
Christian Holst

Muslim traders, Songhay warriors and the Arma

The social destruction of the Middle Niger Bend from 1549 to 1660



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This work has been accepted by the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Kassel as a thesis for acquiring the academic degree of Doktor der Philosophie (Dr. phil.).

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1. Introduction

The sub-Saharan world is often seen as completely separate from the rest of the world and is frequently simply ignored. Even if it is taken into account it is only displayed, paradoxically, not in its own right but only as the subaltern part of something larger. It becomes the object of European history or the extension of the North African world. In both cases it is not seen as the subject of its own past. Nevertheless it was, like other major cultural zones, on the one hand a vigorous place that possessed unique dynamics that shaped its own cultural responses to the different environments in which it was placed and at the same time was connected to the wider world surrounding it. In fact, it is useless to speak of “THE sub-Saharan world.” As is the case with Asia, Europe and other major areas of the globe, sub-Saharan Africa is split up into a host of different environments, peoples and ways of living which are too disparate in order to fit them under one big umbrella. Each of these areas was a highly dynamic place with, to use Fernand Braudel’s term, a deep history, stretching back millennia.

This story takes place in a region often called the “Bilad al-Sudan”¹ - more specifically in the part often called “Takrur”. Translated into English it simply means “Land of the Blacks” and was used as a description by Arab geographers for the land south of the Sahara stretching from the Atlantic coast of West Africa all the way to the Red Sea. This strip touches on its northern limits the Sahara, an area which is called the Sahel, Arabic for “coast”. Here, the sea is the desert and its ships the camels. The south is marked by the deep forests of modern day Ivory Coast, Cameroon and the Central African Republic. In between these two the Bilad al-Sudan is dominated by the Savannah. Large, seemingly infinite plains stretch from horizon to horizon, home to shrubs and bushes. This division was instated by the ancient Arabs that had divided Africa along the lines

¹ In Arabic, the pronunciation of the final “l” of “al” (definite article) changes depending on the initial letter of the following word (sun- or moon letter). This is sometimes reflected in transliterations. In such a case “al-Sudan” becomes “as-Sudan” etc. However, this makes it harder to find references in other works which is why “al” is used throughout.

of its climatic differences: North Africa, the Sahara, the Savannah and the rain-forests. For them, the continent more or less ended there, as no Arab had contact with a human living inland further south.

The Bilad al-Sudan was barely understood by these early Arab writers and instead of being used to describe its inhabitants on its own terms it was more an effort to set apart the “Blacks” from the “Berbers” and the “Arabs”. Linked to this classification was a clear order: Arabs at the top, Blacks at the bottom and Berbers in between. The response from the inhabitants of the Bilad al-Sudan to being relegated to the bottom rung was differentiated and sometimes somewhat curious. Whereas the intellectual titan of the Sudan, Ahmad Baba, argued for equality between the groups as long as the individual members adhered to Islam, others, like Ahmad al-Shinqiti, tried to argue that they in fact were part of the North African world, the “Trab al-Bidan”, despite them living in the at the southern fringes of the Sahara and thus not black.²

The Bilad al-Sudan had made early contact with the Muslim world, beginning in the eighth century C.E. leading to the introduction of Islam and to diplomatic and commercial links. The Bilad al-Sudan is often split into several sub-regions: Nubia, Beja and Ethiopia in the east and the Bilad al-Takrur in the west.³ Takrur was described first by al-Bakri (1014–1094) as a town situated on the lower Senegal river. Its usage was widened by later authors like al-Umari and al-Qalqasandi and used as a term for the territory of Mali and later for West Africa in general. In this sense it was taken up by natives of this part of the world as well. The Wolof term “Tocolor” from which the French “Toucouleur” is taken shows the modern day link to this past.⁴ Ahmad Baba, the most famous scholar to have come from this region, called himself “Takruri” and local chronicles like the Tadzkirot al-Nisian, finished in 1751, used it as well. It is however not a

² al-Shinqīī, Aḥmad ibn al-Amīn. *Al-Wasīṭ fī tarājim udabā’ Shinqīṭ wa-al-kalām ‘alā Tilka al-bilād*. Cairo: al-Maṭba‘ah al-Jamāliyah, 1911, P.422-423.

³ al-Hajj, Muhammad. ‘The Character of the Central Bilad al-Sudan in Historical Perspective’. In *The Central Bilad al-Sudan - Tradition & Adaptation*, edited by Zusuf Fadl Hasan and Paul Doornbos. London: SOAS, 1977, P.14-15.

⁴ al-Naqar, ‘Umar. ‘Takrur the History of a Name’. *The Journal of African History* 10, no. 3 (1 January 1969): 365–374, P.365.

clearly defined term and Takrur, like the Bilad al-Sudan itself, had no exact borders and it was used by different authors in different manners. Al-Burtuli for example juxtaposes Takrur and the Bilad al-Sudan. Others, like al-Samsadi, include the Shinqit into Takrur, which extends the latter to a considerable degree into the desert.⁵ It is important however to recognise that these terms were not merely foreign ascriptions but were used by natives living in these regions as self-descriptions. They argued with these terms and tried to establish their own identity through these idioms. It shows cultural self-consciousness, independence and dynamism and also scholarly and political activity which is only begun to be recognised in modern literature. Here, for the sake of simplicity, Takrur and the Bilad al-Sudan are used synonymously, as is also often done in the sources used. It is a moniker for the western Savannah and Sahel, dominated by the Middle Niger Bend and the Senegal river.

This was the ideal soil for civilisations to grow, and grow they did. The Bilad al-Sudan gave rise to various empires and this study tells the end of one and the beginning of another. The biggest empire West Africa had ever seen was Songhay. Established by Sunni Ali and brought to glistening height by Askya al-Hadj Muhammad and Askya Dawud, it transformed the region and gave rise to a high culture as powerful as never witnessed before. Works created by its scholars still influence thinking in West Africa today and local rulers tried until the 19th century to trace their heritage back to the rulers of Songhay in an effort to take part in their glory. The heartland of this empire was the Middle Niger Bend which was in the heart of Takrur. An area which starts in Djenne, goes up the Niger to Timbuktu and follows the river east to Gao. Its social life was dominated by two groups: the Muslim or religious estate and the ruling or warrior estate. Like all definitions of social units, it is not a hard and sharp classification but rather describes tendencies, while still trying to be analytically useful. The Muslim estate consisted of members with many different ethnic and linguistic heritages. However, they all had a basis of learning rooted in Maliki Islam, spoke at least a smattering of Arabic and had a common basis in Muslim law and code of conduct which gave its members a

⁵ Osswald, Rainer. *Die Handelsstädte der Westsahara: Die Entwicklung der arabisch-maurischen Kultur von Sinqit, Wadan, Tisit und Walata*. Berlin: D. Reimer, 1986, P.3-4.

shared identity. The ruling estate is easier to define. All its members were part of the ruling elite of the Middle Niger Bend. The Askyas, Faris and Kois (and later the Pashas and Qa'ids) were all part of the ruling estate and additionally often members of the same family as the ruling strata were essentially run like a neptocracy. They often considered themselves Muslim but they had never visited a madrasa or were acquainted with any form of deeper Muslim learning like the members of the Muslim estate were. They were interested in running the realm not so much in studying it.⁶ The distinction, self-description and outside definition of these two groups will become subject to much greater scrutiny in the chapter on “Muslims on the Middle Niger Bend” and “Honour, Islam and the Arma”.

