reported that slaves were sometimes sent to distant locations across the Sahara to carry out their master’s business.

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25 The letter from which we draw the name of the son, Baba b. Anjay, is written by one of ʿĪsā b. Aḥmayd’s sons, al-Khalīfa b. ʿĪsā. The deferential tone of this letter on the part of al-Khalīfa suggests beyond much doubt that Baba was not a slave. Letter from al-Khalīfa b. ʿĪsā to Baba b. Anjay, IHERIAB ms. 8324.

26 IHERIAB ms. 5499.
James Richardson mentions this in his mid-nineteenth-century diaries of his time spent in Ghadames:

Two people left today for Ghat, and two for Timbouctoo. The latter were headmen of the large mercantile firm of Ettanee. It is the custom of Saharan merchants to send their headmen, and even slaves, to these distant countries when circumstances prevent them going themselves.  

Various modern scholars have pointed out the role that slaves—or former slaves—played in a number of West African commercial networks. In Charles Monteil’s book about Djenné, he describes the trading networks that connected Djenné with Timbuktu as organized into family units which included slaves, and that furthermore, slaves were absolutely essential to the operation of the commerce:

At Djenné, trade is in the hands of diverse categories of people. First of all, there are the indigenous wholesalers who, in principle, remain in a single place but who send out their people to surrounding areas. These are most often their servant-slaves or freed slaves who are kept busy supplying the goods which little by little they accumulate to go and exchange in Timbuktu.

Monteil gives the following explanation for the importance of slaves in West African commercial networks:

For many centuries there have been important indigenous merchants in Djenné. In general, these are heads of families who know how to employ their own people according to the aptitudes which they present. Very often they confide their biggest affairs to slaves or freed slaves who are better agents than their relatives. But they also use their relatives in cases or situations that require a man of status. Because free people and slaves are intimately connected under the single, all-powerful direction of the head of the family, one notices that the communal nature of the family ensures, in the case in point, the success of the operations. It is in effect all these auxiliaries of the patron working strictly in the framework of the family that allow for so little to be expended for the remuneration of the services of strangers. Such is the secret of the enrichment of these merchants who,

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if they had to carry out these same operations using the labor of strangers, would certainly run at a loss.29

Other examples from West Africa, and elsewhere, could be cited that provide a similar analysis to that of Monteil.30

Despite what is known about trading networks in West Africa, the trans-Saharan and Saharan trading networks are not especially well understood.31 We know that commercial traffic has crossed the desert since Antiquity, if not earlier, and we know some of the principal trading routes. There are even estimates for the volume of the Saharan trade in commodities such as gold, and of course in the human traffic in slaves.32

Ghadames is a Berber-speaking oasis in the northern Sahara. Until the 1820s, it marked the southern limit of the authority of the Pashelik of Tripoli, and it played an important role in the principle trade axis of Saharan trade that connected Tripoli to the Fezzan to Bornu.33 In this capacity, Ghadames was visited by a number of European travelers and explorers, and the British had two vice-consuls stationed there between 1848-54 and 1858-60.34 Certainly by this time, in the 1850s, Ghadames was a major entrepôt in the Saharan trade linking the Mediterranean ports of Tripoli, Tunis, and areas to the west in Algeria, with Timbuktu, Kano and Bornu.35 According to Stephen Baier, Ghadames

29 Ibid., p.262.
31 I should note that I write this before having read Ghislaine Lydon’s new book, On Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks, and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Nineteenth-Century Western Africa (Cambridge, 2009)
34 There were British consular agents (consuls-general) at Tripoli from 1780, at Murzuk (vice-consuls) from 1843-60, and at Ghadames (vice-consuls, C. Dickson, 1849-54; H.S. Freeman, 1858-60). Boahen, Britain, The Sahara, and the Western Sudan, p.236.
35 There were three principal routes to sub-Saharan Africa from Ghadames: south west to Touat and Timbuktu via Touat, south to Kano via Ghat, or southeast to Bornu via Murzuq. Boahen, Britain, The Sahara, and the Western Sudan, p.113.
merchants had established a virtual monopoly over the Tripoli-Kano trade by the second half of the nineteenth century.36

One reason that has been suggested to explain the development of the trading diaspora from the oasis of Ghadames in the larger trans-Saharan trade with West Africa is the fact that Ghadames is a Berber-speaking oasis, and it was therefore easier for people from Ghadames to communicate with Berber-speaking Tuareg who dominated the central Sahara.37 The provenance of the Ghadames trading network is not known. Baier suggests it goes back earlier than the fourteenth century. In the nineteenth century, European travelers noted the prominence of people from Ghadames in the circum-Saharan commercial world. The German traveler Heinrich Barth encountered a whole neighborhood in Kano consisted of people from Ghadames in the 1850s; when Henri Duveyrier visited Ghadames on his trip to the Libyan Sahara between 1859 and 1861, he learned that Ghadames commercial firms have branches in Kano, Katsina, Timbuktu to the south, in Ghat and In Sallah in the Sahara, and in Tripoli and Tunis on the Mediterranean coast. Mohammed el-Hachaichi, who travelled through the oasis in the 1890s, made similar observations.38

These Saharan trade networks were built on top of, or augmented, more local networks of exchange along the desert-edge in West Africa and North Africa. As Ann McDougall has demonstrated for the western Saharan region of Mauritania, the Saharan slave trade and gold trade that connected the Western Sudan with Mauritania and Morocco were directly linked to the local trade in salt.39 Much of the dynamism of the larger Saharan trading networks depended on the local networks that moved slaves back and forth along the desert edge as well as in and out of the desert itself.40 The letters that we use in this paper certainly support McDougall’s contention that these larger commercial networks grafted onto existing local trade. Much of what the Ghadames traders were buying and selling were local products such as salt and food stuffs.

37 Ibid., p.57.
38 Referred to in Baier, An Economic History of Central Niger, p.58.
The role of slaves in the Ghadames network was commented on by Baier. He suggests that these trade networks used slave employees, or former slaves who were called “Ikawaren,” which is the Berber equivalent for Ḥāraṭīn. Baier mentions several cases of former slaves who became prominent and wealthy in the Ghadames trading communities of northern Nigeria, one in particular named Bedari Zumut, who like Anjay Ḥāsā, bore the name of his master as a second name. Baier tells us that Bedari received his freedom only on the condition that he and his descendants affix his master’s name to their own. This strikes me as unlikely. Ralph Austen and Dennis Cordell have suggested that the absence of formal legal safeguards provided an incentive for these networks to incorporate as many participants in the trade as possible:

Instead of formal legal arrangements, the ties between participants in the various zones of the caravan trading system seem to have been based mainly upon combinations of kinship, clientage, and slavery… These arrangements could withstand the uncertainties of the trade, and they also incorporated not only major partners, but also lesser collaborators, such as camel attendants. They also sustained ties between the desert system and expanding merchant networks extending farther south across the Sudan into the forest.

These principles of pre/early-modern trading diasporas have long been recognized. European commercial networks relied on social bonds that were both horizontal and vertical, tying as many people as possible into patron-client networks that gave these networks a certain “density of relations,” to borrow a term from a recent book on the early-modern Portuguese trading network. Such density of relations mitigated the risk that such activities faced.

