

Muslim travelers and others wrote extensively of the great rivers of West Africa—the Niger, the Senegal, the Gambia, the Benue, and the Volta—that made interregional trade possible. In his account of the twelfth-century Sudan, the Muslim traveler Al-Idrisi describes “the strongly made boats” of the people of Ghana. Early Muslim writers erroneously called these rivers the “Nile [Nil] of the Blacks,” thinking them extensions of the Nile in Egypt. Interlacing lakes, lagoons, and streams formed a riverine system that facilitated extensive trade between coastal areas and communities considerably farther inland. In West Central Africa, African traders sold their goods along the coastal waterways between the Zaire and Kwanzaa rivers.

Internal Slave Trade African merchants used slaves, as well as draft animals, to carry their cargo along the overland trade routes that connected to rivers. For the trans-Saharan trade, West African gold and kola were transferred from boat to camel and then carried northward. West African merchants involved in the southern trade to the sub-Saharan regions conducted an extensive commerce from the Niger to the Senegal River and from the Senegal to the Gambia River. River systems formed an integral part of the indigenous African slave trade, and their interlocking character would later facilitate the Atlantic trade along the West African coast.

A lagoon trade provided nearly unbroken communication for 400 miles from the westernmost kingdoms of Allada and Ouidah (Wydah) eastward to Lagos and to Benin farthest east. In 1508 a Portuguese traveler described the lagoon trade through the Lagos area of the Yoruba kingdom of Ijebu as a canoe-borne trade of cloth and slaves that moved along the coastal lagoons and streams spanning the area between the Volta River and the Niger delta. Historian John Thornton thus argues: “Not only did the Niger-Senegal-Gambia complex unite a considerable portion of West Africa, but the Niger provided a corridor that ultimately added Hausaland, the Yoruba States, and the Nupe, Igala, and Benin kingdoms to a hydrographic system that was ultimately connected to the Atlantic.”