The end of Songhay came with the Moroccan attack in 1591. Fielding a small, but technically superior army they destroyed the Songhay forces and took over the Middle Niger Bend. Initially they managed to set themselves up as the dominant power in the region but soon enough they came under pressure by other local groups. Their hold quickly began to crumble not only because of external forces that impinged on their territory but also because of internal divisions that precluded a coherent response to the external threats. In addition the lifeline of this Moroccan outpost to the north was cut very quickly because Morocco itself began to be mired in succession struggles. In 1660 the invaders thus decided to give up the prayer for the Moroccan ruler in their mosques, which indicates that they considered themselves very much on their own. Their realm ultimately fell to a Tuareg attack in 1737. The Moroccan invaders quickly became to be known as the “Arma” (or “Ruma”) which is Arabic (الرمة or sometimes الرومة) for “fusilier”, “the ones with the flintlocks”.

Songhay and the Arma essentially had the same problem: How to stabilise their sway over the land, how to hold onto power, how to live the life they wanted to live? We will see in the course of the following chapters that they both had a fundamentally different approach to this problem that proved to be initially successful but did not provide long term stability.

⁶ Hunwick, J. ‘Secular Power and Religious Authority in Muslim Society: The Case of Songhay’. *The Journal of African History* 37, no. 2 (1996): 175–194, P.180-181.

The study starts with the reign of Askya Dawud (ruled from 1549 – 1583) who was the last ruler who reigned over Songhay while it was at the peak of its power. By having his reign as a starting point it is possible to trace the downfall of the empire and the relationship between its different groups which ossified all aspects of social life, the administration and the economic system, leading to antagonism and finally breakdown. Although the starting date is 1549, it is sometimes needed to take recourse to earlier stages in Songhay's history in order to be able to explain what comes afterwards. As such the names of Askya Mohammed or al-Maghili, a famous North African scholar (died ca. 1505) will also appear here and there. The end date is 1660, when the Arma stopped praying for the Moroccan ruler, which was a clear outward sign that they considered themselves part of the Middle Niger Bend. By going over the divide of 1591, when Songhay fell, it is possible to see which social constructs were carried over and which were modified. Thus it is possible to write an analysis the social groups of the Middle Niger Bend and not “just” writing a history of Songhay or the Arma, which is not the aim here. This study analyses the main groups of the Middle Niger Bend and how they interacted: the Muslim estate, the Songhay ruling estate, the Arma ruling estate and, to a certain extent also other players in society, like slaves. Their interactions are then used to show what ruling systems were erected under Songhay and the Arma and why they worked and why they failed. These social groups did not immediately die when Songhay fell, instead they all lived on, were modified and contested, which is another reason to go beyond 1591 as the history of the peoples of the Middle Niger Bend did not end at that date.

What will be shown is that the Songhay Muslim and ruling estate created a community of sorts that allowed them to renegotiate and communicate through their group boundaries. With this they injected elements of their own thinking into the other group which actually counteracted self-destructive elements of that group, as it provided other ways of renegotiating power and belonging. Although this proved to be the basis for a successful run of rule, it also lay the seeds of destruction as it aligned the aims and want of the different groups of the Middle Niger Bend which led to the stagnation of several systems that were reliant on the social interaction between groups, like the administration and trade. The more they became alike, the more they competed for the same objec-

tives, tearing Songhay apart. This social dynamic did not immediately die with the destruction of Songhay in 1591, as it had become a part of the Middle Niger Bend itself, indeed it had never been a conscious invention of the people of Songhay itself, but had grown organically out of the social situation that prospered on the banks of the Niger.

The downfall of the Arma was not preordained but was fuelled by ignorance of these local social realities. The Arma were not able to use this social system because they derived their view on how to run a society from Marrakech and modelled it according to their own military demands. The defeat/victory of 1591 was not the reason for the social destruction of the Middle Niger Bend, it was the lack of a regulating agent for the ruling estate of the Arma, whose possible rebirth they themselves destroyed 1593, when they dismantled the Muslim estate in Timbuktu.

Before descending into the heart of the matter there will be a short overview over the current state of research on the pre-colonial Middle Niger Bend. Following this, in chapter three, there will be a discussion on methodology which will focus on questions of ethnicity. After that the different kind of sources available are discussed in chapter four, as several problems arise if one wants to use them. Chapter five gives an overview over the whole time period that is covered here and is not intended to be analytical but to provide a chronological overview, because the chapters that follow, although internally organised along a timeline, are not chronological, but sorted according to theme. The chapter that follows “Muslims on the Middle Niger Bend” (chapter six) deals very shortly with the introduction of Islam and then swiftly moves on as to how the local Muslims set themselves up and saw themselves in contrast to their social surroundings, especially their relationship with the ruling estate. Chapter seven mainly deals with how the ruling estate defined itself but also examines how it contrasted with the ideals of the Muslim estate. The next chapter on “Slavery and horses” (chapter eight) looks not so much at slaves as such but what slavery meant for the ruling and the religious estate and how it influenced the Middle Niger Bend on the whole in regards to the social system. The final chapter “The social dissolution of the Middle Niger Bend” then brings everything that has been developed in the chapters prior in order to provide an analysis as to how the major players on the Middle Niger Bend related to each other and how this system ultimately broke down.

2. Literary Review

Modern scholarship on pre-Islamic sub-Saharan Africa is in comparison to other areas of historic interest not very much developed. The first major publication push came in the wake of early colonialism, which has several implications as will be further elaborated on in the chapter on methodology. The earliest surviving work of modern scholarship regarding the Sudan is the body of work left behind by Octave Houdas (1840 - 1916). Growing up in Algeria he later travelled extensively in the region before finally settling and dying in Paris. He was the first to publish translations of many Arabic texts that were held in high regard, making them available for a wider non-Arabic audience. Most of them are still the only ones available today, and they are often much easier to obtain than the original works that are in some cases lost.

Due to developing French interest in the region south of the Sahara, some of its personnel sent there tried to understand local Sudanic culture. Fitting this description were Jean Rouch (1917 - 2004), Marcel Griaule (1898 - 1956) and Germaine Dieterlen (1903 - 1999) who were the first in the region to undertake anthropological fieldwork. All three of them carried out extensive work on the Middle Niger Bend under the guise of the French colonial administration. Working mainly after the Second World War, they give us the earliest non-Muslim description of local life and its religious underpinnings. However, none of them spoke a local language and they relied on local translators whom they questioned to glean their information. This led to some very unreliable records as the social dynamic they wanted to record was unbeknown to them and sometimes completely distorted. A famous example of that happening is Griaule and Dieterlen's "Renard Pâle. Le mythe cosmogonique - La creation du monde."⁷ which gives the impression of a highly detailed and sophisticated Dogon religious life that also implies quite startling insight into some astronomical and thus scientific knowledge. That this is

⁷ Griaule, Marcel, and Germaine Dieterlen. *Le renard pâle - Le mythe cosmogonique - La creation du monde*. Paris: Institut d'Ethnologie, 1965.

quite untenable has been shown comprehensively by van Beek and his collaborators.⁸ That does not mean that all their work is completely to be dismissed as especially Rouch's prudent work on the Songhay is quite valuable in its almost mundane descriptions of their life.