In the letters that we have, slaves often appear as agents who were trusted to carry valuable goods from one commercial destination to another. However, the place of the slaves was not where one would expect them in Austen and Cordell’s argument:

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41 Baier, p.63.
43 Daviken Studnicki-Gizbert, A Nation upon the Ocean Sea: Portugal’s Atlantic Diaspora and the Crisis of the Spanish Empire, 1492-1640 (Oxford, 2007), pp.104-5.
playing the role of porters or fulfilling other transportation services. In a number of letters, the price to be paid to the porters upon their delivery of their loads is mentioned so that the receiver of the goods would know the price that had been negotiated at the beginning of the journey. For example, in one letter, the price of the porterage is listed at 2,000 cowries.\(^{44}\) That the porters had to be paid does not of course preclude the possibility that they were slaves, but it does suggest that their labor was not alienated as slaves in this case, if indeed they were slaves. The role that slaves played in this commercial network was as trusted commercial agents who acted on behalf of their masters, buying and selling goods in particular markets. In a letter written from the Saharan oasis of Ghat in 1884 by somebody named al-Mukhtār b. al-Ḥājj ṬAbī b. al-Ḥājj Muḥammad ṬAmmūsh al-Balīlī to Ṣanbu and Anjay, both described as “slaves of Ḥūsān,” the author announces that he had arrived in Ghat and that he had not had any news from Ḥūsān’s son Aḥmad al-Bakkāy:

The reason for this letter is because Muḥammad b. Ḥūsān and I have come to Ghāt and we were told that if we want to know what is happening in Timbuktu, we must correspond with the slaves in order to gather news. How can we respond to you unless you send us all the news? And you, O Ṣanbu, this is because of your failings! You know everything, and now you are the equivalent of our father. Indeed you have al-Ḥājj Muḥammad there with you in Timbuktu who used to overwhelm us with news, yet eight years have now passed and we have not had a letter in response from al-Bakkāy. You must absolutely give us all the news from these people, and that includes the news of the servant (waṣīf) al-Ḥājj, may God help and strengthen him, and a response putting together the news of our father, and what has become of al-Bakkāy, and what has happened with Bana-kayār and Bou Naʿām in the house. Give us all the news about any matter which might materialize for our brothers in Timbuktu and we will respond accordingly. This is our news. Goodbye.\(^{45}\)

Slaves seem to have been especially important in carrying out the trade with the Middle Niger. In the following letter, we have an example of a merchant in the Middle Niger who, judging from his name (Kami b. Ṣaḍīq b. J-f), is not from Ghadamis. Unable

\(^{44}\) Letter from Ṣambu Ḥūsān to Anjay, IHERIAB ms. 10577.

\(^{45}\) Letter from al-Mukhtār b. al-Ḥājj ṬAbī b. al-Ḥājj Muḥammad ṬAmmūsh al-Balīlī to Ṣanbu Ḥūsān and Anjay Ḥūsān, December 6, 1884, IHERIAB ms 8246. The full letter is in the appendix.
to find people he could trust to carry the gold he wanted to move to the Ghadames network (presumably in Timbuktu), he describes how he gave it to two slaves belonging of a merchant from Touat to carry. So in this case, Bilāl and Musi are not even slaves of the Ghadames patron Ḥājj ʿĪsā b. Aḥmayd, to whom the gold was being delivered. I quote this letter at length to give some sense of the variety of issues that arise in these kinds of correspondence:

You will find the gold karats with Bilāl. There are 100 of them [karats of gold], which I told you before were in the hands of Musi. Now they are in the hands of Bilāl. Both [Bilāl and Musi] are slaves of Muḥammad Daʿaysha al-Tuwātī. I kept them with me until now only because I could not find anybody whom I could trust to take them. So now, I have given them to Musi, and Musi gave them to Bilāl, who will give you the 100 “islāmiyya” of pure gold. Also, we have only been able to sell a little bit of salt here because the cursed Dajāliyūn46 have twice raided the other bank of the river. They want to cut communications. May God not allow that! Our route to Bamako and Kankanri is safe. They are coming to us and we are going to them. Also, I sent to you 400 “islāmiyya” [of gold] with ʿUthmān. Together with the 100 [you will receive from Bilāl], this is the 500 “islāmiyya” that we advanced to you. If you find another trusted person, we will send him with what we have ready… My greetings to your brother Matīḍān. We heard that your beloved al-Ḥājj ʿAbd Allāh died. Condolences to you… Salutations to Barka. I heard he was sick. We implore God that he may recover…47

The confidence placed in these slaves, and the sheer number of similar slaves that appear in these letters, suggests that we need to think of these master-slave relationships as forms of patron-client structures.

While it is interesting to read the correspondence of different “free” traders in this network, and the confidence they placed in trusted slaves, we are by no means limited to this perspective. There are many letters written by slaves themselves in their position as commercial agents. One example is a letter written by Anjay’s older brother Şanbu, to his master Ḥājj ʿIsā b. Aḥmayd, on June 16, 1864 [see appendix for complete letter with annotations of the issues mentioned here, such as the system of currency]:

46 This is a reference to the forces of al-Ḥājj ʿUmar Tal.
This letter is from Şanbu to his master Sīdī ʿĪsā b. Ḥmayd al-Ghadāmisi. Thousands and thousands of greetings to you and may God Almighty’s blessings and mercy be upon you. You asked about us and we ask likewise about you. We are well and in good health and we hope that you are also well.

The reason for this letter is that ʿUthmān has left twenty units of grain with Yarūsāgh in Kārib Tamā. I sent it on the 27th of the month of Shaʿbān [25th of January, 1865], but we heard that he was not able to go that way [because of insecurity] so he instead headed for Jenné, which he reached without trouble. I also sold nine blocks of water-damaged salt for 64,000 cowries, and I gave the money in trust to the commercial house (dār). I also sold four blocks of salt for 24,000 cowries, and I bought two long strips of cloth (durrāʿatayn) for 26,000 cowries. I made four blankets (awāq) from each one, and the thread and the tailoring to do this cost 10,000 cowries.

I bought the 20 units of grain that I sent with Yarūsāgh for a value of 17 blocks of salt. This accounts for thirty blocks. After that, I sold 48 blocks for 120 mithqāls of gold, which means that each block was exchanged for 2 1/2 mithqāls of gold. After that I bought 50 units of grain. This is all that I have right now, in addition to the remaining value of the salt and the cowries. When I reached al-B-J-A-W, I had only four blocks of salt and the grain left with me, which I exchanged for 300 cowries [piles]. Altogether, this made 20 cowry baskets (qashāsha), each of which contains 250 cowries [piles] per basket (qashāsha). The remaining salt with me that belongs to al-Sharīf was 102 blocks, which I sold for 2 1/2 mithqāls per block. I have the gold with me now.

You asked about the prices of commodities in Samsanding: One block of salt sells for two mithqāls of gold, or 10,000 cowries. Labor is 2,700 cowries. Grain is 400 cowries for a sack (qashāsha). There are no slaves (khadīm) that can be bought profitably here. Cotton strips (tāri) are cheap, but honey is expensive. Shea butter is expensive, baobab flower is not available, and tamarind is expensive. Grain is expensive throughout the country but there are no people who are more dishonest than the people of Sansanding. They gouge prices all the time because they do not believe in God or shaykhs.48

This sort of letter is quite common. But in cases where slaves are writing to their masters, there is a tendency for this kind of strict accounting of every transaction. Whether this reflects the need to be doubly diligent as a slave is not clear.

48 Letter from Şanbu to ʿĪsā b. Aḥmayd, June 16, 1864. IHERIAB ms. 5451. The full letter is in the appendix.
In a number of cases, controversy of some kind arose between master and slave. Although such disputes were not uncommon between trading partners and within the same commercial network regardless of the social status of the people involved, such disputes seem to have taken on a greater degree of gravity for slaves when it involved their masters. In one such case involving Anjay and his master ʿĪsā, Anjay wrote a long letter explaining his actions and seeking to mollify ʿĪsā. This letter is worth quoting at length because in this moment of conflict and perhaps even crisis, we get a better glimpse of the relationship between master and slave [see appendix for complete letter]:

…I also received your first letter and the second one which arrived on the same day that I wrote you my letter. I read both of them and I understood their content. You said in the two letters that you had ordered me to return to you and not to remain here. I have not deviated from this for even one day. I do not disobey your commands and your orders because I do not wish to disobey them even for a single moment. Everything that you reproached me for is because of a delay caused by circumstances, not my personal choice. There is no quick business in the town of Youvarou. Salt is not sold quickly and gold is not found easily. But you are absent and I am present here. It is those who are here on the ground who can see and know what those who are not here cannot see and cannot possibly know. This is the difference between you and me. I have no personal business in remaining here other than your service and business. Since we have come to the town of Youvarou not one of us has slept securely in our houses; instead we have spent our nights beside the river guarding our goods from our enemies. None of [the foreigners] who are in the town of Youvarou sleep in their houses because they must spend their nights beside the river. We have spent three consecutive nights outside in this way. In these conditions, the heart does not rest peacefully. It is better to do that than to do something else.