The next wave came in the 70s and early 80s in the form of scholars like Hunwick, Lange, Saad, many of whom undertook research in Africa while being part of local university staff after decolonisation. They went beyond just taking records and tried to understand and contextualise local culture in its historical development. Hunwick pushed research on sub-Saharan Africa forward in large steps by providing excellent translations of local sources. The *Tarikh al-Sudan*, the works of al-Maghili and others were all translated and commented. But also lesser known figures like al-Anusammani were found and meticulously translated into the English language. Apart from providing translations, he also published a seminal article on Songhay. His main contribution is his analysis on the relationship between the Songhay Muslim estate and the Songhay ruling estate in the context of the shift in power from Sunni Ali to Askya Muhammed.⁹ However, his research is for the most part limited to the late 15th and the early 16th century. Lange also provided insight into the pre-colonial world of the Sudan, although he mostly published articles that dealt with relatively obscure issues with regards to the Middle Niger Bend; also dealing with the changes that took place around the 15th century. Blum and Fisher published a very valuable article that carefully and in great detail dissected the relationship between the ruling and the religious estate of Songhay and showed convincingly that the two worked not “hand-in glove” as they put it, but often butted heads and had an uneasy relationship which also cast other players like al-Maghili in a new light. This modified the picture Hunwick had provided who more or less assumed an alignment of interest between the two. Blum and Fisher did not dismantle Hunwick's

⁸ van Beek, Walter, Rogier Michiel Alphons Bedaux, Suzanne Blier, Jacky Bouju, Peter Crawford, Mary Douglas, and Claude Meillassoux. ‘Dogon Restudied: A Field Evaluation of the Work of Marcel Griaule’. *Current Anthropology* 32, no. 2 (April 1991): 139–67.

⁹ Hunwick, J. ‘Secular Power and Religious Authority in Muslim Society: The Case of Songhay’. *The Journal of African History* 37, no. 2 (1996): 175–94.

work but brought a lot of nuance and breadth to the debate. Their narrative revolves a lot around al-Maghili's relationship with the local scholars and Askya Muhammad which also means they mainly dealt with the Middle Niger Bend of the 1500s as he died in 1505. Abitbol on the other hand concentrated for the most part on the Arma and provided a narrative surrounding their rise and fall.¹⁰ He mainly focused on the Moroccan reasoning for the invasion and thus his main thrust is in describing the Arma as part of the Moroccan society and politics and not so much in relation to the people of the Middle Niger Bend. Saad on the other hand provides an invaluable study of the microcosmos that was pre-colonial scholarly Timbuktu.¹¹ His study is unparalleled in depth, tracing the scholarly lineages of the notable families of this city. Due to the nature of this work, however, the scope is very limited and there is also a distinct lack of analysis. This is not a weakness but flows out of what Saad tried to achieve by displaying every single strand of relationship between the different actors and families that lived, taught, traded and schemed in this city. Many of the already mentioned scholars were predominantly active between the 1950s and 1980s, after which much less was published regarding pre-colonial Sudan. Cleaveland is one of those who came later, providing a genealogy of the literary traditions of Walata, an oasis north-west of Timbuktu in what is now Mauritania, essentially extending Saad's and Hiskett's work by providing an overview over the scholarly traditions of the desert.¹² Lydon's work was in a similar vein.¹³ However, instead of concentrating on a single town like Saad and Cleaveland had done,

¹⁰ Abitbol, Michel. *Tombouctou et les Arma: De la conquête Marocaine du Soudan Nigérien en 1591 à l'hégémonie de l'empire Peulh du Macina en 1833*. Paris: G.-P. Maisonneuve et Larose, 1979.

¹¹ Saad, Elias N. *Social History of Timbuktu: The Role of Muslim Scholars and Notables, 1400-1900*. Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

¹² Cleaveland, Timothy. *Becoming Walata: A History of Saharan Social Formation and Transformation*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002.

¹³ Lydon, Ghislaine. *On Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks, and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Nineteenth-Century Western Africa*. 1st ed. Cambridge University Press, 2009.

she traced several families across the whole of the Sahara, demonstrating lines of communications and ties of society that stretched across vast distances and provided the social tools necessary to conduct trade under such conditions.

As one of the main points of this study will be religious attitudes and the framework it provided for the gestation of society in Songhay and under the Arma, the impact of Islam on the region and how itself it (was) adapted has to be put under scrutiny. Fortunately a plethora of research has already been conducted regarding this topic. Rouch was one of the first who did modern anthropological research on Songhay religion.¹⁴ He worked while the Middle Niger Bend was still under French colonial administration, initially as an engineer who later turned film-maker and anthropologist. His film-work is often rejected by African film-makers giving a distorted view of Africa and Africans. With this in mind he is one of the few modern scholarly sources there are that give a description of religious life on the Middle Niger Bend. That being said only some of his observations will be used here and usually only when they are corroborated with earlier source material in order to demonstrate possible continuities. Rouch also never really developed a theoretical framework, he mainly tried to record and archive data, but never provided any insight into how he acquired, filed and weighted the data.

Trimingham on the other hand is one of the first who provided in-depth analysis of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁵ One of his main arguments is that religion integrates the individual into society and provides a recognisable rallying point for every member of a given group if they wanted their grievances or aims to be heard, which is a rather functional viewpoint and denies other qualities religion brings to the table. For example religion is also a highly emotional subject as will become apparent in the later chapters. This does not deny the functional properties of religion but means that other aspects should not be neglected. It mirrors in many ways a similar debate that took place in ethnology circles and which centres around the issues of primordialism and instrumental-

¹⁴ Rouch, Jean. *Les Songhay*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1954.

¹⁵ Trimingham, J. Spencer. *A History of Islam in West Africa*. London: Oxford University Press for the University of Glasgow, 1968.

———. *The Influence of Islam upon Africa*. 2nd ed. Arab Background Series. London: Longman, 1979.

ism, presented in the chapter on “Methodology”. Horton extended Trimingham’s ideas by trying to show that Islam is a very abstract religion that provides enough “gaps” so that indigenous beliefs can be slotted in and make the two link up.¹⁶ Fisher, however, denied much of this¹⁷ – a debate he clearly lost as will be shown later on. Levtzion and Pouwels are the last of the great theoreticians on Islam and its interactions with pre-Islamic religions in sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁸ Their contribution is their attempt to show that Islamisation happened in a number of clearly discernible steps. This model is in many ways valuable and useful but also works only under very limited constraints and in many cases not at all. The chapter on “Islam” will provide a discussion of this very topic. Hiskett also traced the development of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa but without giving much thought to an overarching explanatory model.¹⁹ Nevertheless his research shows the different strands of scholarship that penetrated the Sudan, nicely complementing the work of Saad who mainly wrote about Timbuktu and the desert lineages. Mbiti has also provided valuable work on religion in Africa.²⁰ His main focus however was Christianity and he mainly worked in east Africa, not on the Middle Niger Bend.

¹⁶ Horton, Robin. ‘African Conversion’. *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 41, no. 2 (1 April 1971): 85–108.

———. ‘On the Rationality of Conversion. Part I’. *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 45, no. 3 (1 January 1975): 219–35.

———. ‘On the Rationality of Conversion. Part II’. *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 45, no. 4 (1 January 1975): 373–99.

¹⁷ Fisher, Humphrey J. ‘Conversion Reconsidered: Some Historical Aspects of Religious Conversion in Black Africa’. *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 43, no. 1 (1 January 1973): 27–40.

¹⁸ Levtzion, Nehemia and Randall Pouwels, eds. *The History of Islam in Africa*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2000.

¹⁹ Hiskett, Mervyn. *The Course of Islam in Africa*. Islamic Surveys 15. Edinburgh: Edinburgh U.P, 1994.

²⁰ Mbiti, John S. *African Religions and Philosophy*. 2nd ed. Oxford; Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1990.

Despite this, he tried to generalise his findings which will be presented and dealt with later on.

Moving into the Sudan proper, McIntosh has researched the region as one of the few archaeologist, providing insight into how the region has changed over the millennia.²¹ He argues for “deep time core values” - ideas about society that are perpetuated over very long time spans. His research is especially instructive as he linked these values to features found in the local landscape which also has very strong religious connotations as we will see later on. Nevertheless, it is sobering to see that hardly any archaeological research has been carried out in the region. The only digs that were actually undertaken were those performed by McIntosh near Djenné and those by Insoll in Gao.²² Even those digs were comparatively short, often conducted only over two or three seasons at most. Timbuktu, despite its reputation, has never been subject to an actual dig.

Apart from religious scholars and their religion, this study will deal with the honour concept of the local rulers, warriors and also scholars themselves. The basic groundwork in this area was laid by Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers who gave profound insights into the relationship between honour and the sacred and how it provides legitimacy to the established social order.²³ Their work also gives an understanding as to how ideas of honour and political office are interlinked which is of crucial importance in explaining the political and social relationships on the Middle Niger Bend. It has to be added though that their work concentrated on the Mediterranean and the closest their actual empirical work came to the Sudan was when they wrote about Bedouin societies. As such their ideas have to be judged against local circumstances. Nevertheless, their main points stand but their ideas will be discussed in greater detail in the chapter on “Honour”. Another major contribution to the discussion on honour in sub-Saharan Afri-

²¹ McIntosh, Roderick J. *Ancient Middle Niger: Urbanism and the Self-Organizing Landscape*. Cambridge University Press, 2005.

²² Insoll, Timothy. *The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Cambridge World Archaeology. Cambridge, U.K: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

²³ Peristiany, John George, and Julian Alfred Pitt-Rivers. *Honor and Grace in Anthropology*. Cambridge University Press Cambridge, 1992.

ca was recently made by Iliffe.²⁴ He shows how honour is one of the main drivers of behaviour in society, shaping the life of a community. Although dealing with pre-colonial times, he only does so briefly and mostly analyses colonial or post-colonial times, often focusing on the relationship between honour and violence. As such his contributions, despite being very valuable in general, will here only be used in passing. Another important part of this topic are gifts as was shown by Mauss.²⁵ He explained how gifts can signify and regulate relationships in a given society. Although he mainly concentrated on societies in the Pacific Northwest (“Potlatch”), Polynesia and Melanesia, his insights are nevertheless of value for research undertaken elsewhere. This idea becomes especially powerful when combined with the issue of slavery and horses as will be pointed out further down. It is also potent when considering that Songhay and the Arma created much of their revenue via raids and paid their soldiers with booty as will be argued in later chapters.

Another major theme of this study is slavery. The majority of effort on the research on the history of slavery has been spent on the trans-Atlantic slave-trade. In comparison, hardly any research has been conducted on the trans-Saharan slave trade which was one of the main components of the societies operating on the Middle Niger Bend. This is partly due to the comparable dearth of authoritative source material but can also be blamed on a Euro- or Americocentric viewpoint which had simply no interest in the trans-Saharan trade because it was perceived as not pertaining to them. One of the consequences of the lack of research on the trans-Saharan slave trade is that there is even less insight into the lot slaves in North Africa faced and how they were absorbed and changed local Mediterranean society. That aside, one of the main modern day scholars that undertook research on the trans-Saharan slave trade was Lovejoy, who tried to trace the numbers transported across the desert.²⁶ This is a fairly problematic

²⁴ Iliffe, John. *Honour in African History*. African Studies Series 107. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

²⁵ Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. London: Routledge, 1980.

²⁶ Lovejoy, Paul E. *Ecology and Ethnography of Muslim Trade in West Africa*. Trenton, N.J: Africa World, 2005.

issue as will be shown in the chapter on “Slavery and horses”. His main focus, however, is on showing in what way slavery shapes society as a whole and influences the conduct of the free population. His primary contribution to the debate on slavery was that slavery characterises all relationships, not just those between slave and master as it always looms as a possible punishment for transgression of societal norms. Earlier, Malowist had conducted research regarding slavery on the Middle Niger Bend but mainly regarding its economic impact and as such in not as comprehensive a fashion as Lovejoy did later on.²⁷ Another important contribution to the topic was made by Law.²⁸ In his work he demonstrates the close relationship between the horse and slave trade on the Middle Niger Bend. Without going into too much detail here, it is sufficient to say that this dependency has major implications for Songhay and the Arma as will be developed in detail in the chapter on “Slavery and horses”.

What this overview has shown is that no comprehensive research was undertaken specifically regarding the Middle Niger Bend after the switch from Sunni Ali to Askya Muhammad at the end of the 15th century. And even in this case only a handful of articles were published. Broader research was undertaken mainly regarding the societies of the desert or Timbuktu and Walata or around features of society like religion and honour. This study tries to bring this research under one umbrella and breaks new ground by comprehensively putting under scrutiny the area of the Middle Niger Bend at the turn of the 16th century.

———. *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*. 2nd ed. African Studies Series 36. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

²⁷ Malowist, M. ‘The Social and Economic Stability of the Western Sudan in the Middle Ages’. *Past & Present* 33, no. 1 (1966): 3-15.

²⁸ Law, Robin. *The Horse in West African History: The Role of the Horse in the Societies of Pre-Colonial West Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press for International African Institute, 1980.

3. Methodology: How to deal with ethnicity?

The motivation of actors within history, like the ruling and religious estates of the Arma and Songhay, is often explained in terms of power. Humans are seen as individuals who seek to primarily obtain political and economic advantages. This Hobbesian view of humans as egoistical opportunists may not completely without its merits and may serve to explain quite a few episodes of the human story but does not catch another very inherent human quality: A longing for relationship. David and Roger Johnson put it this way: "From the moment we are born to the moment we die, relationships are the core of our existence. We are conceived within relationships, are born into relationships, and live our lives within relationships."²⁹ In every culture, the drive for affection, companionship and the desire to belong is paramount and gives rise to rituals which establish and strengthen these bonds. It is not useful to juxtapose the opportunistic strain with the emphatic impulse as if they represent diametrically opposite positions, rather they complement each other and raise their heads on different occasions. Thus humans can show great compassion for those they deem part of their social circle but there are limits on its diametre. Empathy often only ever extends to the boundaries of certain domains; the family, the co-religionist, the colleague. In different situations, different levels of empathy or opportunism are to be found and beyond a certain stage, humans are too far removed from each other in order to care about a stranger.³⁰ Sometimes the desire to be

²⁹ Johnson, David W., and Roger T. Johnson. *Cooperation and Competition: Theory and Research*. Interaction Book Company, 1989, P.105.

³⁰ Rifkin makes the argument that there is an "emphatic development" due to communication technologies and other forces, that extend our ability to identify with other's plights and joys. He points out however that this only happens if we have a common real or imagined intellectual and emotional basis that individuals can relate to and both identify with. In the case of family, religion or occupation that basis is obvious which is why they are standard examples of communities that show empathy for each other, but not necessarily beyond.

accepted and the fight against each other for power comes up at the same time. The contestant for a throne wants to be recognised by his peers while at the same time rise above them and remove them from competition. These different social interactions form very complex patterns of social relationships signposted by accepted forms of normative behaviour abided to by a set of individuals. Humans that share specific forms of normative behaviour and are a subset of a larger population group while interacting with other groups that show these characteristics are usually categorised as an ethnic group.³¹ Ethnicity provides the background for individual modes of interaction within a shared social context.