I asked Saddi to delay his trip here for a few days so that I could put together a little bit of gold and send it to you with him, but he said that he could not stay here any longer. God willing, you will see all the gold that I acquired in these last days.

As for the fact that he said that I had sold on credit: I did this only for one load (ʿadīla) of tobacco, which I sold for 100,000 cowries on credit. This was a mistake on my part, but it was decreed by God Almighty and I did not do it by my own will. God willing, I will come to you without further delay. Do not listen to everything that people say to you until you see me, God willing. To you, I am like the mouse that is in the house of the people: He does not abandon these people of the house. You and I are like that. So rest your heart in peace about me. From me you
will see only things that please you, God willing. I swore an oath to God Almighty to never betray you. Even if people tell you that I am stealing your money, I will walk to you on my two feet, God willing. I will walk to you myself and you will do with me what you want. I prefer this to betraying you.

As for the boats, they were held up by the emir ʿAliyu b. Awda.49 He decreed that nobody should travel before he crossed the river. Al-Kāhiya Burāhīm50 also sent a letter to Baba Ṣaʿīdu saying that he should not let anyone travel to Timbuktu before ʿAliyu b. Awda has crossed the river. These two people prevented travelers from coming to you.

Goodbye.51

Anjay’s characterization of this relationship with his master as like that of a mouse in a house of people is fascinating. Any authority that Anjay has is tied to his trustworthiness. It is his only power. No matter the respect others had for him, Anjay remains uniquely vulnerable as a slave.

Anjay’s vulnerability as a slave was in no sense a theoretical vulnerability. In a letter written to ʿĪsā in Timbuktu by a certain ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Yamina, the writer details some of the commercial goods he is sending to ʿĪsā with Ṣanbu. After discussing these transactions, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Yamina says that he is also sending one of his slaves named Kunma along with Ṣanbu. When he arrives, Kunma is to be sold to the merchants of Touat because “he will tell the secrets of the master about his children.”52 Presumably, this fate was unknown to Kunma. That he could be sold to Saharan merchants from Touat because he posed a potential threat to his master’s honor, due to his knowledge about his evidently adulterous behavior, reminds us of how precarious the position of even a relatively higher status slave could be. It is however interesting that ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Yamina felt compelled to at least explain what must have been, at some level, a difficult commission for ʿĪsā to carry out.

At this initial stage in the project, I am unable to provide the date of ʿĪsā’s death, nor that of Anjay. Anjay lived until at least after 1894 because one document refers to the

49 He was the Tijani emir of the region of Farimake, which is west of Lake Debo. He is also known as ʿAlī Awdi.
50 This is the emir (kāhiya) of Timbuktu who died in 1884. See Elias Saad, Social History of Timbuktu: The role of Muslim scholars and notable, 1400-1900 (Cambridge, 1983), p.220.
51 Letter from Anjay ʿĪsā to ʿĪsā b. Aḥmayd, IHERIAB ms.8308.
52 Letter from ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Yamina to ʿĪsā b. Aḥmayd, IHERIAB ms.8261.
qādī of Timbuktu, Aḥmad Baba b. Abī-ʾl-ʿAbbās, who only assumed the office in that year. My educated guess at the moment is that ʿĪsā died sometime in the early 1880s, and that Anjay died around the year 1900. What is clear from the letters is that after ʿĪsā died, there was a continuing relationship between Anjay and the sons of ʿĪsā. I have already quoted the salutary line in one of ʿĪsā’s sons named Aḥmad al-Bakkāy, who refers to Anjay as his “brother” and only then as “the slave of his father.” Another son of ʿĪsā named al-Khalīfa refers to Anjay as his “father” in one letter.53 It is clear from this correspondence that Anjay was held in some regard by these sons of ʿĪsā. He was older than they were and had almost certainly been a periodic member of their household as they grew up. The extent of this respect can be seen from the fact that Aḥmad al-Bakkāy sent his own son named ʿĪsā to study in a Qur’ānic school with the Shaykh Bāba b. Sinṭāwū, who had apparently also taught Aḥmad al-Bakkāy himself as a child. Aḥmad al-Bakkāy tells Anjay “to stand by his side as much as possible, to hit him and imprison him, to do what is possible and impossible until he obeys you and obeys God.”54 That a senior member of the family, even if a slave (or former slave at this point), would be asked to discipline a difficult child is not that surprising.

At some point, Anjay was manumitted. One might have expected that this happened at his master’s death, but that does not appear to have been the case. Even after ʿĪsā b. Aḥmayd’s death, the language of slavery continued to be used in correspondence with Anjay. For example, in a letter written by a certain Muḥammad b. Ṭālib to Anjay, in which Anjay’s status as a slave is not invoked (perhaps he had already been manumitted?), we see the rhetorical use of the language of social hierarchy and slave inferiority invoked because Anjay had not sent a response to a previous letter. The relevant part of the letter is as follows [see appendix for complete letter]:

I saw al-Khalīfa and I did not hear anything from him, nor did he give me a letter from you. I did not write a letter to Aḥmad Bāba but instead, I wrote to you with all the news about what happened. So, why did you not write back to me and send [the letter] with him? If I was to become a slave to you, and you would write me a letter telling me good things and bad things, what would I do for you? What would you hear from me? What

53 Letter from al-Khalīfa b. ʿĪsā to Anjay, no date, IHERIAB ms. 5510.
54 Letter from Aḥmad al-Bakkāy b. ʿĪsā to Anjay ʿĪsā, no date, IHERIAB ms. 8339.
would reach you from me? If sending al-Khalifa was enough I would not have written a letter to you telling you all that happened. I raised you [in status] and now you abase me…

But it is clear that Anjay was manumitted. The last line of the above passage may refer to this. In a letter written to Anjay by al-Khalifa b. ʿĪsā, he mentions Anjay’s manumission in a way which suggests that it has been held up for some reason. Al-Khalifa claims to have had no involvement in stopping the case from going forward, and he mentions a letter written to Aḥmad Bāba b. Abī ʿl-ʿAbbās, the qādī of Timbuktu after 1894, that may have concerned his manumission:

You should know that I am in disagreement with my elder brother Sīdi, son of my father the master, who claims that I said to you (pl.) that he stole 600,000 cowries of my money and that I had spoken to you about it. He says that I had informed him of this. So I am writing a quick response. Sīdi also claimed that I said that I had not given you permission to be manumitted and to be free. He claimed that I told him and that you were informed of it by our jurisconsult (faqīh) Baba Ṣantāwu. I also inform you that Sīdi wrote a letter to the jurisconsult and judge Aḥmad Bāba, so I am asking for news of the letter which was sent to him. How is it? And I also inform you Jī [Anjay] that Sīdi said that you have not written him a letter since you have been staying there. Endeavor to send a letter to Sīdi and I will send him a letter out of my desire to make peace and perform good deeds. Do not to believe what you hear from others unless you see it for yourself and it comes from me. I told you one evening a long time ago that a wedge will be driven between Sīdi and me one day, and that day has arrived.