Although it is often hard to pinpoint exactly what contributes to ethnicity it is usually the case that ethnic identity exhibits in varying degrees the following attributes (in no particular order): (1) A common descriptor or name that expresses some form of proclaimed 'essence' of that group; (2) common ancestry (myth or fact) that emphasises a common descent; (3) shared history and memory of a common past that includes landscapes, heroes, trials and triumphs; (4) elements of common culture that often include religion, language, food or clothing; the idea of a physical piece of land that is considered home; (5) a sense of community and solidarity that is often demanded by referring to common myths.

Ethnicity combines these elements and creates with them a social construction of systems of meaning through descent and cultural, social practices, etc. that is used to create a set of shared ideas and values and with that a unified society. The ethnic groups³² that will be dealt with in this study all share these attributes but they emphasise

See: Rifkin, Jeremy. *The Empathic Civilization*. New York: J.P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2009. Especially P.181-223.

³¹ Cohen, Abner. 'The Lesson of Ethnicity'. In *Urban Ethnicity*, edited by Abner Cohen, IX–XXIV. Monographs/Association of Social Anthropologists 12. London: Tavistock, 1974, P.IX.

³² In order to avoid confusion but allow for some linguistic flexibility it is hereby stated that the term 'ethnic group' and 'social group' in the context of this study are treated as exactly the same.

different aspects of their ethnic experience as will become clear in the following chapters.

One of the main points of recent debate that has cropped up in the question on how to deal analytically with ethnicity was the discussion about “primordiality versus instrumentality.” This debate centred around the question as to why ethnicity exists in the first place. As its most extreme primordialists hold that ethnicity is an innate part of the human condition. In the first place it just 'is' and has to be described instead of explained. In the word of Grosby: “Ethnic groups and nationalities exist because there are traditions of belief and action towards primordial objects such as biological features and especially territorial location.”³³ The interpretation of those features by members of a group that uses these markers in such a primordial sense may change but the feature itself will not.

Some of the main proponents were for example Evan-Pritchard and Meyer Fortes. They were anthropologists who were mainly concerned with describing pre-colonial societies but often saw them as self-contained distinct groups and thus gave rise to the traditional idea of 'tribe'. The Manchester school that arose afterwards around figures like Abner Cohen instigated the categorical shift from 'tribe' to 'ethnic group' which are seen as much more malleable.³⁴ They had a much more instrumental or constructivist outlook on ethnicity, emphasising economic and political reasons for group cohesion. Consequently cultural identity is a prerequisite for ethnic identity, which ties him back to Evan-Pritchard who looked exactly for such primordial qualities within societies. The crucial difference between Cohen and Evan-Pritchard is that these 'tribal' qualities (to use Evan-Pritchard's terminology) only come into their own and become a cohesive whole when there are goals to achieve which structure the different primordial qualities of a group among certain lines.³⁵

³³ Grosby, Steven. 'The Verdict of History: The Inexpungeable Tie of Primordiality—a Response to Eller and Coughlan'. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 17, no. 1 (1994): 164–71. P.168.

³⁴ Banks, Marcus. *Ethnicity: Anthropological Constructions*. Routledge, 1996, P.25.

³⁵ Cohen, Abner. *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa: A Study of Hausa Migrants in Yoruba Towns*. University of California Press, 1969.

The instrumentalist or constructivist perspective sits on the other end of the spectrum and declares ethnicity as an expression of a common purpose created by individuals to form a group in order to further their own interests which happen to align. Thus “[e]thnicity and race are viewed as instrumental identities, organized as means to particular ends”³⁶ In short, the primordialists (at their extreme) state that ethnicity has no purpose in an on itself, whereas the instrumentalists (at their extreme) hold that ethnicity is only a means to an end and if that end disappears the ethnic group that had formed to achieve that goal will disappear as well.³⁷

The main challenge against primordialism was that it represents a static and too simplistic view of ethnicity that does not explain anything although ethnicity itself is a huge factor in human relations. Scholars have also repeatedly pointed to the fact that ethnic identity is a very fluid and malleable concept and that different ethnicities frequently overlap and influence each other. Edmund Leach, in his study on inter-group relations in northern Burma, showed that humans might talk about themselves as if they belonged to a distinct collective, but everyday interaction and organisation made clear that different groups, like the family and the village, provided considerable overlap and changed over time.³⁸ The interplay between distinction and similarity of different social groups is usually no more evident than in cities as they often harbour different beliefs, lineage traditions and occupational specialisation close to each other. This physical proximity encouraged division of labour and made the divergent social realities inherent in different ways of life bounce off each other, leading to an increase in the efficiency of mercantile and artisanal activity and created a marketplace of religious and social ideas. Furthermore individuals routinely assume different ethnic identities depending on the social environment they happen to be part of at any given moment. Migration, marriage

³⁶ Cornell, Stephen, and Douglas Hartmann. *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World*. 2. ed. London: Pine Forge Press, 2006, P.59.

³⁷ Banks (Ethnicity), P.39.

³⁸ Leach, Edmund Ronald. *Political Systems of Highland Burma: a Study of Kachin Social Structure*. Berg, 1973.

patterns and the habitual absorption of cultural expressions from one culture into the other³⁹ were also fielded as challenges towards the primordial approach.⁴⁰

Instrumentalists on the other hand treat ethnicity in the context of rational choice. Actors adhere to a specific ethnic identity because it allows them to further their own goals by joining a community that gives them the best opportunity to fulfil their aims. This point of view was also challenged on several fronts. By purely abstracting ethnicity away into a nebulous and intangible artefact it denies its institutional roots. Language for example is partially based on our material surroundings and at the same time an important ethnic marker.⁴¹ Instrumentalist tend to neglect the wider cultural environment people live in. It also presupposes that humans always act rationally which is highly doubtful as the affective dimension is often left out in such discussions.⁴²

This leads to most scholars not being strict adherents to one of these two approaches or using other concepts that only in some ways harken back to primordialism or instrumentalist ideas but rather adhere to a more experientialists point of view. This means that humans structure their surroundings by concepts that are unique to their culture and are in this sense “constructed”, but these concepts are always tied to their material surroundings. Be that their own bodies or the landscape surrounding them. In this sense the source of the concepts can always be traced back to primordial elements of the human experience. This study here follows this line of thinking. This will become especially evident in chapter five, which mainly deals with the religious world of the Middle Niger Bend.

Other scholars sidestepped the primordial-instrumentalist issue somewhat. A hugely influential alternative approach was formulated by Barth in his seminal essay on “Eth-

³⁹ For example Blues is a music style that was initially developed from West African musical traditions which were then later taken up and incorporated into Country music and Rock music, which were originally seen as quintessentially 'white' music.

⁴⁰ Hutchinson, John. *Ethnicity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, U.S.A., 1996. P.8.

⁴¹ Fought, Carmen. *Language and Ethnicity*. Cambridge: University Press, 2006.

⁴² Kahneman, Daniel. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. London: Penguin, 2011.

nic Groups and Boundaries”.⁴³ He proposes that ethnic groups are units of ascription where the social boundaries guarantee the existence of that group. Consequently it is not important what the boundary encloses but the boundary itself is the object of analysis as it contains the 'border guards' like language, dress, food, music, etc.

Barth argues that group definition is only possible with reference to other social groups. A multitude of markers is used to create distinction, establishing their very own cultural boundaries that separate them from others. We are what they are not. He does not negate that these boundaries contain cultural content that any given society identifies with but asserts that it is not useful to use it as a measurement of its topology. Barth developed this argument further by negating the idea that these sets of traits that distinguish distinct social groups are constant.⁴⁴ Social identity is through contact to other social groups continuously created and reformed through interaction in everyday life.

Barth's central insight was that ethnic identities are kept in place by the maintenance of its boundaries vis-a-vis other groups and not what is within it. It is only important what is considered as markers of difference between two groups. They form the boundary markers that signal where one group “starts” and “ends.” The boundary markers themselves are not static but are constantly shifting in order to maintain that boundary. The “signposts” that are used as markers of difference that demarcate the boundary between different ethnic groups only represent a subset of the cultural repertoire of a given group and can change over time in order to maintain the boundary itself. This markers can be quite distinctive, like language, or small but they are always decisive.⁴⁵ It is important to recognise that these are not in any way “objective” features but simply items that are considered important markers of difference by the actors within the respective social group.⁴⁶

⁴³ Barth, Fredrik, ed. *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*. Bergen: Universitetsforlaget, 1969, P.14.

⁴⁴ Barth (Ethnic Groups and Boundaries) P.14.

⁴⁵ Fenton, Steve. *Ethnicity*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Polity, 2013, P.90.

⁴⁶ Barth (Ethnic Groups and Boundaries), P.14.

According to Barth “ethnic [social] groups are categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves”⁴⁷ which are subject to constant interpretation and reformation as social and material factors, like religious convictions, climate or forms of government change. Thus the discussion has to concentrate on how these social categories are formed and changed through the interaction between “us” and “them” which take place through and across these boundaries.⁴⁸ The boundary is erected from two sides: It is not only important what groups think about themselves but also how they are described by outsiders, which in turn often becomes internalised by the described group itself. Hence, social ascription is of two different kinds: There is the internal definition - how actors within a group signal to members and non-members their self-definition of their own identity. The “actor” can be an individual or a collective which sees itself as part of a certain social group, e.g. a family of the nobility. In Barth's thinking this identification is structured by the boundary. Even internal group signalling always pertains to boundaries, takes other groups into consideration. “We are what you are not.” The external definition in contrast is applied by out-group individuals or collectives which through whatever means have an influence on the group. Such social intervention always implies the power or authority to do so, which presupposes access and/or control over resources which both groups lay a claim to or have a wish to use.⁴⁹ It is thereby useful to analyse areas which brought forward such competitive behaviour: salt mines, slavery, control of land and trade routes. By exercising pressure on each other the different social groups changed each other. During this process external descriptions become internalised by the categorised group and integrated into their internal definition.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Barth (Ethnic Groups and Boundaries), P.10.

⁴⁸ Jenkins, Richard. *Rethinking Ethnicity: Arguments and Explorations*. London: SAGE, 2008, P.18.

⁴⁹ Jenkins (Rethinking Ethnicity), P.53.

⁵⁰ There are a multitude of questions that arise here: Why should that happen? What forces a group to internalise an external description? In the interest of brevity this is not discussed here but a thorough discussion is to be had in “Rethinking Ethnicity” and other works.

One has to always understand social identity as a dialectical process of mutually influencing internal and external ascription.⁵¹

Social groups as considered here are not just the sum of their individual parts but a function of the group as a whole, embedded in a specific environment that changes over time. The social customs, norms and values of a group have their own enabling and constraining power that an individual is subject to or can exploit, as the customs and norms have to be realised by every individual within the group to carry meaning. This means, however, that every member of a group can only become an adherent by subscribing to sets of ideas that form the ideological and cultural basis of that group. This in turn means that although an individual has the power to change these norms and customs he is also subject to such manipulations from other individuals within that group.⁵² Group identity is a malleable, impermanent quality and in order to maintain or obliterate the boundary between two groups it is thus crucial to constantly manipulate the perceived markers of difference.⁵³ It is crucial to understand that communication through these group boundaries is not only possible but a constant feature, either by emphasising the differences or by adopting elements and thus obliterating a boundary-marker. This can and does happen both on a conscious and also on an unconscious level.

This approach has been mainly criticised for treating ethnic groups as fixed entities that only ever allows change in how the border itself is maintained but not not changed as such. Barth's ideas are nevertheless very fruitful as they emphasise that ethnic groups are often surprisingly stable which is also one of the claim this study makes with the important caveat that if a lot of (often violent) pressure is applied these boundaries shift dramatically or disappear entirely, which is what happened on the Middle Niger Bend.

Handelman has further enriched this part of the conversation by emphasising that categorisation can change not only through time but also flip back and forth depending on different social situations. Occupation, class or religion can become important or completely inconsequential due to different circumstances. Consequently, two individuals may belong to the same group in a certain set of circumstances but in a different

⁵¹ Jenkins (Rethinking Ethnicity), P.70.

⁵² Cohen (The Lessons of Ethnicity), P.XIII.

⁵³ Jenkins (Rethinking ethnicity), P.19-20.

context a boundary is raised between the two of them. However, there are certain markers which have the tendency to dominate every discussion, like the colour of one's skin or gender. Handelman describes the former as "lateral" and the latter as "hierarchical" markers.⁵⁴ Thus who belongs to which social group can also flip at a moments notice and consequently everyone belongs to several social groups at the same time. Individuals are members of several social communities at the simultaneously, constructing several partially overlapping identities for themselves that are determined by the boundaries that have been created to mark the social space around them. This in turn creates issues if boundary-markers are accessed at the same time and different social contexts are activated simultaneously but mean different things in different contexts.

A more recent outgrowth of the Barthian theory has been competition theory, which mainly arose as part of the discussion of group relationships within the U.S.⁵⁵ Groups are seen as competing for different resources. According to Steve Fenton the main parts of the theory are:

*"(1) that (ethnic)groups are defined as different collectivities and 'members' of a group see their fates as bound up with co-ethnics; (2) that advances made by one group may be at the expense of another; (3) that competition creates or reinforces prejudice sat the points where group boundaries are defended; and (4) that a wide range of social attitudes or types of mobilization and acts of violence may be viewed as a response to a 'group threat'."*⁵⁶

Bonacich⁵⁷ argues that individuals who are part of group A see themselves in possible competition with group B and thus identify them as a threat. The identification with one group can be as simple has those of the "have-nots" and those who "have." The boundary between the two is defined by what is competed for. As such the emphasis of

⁵⁴ Jenkins (Rethinking Ethnicity), P.21.

⁵⁵ Cunningham, David, and Benjamin T. Phillips. 'Contexts for Mobilization: Spatial Settings and Klan Presence in North Carolina, 1964–19661'. *American Journal of Sociology* 113, no. 3 (2007): 781–814, P.783

⁵⁶ Fenton (*Ethnicity*), P.93.

⁵⁷ Bonacich, Edna. 'A theory of ethnic antagonism: The split labor market.' *American sociological review* (1972): 547-559.

what constitutes a group is not seen in the context of a (perceived) shared cultural heritage but more in the context on what is acted upon. Once we have identified what causes a ruckus within an overall set of people and who supports which course of action is to take we can identify the different groups and also allows some prediction as to who might join which groups.⁵⁸

The salient feature of competition theory is that behaviours are to be explained and analysed in the context of a group or groups, instead of the characteristic of individual actors (age, sex, etc.). It shares some the weaknesses of Barth's theory in that it tends to assume the permanence of groups.⁵⁹ It is however a good explanans for situations which poses immigrant groups vis-a-vis established groups as is the case in this study where Muslim traders establish their basis on the Middle Niger Bend in the midst of an already established society. It has the tendency to assume the group as a collective actor which is somewhat ameliorated here by the simple fact that the sources themselves paint an elite history overemphasising the role of individuals and as such Barth's ideas about ethnic boundaries and competition theory itself pose a good antidote against such tendencies.