Such letters provide a glimpse of a much more interesting story that lies behind them, but frustratingly for the moment, this is as far as I can go.

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55 Letter from Muhammad b. al-Ṭālib to Anjay ʿĪsā, no date, IHERIAB ms. 8326.
56 This is Ahmad Baba b. Abī ʿl-ʿAbbās, the qādī of Timbuktu beginning in 1894 at the beginning of French colonial rule.
57 Letter from al-Khalīfa b. ʿĪsā to Anjay ʿĪsā, no date, IHERIAB ms. 5510.
The idea of the African Diaspora is usually characterized as: 1) African peoples displaced from the continent, often forcibly as slaves; 2) African peoples whose displacement is marked by ideas of “racial difference”; 3) African peoples who possess a subjective idea of themselves, in one way or another, as some kind of collective unit, whether as “Black” or African, sharing the idea of the same geographic motherland or shared cultural features, and perhaps shared political aspirations. Of course, the idea of an African Diaspora has found its greatest coherence in the Americas, where an especially virulent racism and slave-based economic system marked African-descended people as very distinct and certainly inferior. It is in the Americas that a politics associated with the people of the African Diaspora has emerged in its strongest and most coherent forms.

Do the historical processes that produced the characters discussed in this paper warrant the use of the term diaspora? The life stories of Anjay ʿĪsā and his brothers and sisters, in as far as we have been able to reconstruct them, involved forcible displacement as slaves, and a “re-crossing” of the desert to sub-Saharan Africa. These are the stories of slaves, and although it is not evident in these letters, or in what we have written about these lives, there certainly was a strong history of racial characterization of “Blacks” in the circum-Saharan world. The letters discussed in this paper suggest that even slaves could share in a wider religious identity with their masters, and be recognized as such according to their level of moral conduct and religious knowledge. At the same time, the case of Anjay appears to indicate that while such religious identity and practice could bind together master and slave in these particular circumstances, it also gave them a language of meaningful terms to mark those Africans who were being trafficked across the Sahara, and who were described by a variety of more or less synonymous terms for slaves. In short, it does not appear that Anjay or his fellow slaves possessed anything like a “diaspora consciousness.”

The best definition of the terms of “diaspora” that I am aware of comes from Khachig Tololyan, who argues that diaspora is a form of stateless power.58 In its

paradigmatic form (Jews, Armenians), a diasporic people is forced to resettle by coercion, and it is already a delimited identitary community in its homeland before departure. If we wish to apply this to African dispersals, we can agree that these were coerced, but that in most cases anyway, there was not a common identity in the “homeland.” The African diaspora was quickly forged by the racial ideologies of the host societies which constructed a common racial social category for Africans, much as Jews in medieval Europe or the Middle East had their identity as Jews imposed on them by the segregation and oppression they suffered. These are processes of ghetto-ization that we can think of as “objective” conditions necessary for the production of diaspora. However, this is not enough.

Tololyan stresses the constitutive actions of diasporas themselves in producing and reproducing themselves as a diaspora. Diaspora communities must actively reproduce an identity connected to a “homeland” (teaching language and culture, newspapers, social/community organizations). They must police their communal boundaries. They must maintain contact with the homeland, or where it does not exist, to a mythical notion of the homeland. In this last sense, they evince a desire to be active in the affairs of the homeland, and even wish to return to it. As such, the concept of diaspora is fundamentally dialogic. There is a relationship between the dispersed part of a “people” and its “homeland.”

However, it is possible to see the dialogical nature of diaspora as more than just a feedback loop connecting strongly self-conscious diaspora populations with the politics and cultural production of their homelands. In the case of some recent work on African diaspora in the Americas, there has been an effort to see the dialogic process between diaspora and “homeland” as constitutive of both. In this way, it becomes possible to move beyond the debates about creolization and cultural carry-overs from Africa that have played such a large role in the field of African diaspora. To take one example that I am familiar with, J. Lorand Matory argues that the wider “Yoruba”-derived religions of Brazil, and the late nineteenth-century “Yoruba” culture in places such as Lagos, owe much to trans-Atlantic dialogues in both directions. In the “Black Atlantic,” Matory

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59 From the differences between Melville Herskovitz and E. Franklin Frazier, to Sidney Mintz and James Sweet. [plug in refs]
argues, African and American cultural forms are “coeval” and not representatives of a temporal transfer from one place to another.⁶⁰

In the circum-Saharan world of the nineteenth century, there are cases that resemble the dialogical nature of “Yoruba”-based religious traditions in Brazil and elsewhere in the Americas. Ismael Musah Montana has documented the existence of West African religious traditions in Tunis in the nineteenth century. The news of these activities was provided by a West African traveler who disapproved of these “non-Muslim” religious activities.⁶¹ Other examples include various sub-Saharan cultural practices among “black” populations in Morocco and Egypt.⁶² But what do we make of the examples we have of sub-Saharan Africans living inside, and apparently sharing the same cultural forms, as the dominant Saharan population that viewed them as distinct and inferior according to some kind of racial social category, even if this version of racism was not the same as racial formations in the Americas? Can we speak of a diaspora? Is the fact of being identified as “Black,” and of sub-Saharan origin, sufficient to use the categories of diaspora?

Perhaps the fluidity of cultural categories in the circum-Saharan renders the strict terms of diaspora inadequate. However, it is certainly too early to make such a judgment. The letters discussed in this paper are only the beginning of my efforts to recover more details and further unravel the complicated network that Anjay ʿĪsā lived within. At this point, I only know enough about our “mouse in the house” to know that he would not give up his secrets easily.

The ambiguity of Anjay’s position is one of the most interesting problems in these letters, both in terms of his juridical status and in cultural terms. Anjay was a slave and “Black” yet he was culturally Saharan. Non-Saharan commercial agents treated him with a rhetorical respect demanded by a prosperous and learned Saharan, but his master’s sons were careful to use the familiar language of a close relative while always mentioning

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his status as a slave. In Timbuktu, Anjay was neither fully Saharan nor sub-Saharan. Perhaps more than anything else, it is this inability to fully “inhabit” any identity category, and the constant re-iteration of his status as a slave, or as someone with an immediate slave past, in so much of this correspondence, that renders Anjay Ḥisā’s story as diasporic. As so many letters reminded him, even a relatively high-status slave such as Anjay was highly vulnerable to the whims of his patrons. In these ways, he is very much a familiar figure of the African Diaspora.
Appendix: Selected Arabic Letters of Ghadames Slaves in the Niger Bend, 1860-1900

1. Letter from Ṣanbu ʿĪsā to ʿĪsā b. Aḥmayd

This is a letter written by the slave Ṣanbu ʿĪsā to his master ʿĪsā b. Aḥmayd in 1865. It is written from the town of Sansanding on the Niger River east of Segou, at a time of significant conflict in the region between the forces of al-Ḥājj ʿUmar Tal on the one hand and those of Masina and the Kunta on the other. The main interest of this letter is that it provides an example of the commercial correspondence that these slaves were involved in. In this case, Ṣanbu is acting as the commercial agent of his master in Sansanding. He has come from the north with salt to sell. He buys cloth, gold and grain with the money he earns from selling the salt. He says that he could not buy slaves for a good price. The currencies used in these transactions are cowry shells and gold. It is difficult to follow the different denominations of cowry shells because Ṣanbu refers to different systems of counting (the footnotes explain the different systems). Ṣanbu also reports on the general market conditions in Sansanding.

Text:

Praise be to God and may God bless he who was the last prophet.

This letter is from Ṣanbu to his master Sīdi ʿĪsā b. Ḥmayd al-Ghadāmisī.

Thousands and thousands of greetings to you and may God Almighty’s blessings and mercy be upon you. You asked about us and we ask likewise about you. We are well and in good health and we hope that you are also well.