This study will take the idea that boundaries are the salient feature of social organisation and differentiation and use it in order to identify and analyse the relationship of the different groups of the Middle Niger Bend.

All these approaches however already presuppose ethnic identity markers, wherever they might sit. Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner have provided insights into how these social categories and boundaries are created in the first place, how they interact and can be circumvented. Van Gennep was mainly interested in rites of passage - childhood, marriage, death. He found out that all of them share an "underlying arrangement" which is always the same. There are three stages: separation - the dissociation from the previous condition, transition - the possible moment of change and incorporation and then the finalisation of a new condition. He also calls them preliminal, liminal and postliminal. The stages are not static but highly dynamic. In the rite of passage which officially turns a child into an adult, childhood is the preliminal phase and it is seen as de-

⁵⁸ Fenton (*Ethnicity*), P.113.

⁵⁹ Fenton (*Ethnicity*), P.94.

veloping, changing towards becoming an adult. The postliminal phase, being an adult, also allows for changes in behaviour but more importantly here it is seen as being “better”, or “more developed” than the preliminal self. Being called a child is an insult for an adult. Being called a pagan is negative for a Christian or Muslim. The liminal phase, sitting in between the two, is the crucial moment of transformation and is decisive for the eventual outcome. It is a highly dynamic, unstable, even dangerous phase, as, to stay with the example of transitioning from childhood to adulthood, the two concepts from everyone involved of what a child and what an adult should be bounce off each other, feed on each other and influence each other, but nobody can predict the end-result.⁶⁰ Victor Turner and others took this idea of transformatory stages and expanded it into a more general tool. Not only do rites of passage fit into this concept but also the interaction between different social groups. Groups meet, interact and bring forth new identities on all sides. The most important concept here is that of liminality, the moment where it is possible that a social identity becomes intrinsically linked to that of a group, creating a new social configuration in the process.⁶¹ However, it is important to note here, that the liminal process does not necessarily birth “better” societies, although those affected by the liminal process do indeed put a value judgment on the developments in question. Today is always “better” or “worse” than yesterday to the one directly affected by the described circumstances, but it cannot be used as an analytical category by the historian.

We will see the liminal process in action quite starkly when talking about the interaction between Islam and traditional religion, which gave rise to an Africanisation of Islam and an Islamisation of traditional African religions, where there were quite obvious value judgements by the actors involved. It is important to note that liminality can become a permanent feature.⁶² The interaction between Islam and traditional religions

⁶⁰ Gennep, Arnold Van. *The Rites of Passage*. Routledge, 1977, P. 11, 21 and 166.

⁶¹ Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. The Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures 1966. New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1976, P.125-128.

⁶² Fisher, Humphrey J. ‘Liminality, Hijra and the City’. In *Rural and Urban Islam in West Africa*, edited by Nehemia Levtzion and Humphrey J Fisher, 147–171. Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1987, P.147-149.

in West Africa is by no means over even today, it can be seen as an ongoing liminal process. As social interaction is never removed from physical space, they formed proper stages of interaction like Timbuktu, where Muslim traders, Berbers and adherents of traditional religions met and interacted and often went their separate ways afterwards. Van Gennep remarked on this link between physical space and cultural change:

*“(...) it seems important to me that the passage from one social position to another is identified with a territorial passage (...) The spatial separation of distinct groups is an aspect of social organization (...)”*⁶³

Turner went on to enrich van Gennep's ideas through the concept of “communitas”, that is a highly structured and formalised event in which members of different social groups are able to meet and bring forth new social identities through interaction. By virtue of this “communitas event” having a recognisable, set structure it provides security of action, as everyone knows how to communicate and what is being communicated, even though different groups are present that normally do not share the same or a similar cultural background. Those who partake in “communitas” undergo liminality by placing themselves into a zone of “communitas”.

Such events are often initiated or mediated by those who live on the margins of society, those who do not fit in easily or who are seen as being part of two different social groups, those “who are simultaneously members (...) of two or more groups whose social definitions and cultural norms are distinct from, and often even opposed to, one another,” and also “outsiders,” who are “set outside the structural arrangements of a given social system.” All these people are likely to already be part of a liminal process and live at places of liminality. They are often forced to come together, bridging different social groups through “communitas” by employing highly structured and common rituals, like Ramadan, which brings together different Muslim social groups and even non Muslims who nevertheless take part in the festivities.⁶⁴ Apart from allowing established groups some form of social exchange, liminality always represents the chance for an outsider to enter and change an established system. Hence societies rely on liminal spaces as they are the prime places of the creation of new ideas and a lack of dynamic in

⁶³ van Gennep (The Rites of Passage), P.192.

⁶⁴ Fisher (Liminality, Hijra and the City), P.151.

or number of these places is responsible for stagnation. At the same time they are always dangerous to established powers, who may become marginalised by the novel thoughts developed there. This idea will be employed in order to analyse the interaction between the ruling and the Muslim estates.

Turner's contributions are not without problems for the historian as they were mainly geared towards the anthropologist and did not concentrate so much on social change. He was never interested in the origins of a social system and its rituals. Despite this, Turner already saw the potential for its application in history as it describes a space where "society happens." Whereas a liminal situation is always ambiguous and lacks structure as it is the space in-between the old and the new, *communitas* provides the stage for controlled social change. It provides structure through symbols and gives a liminal phase meaning and direction. The masks of the Dogon, the social networks of the Djoula, corporate groups and also language provide the space in which something new can develop without causing the complete breakdown of society.⁶⁵ It is thus interesting to see what kind of situation was created after the Moroccan invasion in 1591 or how they dealt with the Muslims estate and the surviving rest of the Songhay ruling estate.

It has to be emphasised though that communication through boundaries while being in a liminal state does not mean that the groups always merged into one while the boundaries disappeared. The boundaries only got renegotiated, which might result in the merger of two or more social groups but it could as well mean that differences became reinforced. The mutations ideas experience while passing through a group boundary might actually be the very things that set two groups apart. By constantly renegotiating the boundary they also reestablish the boundary itself. An example is the 'Ulema and the warriors of Songhay. Muslim religious ideas permeated the boundary between the religious and the ruling estate but were changed in the process to fit the needs of the warrior elites. These changes were then the markers of perceived difference between the two

⁶⁵ Shorter, Aylward. 'Symbolism, Ritual and History: An Examination of the Work of Victor Turner'. In *The Historical Study of African Religion*, edited by Terence O. Ranger and Isaria N. Kimambo, 139–149. University of California Pr, 1976, P.141-142 and 146.

which drew the ire of the Muslim scholars. Conversely, local ideas of honorific conduct was incorporated into what was considered the character of a “good Muslim”. It is also important to recognise that there are different levels of group identification. Although the Muslim and the ruling estate saw themselves as distinct and renegotiated the boundary between them on a constant basis they saw themselves (usually) as both belonging to Takrur, in contrast to the Arma as will be argued in the following chapter.

4. Sources and their problems

This chapter will discuss the different kinds of sources available and show some of the problems that arise when dealing with them. This chapter only aims to provide a general overview and individual issues with certain sections of the sources will be dealt with when the source is actually cited.