63 IHERIAB ms. 5451
The reason for this letter is that ʿUthmān has left twenty units of grain with Yarūsāgh in Kārib Tamā. I sent it on the 27th of the month of Shaʿbān [25th of January, 1865], but we heard that he was not able to go that way [because of insecurity] so he instead headed for Jenné, which he reached without trouble. I also sold nine blocks of water-damaged salt for 64,000 cowries, and I gave the money in trust to the commercial house (dār). I also sold four blocks of salt for 24,000 cowries, and I bought two long strips of cloth (durrāʿatayn) for 26,000 cowries. I made four blankets (awāq) from each one, and the thread and the tailoring to do this cost 10,000 cowries.

I bought the 20 units of grain that I sent with Yarūsāgh for a value of 17 blocks of salt. This accounts for thirty blocks. After that, I sold 48 blocks for 120 mithqāls of gold, which means that each block was exchanged for 2 1/2 mithqāls of gold. After that I bought 50 units of grain. This is all that I have right now, in addition to the remaining value of the salt and the cowries. When I reached al-B-J-A-W, I had only four blocks of salt and the grain left with me, which I exchanged for 300 cowries [piles]. Altogether,

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64 ʿUthmān is another slave owned by ʿĪsā and involved in this network.
65 The precise weight of a unit is not known to us. This appears to be equivalent to a sack of grain.
66 This is an unknown location.
67 This word usually refers to the long, sleeveless garments, often called “boubous,” worn by men in this part of West Africa. In this context though, it appears to be strips of cloth, because the next sentence indicates that they were sown together into large blankets.
68 We will see below that one block of salt is worth 6,000 cowries. At the ratio of 20:17, one unit of grain sells for 5,100 cowries.
69 The mithqāl was the weight unit of gold in West Africa. However, its precise weight varied considerably in different times and places. In the second half of the nineteenth century in the Niger Bend, one mithqāl was equivalent to approximately 4 grams of gold. See Marion Johnson, “The Nineteenth-Century Gold ‘Mithqal’ in West and North Africa” Journal of African History 9, 4 (1968), p.557; John Hunwick, “Islamic Financial Institutions: Theoretical Structures and Aspects of Their Application in Sub-Saharan Africa” in Endre Stiansen and Jane I. Guyer eds., Credit, Currencies and Culture: African Financial Institutions in Historical Perspective (Uppsala, 1999), p.85.
70 This is an unknown location.
71 This is very confusing for the uninitiated. He appears to be talking about a different denomination of cowries here. Ṣanbu first indicated above that he had sold the blocks of salt for 6,000 cowries each. When he first discusses this, he uses a system of counting based on denominations of single cowries. But there
this made 20 cowry baskets (qashāsha), each of which contains 250 cowries [piles] per basket (qashāsha). The remaining salt with me that belongs to al-Sharīf was 102 blocks, which I sold for 2 1/2 mithqāls per block. I have the gold with me now.

You asked about the prices of commodities in Samsanding: One block of salt sells for two mithqāls of gold, or 10,000 cowries. Labor is 2,700 cowries. Grain is 400 cowries for a sack (qashāsha). There are no slaves (khadīm) that can be bought profitably here. Cotton strips (tāri) are cheap, but honey is expensive. Shea butter is expensive, baobab flower is not available, and tamarind is expensive. Grain is expensive throughout the country but there are no people who are more dishonest than the people of Sansanding. They gouge prices all the time because they do not believe in God or shaykhs.

L-T-W-N and Ḥamad have left for Saro, and Ḥabd al-Salām left Sansanding headed to the west. You asked about the news from Jenné: The road is blocked and this has caused prices to rise. Grain is 140 cowries per measure (sāʾ) and corn is 200 cowries.

was another system of counting cowries in towns such as Sansanding in which cowries were counted by piles, in which each pile contained a standard number of cowries (60, 80, or 100 cowries depending on the particular local system). These piles were called “hundreds” even if they had less than one hundred cowries in the pile. When Ṣanbu switches to this denomination of cowries as he does here, he is referring to 300 piles (“hundreds”) of cowries for four blacks of salt. If each pile has 80 cowries, as was the common denomination in Bamana-speaking areas of the Niger Valley, that means he received the same 6000 cowries for each block (300 ÷ 4 = 75 × 80 = 6,000). See Marion Johnson, “The Cowry Currencies of West Africa, Part I,” Journal of African History 11, 1 (1970), p.38.

72 The term “qashāsha” is derived from a word for “straw” or “rush”, and it means “sweeper, broom, rake” in different contexts. Here, it refers to a basket or sack made from rushes. This basket contained a standard 20,000 cowries, which weighed between 50 to 100 pounds depending on the type of cowry shell. When Ṣanbu explains that each basket contains 250 cowries, he means 250 piles of 80 cowries each. This equals 20,000 individual cowries (250 × 80 = 20,000). See Marion Johnson, “The Cowry Currencies of West Africa, Part I,” p.41.

73 There is something missing from this price. If it is in the second denomination of cowries, in piles (“hundreds”), that would mean that a sack of grain costs 32,000 cowries in Sansanding (400 × 80 = 32,000). We have already learned at the beginning of the letter that a unit (farda) of grain costs 5,100 cowries.

74 It is written “Ṣār.” Saro is the region between the Niger and the Bani rivers, east of Sansanding and west of Jenné.
per measure (sā’). As for salt, we know its value already. Today, I am worried because you said in your letter that you wanted honey, baobab flour, shea butter and tamarind. I have sent word that I am looking to purchase those products.

The slave girl (ama) of Brāhīm, son of what’s-his-name al-Arawānī, went to Segou even though I told her, and she knows very well, that she will have no better luck there. A slave (khadīm) of one of the Whites who died in Segou, ran away and left Segou. Mas‘ūd has passed away, may God have mercy upon him, and the only thing that he left was a young slave (ghulām). Three people here asked about his debts and I said that we would seize the slave. They said that no one had seized him yet, that he is currently at the mercy of God and His Prophet.

Greetings from us to all of the members of the household in His name. Greetings to Muḍīdu b. Aḥmad. Goodbye. Written on the 11th of Dhū ’l-Ḥijja, 1281 / 7th of May, 1865.

2. Letter from Ṣanbu ʿĪsā to Ḥīsā b. Aḥmayd

This is a second letter written by Ṣanbu ʿĪsā to his master Ḥīsā b. Aḥmayd. This letter is not dated, although judging from the discussion of military maneuvers, it may also have been written in the mid-1860s. The letter is interesting because it shows another aspect of Ṣanbu’s role as commercial agent for his master, that of creditor and debt collector. We
will see in another letter below that this could be the cause of conflict between master and slave. This letter appears to have been written by a scribe on Ṣanbu’s behalf. The spelling of names and the expressions are different from the first letter which was also, almost certainly written by a scribe.

Text:

Praise be to God and may God bless he who was the last prophet.

This is from the slave (ʿabīd) Samba, slave (ghulām) of ʿĪsā b. Aḥmayd al-Ghadāmīshī to his master, the elegant (al-ẓarīf), the superior (al-fāʾiq), the peer of the good and the great alike, the above-mentioned ʿĪsā. Thousands and thousands of greetings to you and may you have God Almighty’s mercy and blessings. Greetings also to all the people whether known to me or not.

Now then, the reason for my letter is to inform you that I have still not been able to collect the debt that is preventing me from leaving and coming to you. The debt is 10 bīṣāti al-maḥmūdhiyya for ʿAlāmūsu, as well as some salt. If it were not for that debt, you would have seen me already. I wanted to leave because I don’t have any more business here other than the debts. What is preventing boats from moving are the Dajjāliyīn who have blocked the way by assembling in the town of Yafuka, where travelers cross the river. That hinders the boats from coming your way.

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79 spelled “Samba” instead of the normal “Ṣanbu.”
80 The nisba is spelled incorrectly as “Ghadāmīshī” instead of “Ghadāmīshī.” Among other things, this is evidence of a different scribe.
81 We do not know what this refers to. One possibility is that it is a set of women’s wraps (“bayṣa” in Hassaniya).
82 It is not clear who this refers to. The term “dajjāl” means “swindler, cheat, charlatan.” It may refer to the Tijāni forces of al-Ḥājj ʿUmar Tal.
83 We do not now know where this is.
As for the news of the country that you asked about: The Shaykh went to the town of Wanza and he stayed there with the army. As for Sidi, he entered Kunārī. Ibn al-Dajjāl went up to the land of stones (arḍ al-ḥijāra), and they did not find him. He was not found in Jenné either. He was not found and our horses did not enter (that country), but we pray to God on his behalf.

Our greetings to the children of my master, both the boys and girls, and to Muḥammad al-Sināwi, and to the great jurisconsult Matīdan. This is the end. You asked about us and we are well and in good health. We ask for your prayers. Goodbye.

3. Letter from Anjay Īsā to Īsā b. Aḥmayd

This is a letter written by the other main slave in this correspondence, Anjay Īsā, who, like Šanbu, was a slave of Īsā b. Aḥmayd. In this letter written to his master, Anjay details commercial information and reports on his purchases and sales from the town of Youvarou, on the Niger River just north of Lake Debo (the town is known as Yuwar in Arabic writings from Timbuktu). In this letter we get more than just the reporting of prices and accounting of merchandise; we also have part of a conflict between master and slave over Anjay’s conduct and the accusation that he has disobeyed the orders of his master. What is especially interesting in this letter is the way that Anjay argues, how he compares himself to a mouse, and how he makes reference to his piety in defending

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84 Kanuri is a region east of the Niger River to the north of Mopti and south of Lake Debo.
85 This appears to be a reference to the death of al-Hājj ʿUmar Tal (if this is indeed who “Ibn al-Dajiīl” or “son of the charlatan” refers to). He was killed in 1864 in a cave on the Bandiagara escarpment in Dogon Country, which may be what “land of the stones” refers to.
86 Presumably, this should be spelled Muḥammad Sinṭāwu, a scribe used often by the Ghadames network.
87 IHERIAB ms. 8308.
himself. The letter is not dated, but it does refer to political and military disorder that is hindering trade. This may or may not mean that the letter was written in the 1860s, like the letters above.

**Text:**

Praise be to the Unique God and may God bless the best of His deputies.

This is from Anjay\(^{88}\) to his noble master ʿĪsā b. Ḥmayd al-Ghadāmisī. Greetings to you and those who are with you.

Now then, I write to tell you that, God willing, you will find 30 cotton bands (tāri) brought to you by Saddi Maflūṭ. They will be folded in a mat and marked by two circles, one inside the other, plus the foot of a bird just like the mark\(^{89}\) from Kurunghuy. He is also bringing with him one rod (ʿūdu) of kola nuts,\(^{90}\) which contains 1500 nuts. As for the cotton bands, they are in the middle of the two veils (disa),\(^{91}\) and their price is 11,000 cowries. The cotton bands cost 100,000 salāmiyya [of salt] and 2000 cowries.\(^{92}\) As for the price of the 1500 cotton bands, it was 93,000 cowries. Inside of the cotton bands you will also find 8 garments (libās) – they are for your beloved al-Madani.

I also received your first letter and the second one which arrived on the same day that I wrote you my letter. I read both of them and I understood their content. You said in the two letters that you had ordered me to return to you and not to remain here. I have not

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\(^{88}\) Anjay’s name is written as “Unkī”

\(^{89}\) These marks are drawn. This is a mark of three lines, shaped like a capital “H” on its side.

\(^{90}\) “gūriya,” spelled “jūriya.”

\(^{91}\) We have read this as the Songhay word for veil (disa). But it may refer to a more generic kind of textile, or even to a hiding place (from the Hassaniya “dsiisa”).

\(^{92}\) “100,000 salāmiyya” appears to be a measure of salt, construed here as a barter, plus 2000 cowries of currency. This at least is how John Hunwick interprets “salāmiyya;” see Hunwick, “Islamic Financial Institutions,” p.98.
deviated from this for even one day. I do not disobey your commands and your orders because I do not wish to disobey them even for a single moment. Everything that you reproached me for is because of a delay caused by circumstances, not my personal choice. There is no quick business in the town of Youvarou. Salt is not sold quickly and gold is not found easily. But you are absent and I am present here. It is those who are here on the ground who can see and know what those who are not here cannot see and cannot possibly know. This is the difference between you and me. I have no personal business in remaining here other than your service and business. Since we have come to the town of Youvarou not one of us has slept securely in our houses; instead we have spent our nights beside the river guarding our goods from our enemies. None of [the foreigners] who are in the town of Youvarou sleep in their houses because they must spend their nights beside the river. We have spent three consecutive nights outside in this way. In these conditions, the heart does not rest peacefully. It is better to do that than to do something else.

I asked Saddi to delay his trip here for a few days so that I could put together a little bit of gold and send it to you with him, but he said that he could not stay here any longer. God willing, you will see all the gold that I acquired in these last days.

As for the fact that he said that I had sold on credit: I did this only for one load (ʿadīla) of tobacco, which I sold for 100,000 cowries on credit. This was a mistake on my part, but it was decreed by God Almighty and I did not do it by my own will. God willing, I will come to you without further delay. Do not listen to everything that people

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93 This is called “Yuwar” in this and other documents from Timbutku. It is a town on the Niger near Lake Debo.
say to you until you see me, God willing. To you, I am like the mouse that is in the house of the people: He does not abandon these people of the house. You and I are like that. So rest your heart in peace about me. From me you will see only things that please you, God willing. I swore an oath to God Almighty to never betray you. Even if people tell you that I am stealing your money, I will walk to you on my two feet, God willing. I will walk to you myself and you will do with me what you want. I prefer this to betraying you.

As for the boats, they were held up by the emir ʿAliyu b. Awdā. He decreed that nobody should travel before he crossed the river. Al-Kāhiya Burāḥīm also sent a letter to Baba Saʿīdu saying that he should not let anyone travel to Timbuktu before ʿAliyu b. Awdā has crossed the river. These two people prevented travelers from coming to you.

Goodbye.

4. Letter from Aḥmad al-Bakkāy b. ʿĪsā to Anjay ʿĪsā

This letter was written to Anjay ʿĪsā by one of ʿĪsā b. Aḥmayd’s sons, named Aḥmad al-Bakkāy. There is no date on this letter but it must have been written later than the letters above. It is a simple request that Anjay carry out certain commercial tasks and it demonstrates that Anjay continued to fulfill his role as commercial agent for ʿĪsā’s children, even after ʿĪsā died in the early 1880s.

94 He was the Tijani emir of the region of Farimake, which is west of Lake Debo. He is also known as ʿAli Awdī.
95 This is the emir (kāhiya) of Timbuktu who died in 1884. See Elias Saad, Social History of Timbuktu: The role of Muslim scholars and notable, 1400-1900 (Cambridge, 1983), p.220.
96 IHERIAB ms. 10332.
97 We do not know his precise date of death.
Text:

Praise be to God and may God bless he who was the last prophet.

This is from ʿĀḥmad al-Bakkāy b. Ḫmayd to his brother and beloved, and only then his slave (ghulām) Anjay. Greetings to you and may you have God’s mercy and blessings. How are you? How is your family? We hope that you are just as we are and that you are satisfied with that.

Now then, know that I wrote to you previously asking you to come over to me quickly and leave what you have with you in the custody of my shaykh Baba b. Sinṭāwu. We ask him, and likewise God Almighty, for his continuing love for me and for the blessings which he transmitted to me. If this is not possible, then leave it with whomever you have confidence in, and may God bless you. Do what I have told you quickly and without delay or interpretation. You must know that I see what you do not see. Goodbye.

In addition, bring along with you the blankets (khash) that you think will be profitable for us to sell here along with the trunk which does not have a key. Put parts of K-L-ʿ and the new books which are valuable in the trunk. Bring whatever you can from there. Goodbye.

Appoint someone who can recognize and differentiate between these things for you and pay him very well. Greetings to my brother and Shaykh Baba b. Sinṭāwu and to my brother al-Bashīr b. Ṭālib and to everyone else who asks about us.

5. Letter from ʿĀḥmad al-Bakkāy to Anjay Ḫmayd ʿĪsā

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98 IHERIAB ms. 8339.
This is a second letter written to Anjay ʿĪsā by Aḥmad al-Bakkāy b. ʿĪsā. Although there is commercial information in this letter, it is mainly about Aḥmad al-Bakkāy’s son, who has been sent to study under the teacher, scribe and jurisconsult Baba b. Ṣinṭāwu. Aḥmad al-Bakkāy instructs Anjay to discipline the child and to ensure that he follows his lessons. This letter highlights the complex position of Anjay in this network. He is both a senior, perhaps fatherly figure for the younger Aḥmad al-Bakkāy, who is entrusted with the education of his own son, yet he is still apparently a slave.

Text:

Praise be to God and may God bless he who was the last prophet.

Full and generous greetings from Aḥmad al-Bakkāy b. ʿĪsā to his brother Anjay. Greetings to you. You will see my son ʿĪsā coming to you. Put him in the Quranic school (maḥaḍra) of my shaykh Baba b. Ṣinṭāwu and support him as much as you can. Hit him and imprison him, and do whatever is possible and even that which is impossible until he obeys God and obeys you. Do not neglect him.

He is bringing with him 20 units so give two of them to Shinī. The first one is tobacco and the second one is corn.

Many greetings to you and greetings to my shaykh Baba b. Ṣinṭāwu. You will see my son and the son of your pupil (talmīdh) coming to you. Struggle hard with him. May God bless you and reward you. You will find him to be beyond your capacity but bear with him. Many greetings. Goodbye.

99 This is written as “your son,” but it clearly refers to Ahmad al-Bakkāy’s son.
100 He is referring to himself here, indicating that he had been a student of Baba b. Ṣinṭāwu.
This is a letter written in 1884 from the Saharan oasis of Ghāt, located in present-day southwestern Libya. It is written by a merchant in the larger Ghadames network to the two slaves of ʿĪsā b. ʿĀhmayd, Ṣanbu and Anjay. The author complains that he has been kept out of the loop on commercial opportunities in Timbuktu and he asks repeatedly for news. By news, he means commercial news. He says in this letter that one must correspond with the slaves if one is to be kept up-to-date with business on the southern side of the desert. This suggests just how important these slaves were to the larger commercial network.

Text:

Praise be to God and may God bless our master Muḥammad and his family and his companions.

This letter is from al-Mukhtār b. al-Ḥājj ʿAlī, son of the late al-Ḥājj Muḥammad ʿAmmūsh al-Balīlī, to our dear and honorable Ṣanbu, slave of ʿĪsā b. ʿĀhmayd, and to Anjay,102 slave of ʿĪsā b. ʿĀhmayd and all of the children. Greetings to you and may you have God’s mercy and blessings. You asked about us and we are well. We hope that, God willing, it is the same for you. If a blemish appears on your faces, it is only because of

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101 IHRIAB ms. 8246.
102 spelled “N-J-Y”
God. It is God who causes us to suffer. Beware of the nearness of He who is All-hearing and All-Responsive.

The reason for this letter is because Muḥammad b. ʿĪsā and I have come to Ghāt and we were told that if we want to know what is happening in Timbuktu, we must correspond with the slaves in order to gather news. How can we respond to you unless you send us all the news? And you, O Ṣanbu, this is because of your failings! You know everything, and now you are the equivalent of our father. Indeed you have al-Ḥājj Muhammad there with you in Timbuktu who used to overwhelm us with news, yet eight years have now passed and we have not had a letter in response from al-Bakkāy. You must absolutely give us all the news from these people, and that includes the news of the servant (waṣīf) al-Ḥājj, may God help and strengthen him, and a response putting together the news of our father, and what has become of al-Bakkāy, and what has happened with Bana-kayār and Bou Naʿām in the house. Give us all the news about any matter which might materialize for our brothers in Timbuktu and we will respond accordingly. This is our news. Goodbye. Written on 18 Safar 1302/ 6 December 1884.

7. Letter from ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Yāmina to ʿĪsā b. Hmayd al-Ghadāmisī

This letter was carried by Ṣanbu to his master ʿĪsā b. Aḥmayd. It was not written by a slave, nor sent to a slave. We have included it here because it reveals that the status of being a slave, even a relatively high-status slave such as Ṣanbu and Anjay, rendered one uniquely vulnerable. This was not in any sense a theoretical vulnerability. In this letter, after detailing some of the commercial goods he is sending to ʿĪsā with Ṣanbu, he

103 IHERIAB ms. 8261.
explains that he is sending two slaves who must be sold into the Saharan slave trade. One slave named Kunma, who presumably traveled with Ṣanbu and the letter, is to be sold to the merchants from Tuwat in the Algerian Sahara because he knows too much about the internal workings of the master’s family. Presumably, this fate was unknown to Kunma. We can only guess at exactly what this means, but marital infidelity seems a likely reason. That he could be sold to Saharan merchants from Tuwat because he posed a potential threat to his master’s honor, due to his knowledge of adulterous behavior, reminds us of how precarious the position of slaves could be. It is however interesting that the writer felt compelled to at least explain what must have been, at some level, a difficult commission for ʿĪsā to carry out.

Text:

Praise be to the Unique God and May God bless His Prophet.

Now then, generous greetings from the servant of his Lord, ʿAbd al-Rahmān Yāmina to he who is most honorable, he who does not disturb the peace, master of his companions, light of his age, the most obedient in this generosity, ʿĪsā b. Ḥmayd al-Ghadāmisī. After our greetings to you, may God have mercy on you and bless you. You asked about us and we are well, praise be to God. Perhaps you are likewise.

The reason for our letter to you is to tell you that you will see with the slaves, brought to you by your slave (ghulām) Ṣanbu, in loyalty to God and under His protection, 30 units of food, 8 of which are unadulterated rice while the rest are white corn. In this, there are two or three units of personal property, which God only knows the value of.
You will also receive one container of kola nuts, which holds 2200 nuts, that belongs to Nana Zawja. After that, know that one unit of this number is marked by a white rag tied to the container of the kola nuts which belongs to Zawja. From God and then from you, we want you to use the kola nuts to buy sheep. Zawja tells you that when you sell her merchandise, you should ask for a sliver Maria Theresa dollar and lace; also selling 5000… [unreadable] which you should count in the money of Zawja. Exchange what remains for good salt. After this, you will see in the aforementioned merchandise a little bit of honey and that belongs to me, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, so put it together with the food.

After that we want from God and His Prophet, and only then from you, for you to sell one of the slaves named Kunma when he arrives. Sell him to the people of Tuwat so that he will go to their country. You must sell him because otherwise he will reveal the secrets of his master’s family. This is the reason that I ask you to sell him. In addition, you will receive one female slave. Sell this slave girl together with the aforementioned slave for a single price when the notables from Tuwat come to you. Exchange them for tobacco, or, if the notables from Tuwat do not come, wait for the Azalaï to arrive and exchange them and the food and honey for salt. May God preserve your life.

Know that we want from God, and only then from you, that we all join together in the matter of your merchandise and the monetary debt incurred in the matter of the food.

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104 The letter refers to Zawja as a proper name, although the word means “wife.”
105 Touat is an oasis complex in southern Algeria. Merchants from Touat were prominent in the Saharan trade from Timbuktu.
106 The Azalaï is the annual salt caravan from Taoudeni to Timbuktu and other sites where salt is in demand.
May we receive news of this quickly, God willing… [unreadable] Praise be to God who has reunited you and your slave [the letter carrier]. Goodbye.

8. Letter from Ṣanbu ʿĪsā to Anjay ʿĪsā

This is a letter written by the slave Ṣanbu to his “brother” and fellow slave Anjay. Whether they were actually brothers is not clear. Ṣanbu was older than Anjay and his written Arabic was much weaker. This letter appears to have been written by a scribe. There are a few items mentioned in this letter that we are unable to understand and translate. However, it provides a window into the ways in which even slaves participated in joint commercial ventures amongst themselves. Notice that the amount of money at stake in these transactions is much less than in earlier letters where the goods were being sold on behalf of the master ʿĪsā b. Aḥmayd. This letter also mentions the larger families that these slaves established in Timbuktu, and provides evidence that women were also investors in this commerce.

Text:

Praise be to God and may God bless the best of His deputies.

This letter is from the big brother Ṣanbu ʿĪsā to his cultured (al-adīb) and distinguished (al-nabīh) younger brother Anjay, slave (ghulām) of ʿĪsā. Greetings to you and to everyone with you.

Now then, I write to tell you that we arrived safely and in good health but since we have arrived here I have fallen ill and I have not gotten better. I am so sick that I have

107 IHERIAB ms. 10577.
not even been able to pay a visit to Shaykh ʿAbidīn, and I have not sold a thing since coming here. That’s why I was not able to send you the sibri\textsuperscript{108} that you commissioned. The man for whom I came to this place has left for Suraya,\textsuperscript{109} but he informed his people about my arrival and instructed them to make me wait until he returned. I will wait for him until he comes back, but if I feel healthy enough, I will go and travel to him.

Tell my creditor not to be alarmed about my health. God will solve what is between us without fatigue or effort. Tell my wife Kani, after giving her my greetings, and my greetings to Baniya and his brother ʿUthmān as well, that she should not neglect the few things that I left with her. She should hold on to the string of beads which I brought for her. I have not sold any of them. The scribe Muḥammad Yintawu sends you his greetings.

I was able to sell the entrusted (amāna) būbu\textsuperscript{110} for 60,000 cowries and then I bought 15 silver ḍiyār\textsuperscript{111} which I sent with Bukayyil al-Aʿrab. The price of porterage and the rent is 2,000, which I paid. I also sent with him 8 other ḍiyārs to give to al-ʿArbi b. Tata, as the price for the kola nuts. So now you know about them. Goodbye.

9. Letter from Yājīda, the concubine of ʿĪsā, to Anjay ʿĪsā\textsuperscript{112}

This letter was written by a female slave named Yājīda, who calls herself a concubine of ʿĪsā. The handwriting of the letter indicates that she used a scribe to compose this.

\textsuperscript{108} It is not clear what this refers to.
\textsuperscript{109} It is not clear where this is. It seems unlikely that this is the Saraya in present-day Guinea.
\textsuperscript{110} It is not clear what this refers to unless it is to a male outer garment or “boubou.”
\textsuperscript{111} It is not clear what this refers to.
\textsuperscript{112} IHERIAB ms. 10444.
Nonetheless, it is the sole example of a female slave letter in this correspondence that we are aware of. Like the other letters, the subject here is commercial.

Text:

Praise be to God and may God bless he who was the last prophet.

Please accept full and generous greetings from Yājīda, concubine (surriya) of ʿĪsā, to her beloved and distinguished brother Anjay ʿĪsā. After invoking God, I write to inform you that you will receive from Tafa two units, one of hulled rice and the second of tobacco, and two strips of cotton (tāri) equal to 20 lengths (dhirāʿ), and 5 lūb113 turbans (ʿamāʿim) marked with an “X.” When they reach you, may God’s blessings be upon you, send them to me quickly in less than three day and no more than five days. I have also sent one cover (kāsha)114 made from wool at the house of Fāṭim Gh-Th-M. Take possession of it and buy it for me in exchange for tobacco (tabāk).115 We send our greetings to you, to everyone with you, to those who are related to you and to all of the people, even those we don’t know. Know that I did not remain during this period of time in J-N-B-L only because I am waiting for Kīrtī Yukuru, who has not come yet from her travels to Djanet.116

113 It is not clear what this refers to.
114 The word “kasha” is used especially in Morocco. Marcel Beaussier, Dictionaire pratique arabe-français (Alger, 1958), p.867.
115 In Hassaniyya Arabic this refers to leaf tobacco. It is not clear if that is what is intended here or if it is more general meaning.
116 Djanet, if this is what is meant here, is a town to the west of Ghāt, in present-day southeastern Algeria.
As for the cover that I mentioned to you already in the letter, do not ask where it is. Just send me its price with the writer of the letter. Also, the first writer of the letter had (mistakenly) revised the word “tārī” (cotton strips) as “kharīj” the first two times…

10. Letter from al-Khalīfa b. ʿĪsā to Anjay ʿĪsā

This is the final letter we present. It is from al-Khalīfa, one of ʿĪsā b. Aḥmayd’s sons, to Anjay. This letter does not concern commercial affairs, but it is written because of a conflict between al-Khalīfa and one of this brothers. What is especially interesting is that al-Khalīfa mentions the issue of Anjay’s manumission, denying that he acted to prevent it from happening. There are other letters that refer to this issue as well. We know that at some point Anjay was manumitted. One might have expected that this happened at his master’s death, but that does not appear to have been the case. Even after ʿĪsā b. Aḥmayd’s death, the language of slavery continued to be used in correspondence with Anjay. There is a larger story behind this letter but we do not know the details of it at this time. However, this letter demonstrates that the issue of manumission was one that was clearly discussed between masters and slaves.

Text:

In the name of God. Praise be to God and may God bless His chosen one.

That’s enough. Now then, full and generous greetings from al-Khalīfa b. ʿĪsā to his father Jī [Anjay], with whom distinguished men associate. I am well and in good health. You should know that I am in disagreement with my elder brother Sīdī, son of my

117 IHERIAB ms. 5510.
father the master, who claims that I said to you (pl.) that he stole 600,000 cowries of my money and that I had spoken to you about it. He says that I had informed him of this. So I am writing a quick response.

Sídi also claimed that I said that I had not given you permission to be manumitted and to be free. He claimed that I told him and that you were informed of it by our jurisconsult (faqīh) Baba Şantāwu. I also inform you that Sídi wrote a letter to the jurisconsult and judge Aḥmad Bāba, so I am asking for news of the letter which was sent to him. How is it? And I also inform you Jī [Anjay] that Sídi said that you have not written him a letter since you have been staying there.

Endeavor to send a letter to Sídi and I will send him a letter out of my desire to make peace and perform good deeds. Do not to believe what you hear from others unless you see it for yourself and it comes from me. I told you one evening a long time ago that a wedge will be driven between Sídi and me one day, and that day has arrived. Pass our greetings to our jurisconsult Bāba Şintāwū and ask him to please include us in his prayers at all times. We also send our greetings to Bintu and to Tasyīn and to ʿĪsā Bakkayu. We also send our greetings to our mother Musūd and we ask her to include us in her prayers.

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118 Notice the difference in spelling – find a common spelling
119 This is Aḥmad Baba b. Abī ‘l-ʿAbbās, the qādī of Timbuktu beginning in 1894 at the beginning of French colonial rule.