Sources of European origin regarding the interior of West Africa are sparse until the 19th century. What is accessible is a contemporary document from 1573, “L’Universal Fabrica” where the author, Giovanni Lorenzo Anania, essentially summarises known written sources, like Leo Africanus and oral sources, probably provided by Genoese and other merchants.⁶⁶ It is thus not a source based on first-hand experience. A similar second-hand source is the “anonymous Spaniard” who reported from Morocco to the Spanish king Philip II.⁶⁷ Another source is Cadamosto, an Italian traveller who had sailed down the West African coast in the name of the Portuguese king, Henry the Navigator. He gave us some descriptions of the West African coast but hardly anything about its interior.

Apart from these primary sources there are also important early European secondary sources that hugely influenced all further writings about the Sudan, e.g. the works of Delafosse, Paul Marty, Monteil and others. As many of them were also colonial administrators their writings are steeped in French colonial thought. They conquered, ruled and then later divided West Africa according to “scientific racism”. They ultimately favoured the “Whites”, the Bidan, whom they included into the “Moors” category over the “Black Africans”. Stemming from this distinction came the idea to also differentiate between “White Islam” and “Black Islam”, which in turn influenced French policy.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Lange, Dierk. ‘L’intérieur de l’Afrique occidentale d’après Giovanni Lorenzo Anania (XVI^e Siècle)’. *Cahiers d’Histoire Mondiale* 14, no. 2 (n.d.): 299–350.

⁶⁷ Anonymous. ‘An Account of the Sa’dian Conquest of Songhay by an Anonymous Spaniard’. In *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, edited by John Hunwick, 318–330. Leiden: Brill, 1999.

⁶⁸ Lydon (On Trans-Saharan Trails), P.42

Saharan society was viewed as strictly static, divided into clerics, warriors and tributaries, a view taken from the Saharan scholar Muhammad al-Yadāli who expounded his ideas in the 18th century⁶⁹ and which fitted nicely into French “scientific racism” thinking. The reality, however, was much more fluid and such distinctions, although not completely off-base, have to be considerably modified, reassessed and stripped of colonial bias in order to become useful for analytical purposes.

More important than these European sources are those from contemporary Arab writers. Firstly there are the medieval Arab travellers, like al-Umari, al-Bakri or Ibn Khaldun, providing the earliest known sources on the Sudan. The information they make available is laced with their own social values, formed in the Levante, Andalusia or the Maghrib, to what they saw south of the great desert.⁷⁰ In their descriptions, history is “unfolding from north to south, from the Maghreb, across the Sahara to the Sahel and the Savanna” as Levtzion aptly points out.⁷¹ The authors often compiled their writings in the cities of the Maghrib and all of them were Muslim scholars or merchants who had little in common with the Sudanic nobleman or peasant and were hardly sympathetic to what they observed south of the Sahara. The societies they reported on were completely alien to what they were accustomed to and, importantly, inhabited and run by people with dark skin, whom the authors had mostly encountered as slaves before. Ibn Battuta is especially instructive as he was quite vocally disgusted at finding blacks who behaved as masters of their own country.⁷² Another external but more involved source is al-Ifrani who wrote the “Nozhet-el hādi bi akhbar moulouk el-Karn el-Hadi

⁶⁹ Ghislaine (On Trans-Saharan Trails), P.42.

⁷⁰ Levtzion, Nehemia. *Ancient Ghana and Mali*. New York: Africana Pub. Co, 1980, P.105.

⁷¹ Nehemia Levtzion ‘Berber Nomads and Sudanese States: The Historiography of the Desert-Sahel Interface.’ Unpublished paper, International Conference on Manding Studies. Bamako, Mali, P.1 in: Insoll, Timothy. *The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Cambridge World Archaeology. Cambridge, U.K: Cambridge University Press, 2003, P.231.

⁷² Insoll (The archaeology of islam in sub-saharan africa), P.231-232.

(Histoire de la Dynastie Saadienne au Maroc), 1511-1670”⁷³ (translated by Houdas), borrowing heavily from al-Fishtali (1549-1621). Hunwick translated and published a part of it as “Account of the Sa’dian Conquest of Songhay”.⁷⁴ Al-Ifrani is largely an unknown figure, other than that he was born in 1669-70 in Marrakech and probably worked for the Moroccan ruler as chronicler, not much is known about him.

Another bulk of sources are provided by local Sudanic authors, who pose a different set of problems. They were well acquainted with their homeland and thus knew the internal workings of the social and political institutions. Al-Sadi, the author of the “Tarikh al-Sudan” (Chronicle of the Sudan) was born in 1594 and mainly wrote in the 17th century under the auspices of the Moroccan administration. The early chapters of the Tarikh al-Sudan deal with the founding and rise of Songhay, resting heavily on oral sources, that drift into legend the further back in time he went. The bulk of the book deals with Askya Muhammad and the dynasty of the Askyas that followed in this ruler’s wake, all of which is presumably based on oral sources, although he rarely mentions the origin of his information. He has a tendency to paint the Songhay past in very rosy terms, especially when rulers were in power who, according to his standards, represented model Muslim leaders, like Askya Muhammad and Askya Dawud. His work stands in the tradition that history is first and foremost a tool of moral teaching which is reflected in the tone and approach of his writing. Everything which furthered Islam and Muslims, the social group he belonged to, was welcomed, everything else was often damned. In the latter pages of the Tarikh al-Sudan, when al-Sadi has gained or verified most of the information he writes down first hand his account becomes decidedly gloomier but also more detached and more chronicle-like as he often only describes events and attaches a date to them without giving comment on what has happened. As

⁷³ al-Ifrānī, Muḥammad al-Ṣaghīr ibn al-Ḥājj Muḥammad. *Nozhet el-hādi, Histoire de la dynastie Saadienne au Maroc (1511-1670)*. Paris: Publications orientalistes de France, 1973.

⁷⁴ al-Ifrānī, Muḥammad al-Ṣaghīr ibn al-Ḥājj Muḥammad. ‘Al-Ifrānī’s Account of the Sa’dian Conquest of Songhay’. In *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sa’di’s Ta’rīkh al-Sūdān down to 1613, and other Contemporary Documents*, edited by John O Hunwick, 309–317. Islamic History and Civilization 27. Leiden: Brill, 1999.

will be argued in the following chapters, what al-Sadi ultimately tries to do is create a unique identity for the people of the Sudan in the wake of a crushing defeat at the hand of outsiders, while at the same time trying to come to terms with these invaders who were staying for good. As such it is not trying to be an impartial source but one with a clear agenda of creating an identity for the people of the Middle Niger Bend. Apart from the ideological slant, a further problem is that it is often difficult to independently verify the *Tarikh* and as such, after removing the mystical and mythical aspects, we have to take al-Sadi cautiously by his word. Sometimes, a different, but also locally crafted source, the *Tarikh al-Fattash*, can be used as corroborating or contradictory evidence, but this source has its own problems as will be pointed out further down. As the *Tarikh al-Sudan* is one of the main sources on pre-colonial West Africa and two translations have already been published. The first one was undertaken by Houdas into French and covers the whole work, whereas the second translation was into the English language and put in print by Hunwick, but it covers only to chapter thirty, just after the Moroccan invasion. However the latter is better in every conceivable way and as such it is preferred here.⁷⁵

The already mentioned “*Tarikh al-Fattash*”⁷⁶ (Chronicle of the researcher) is the other main Sudanic source and covers roughly the same period. Unfortunately, it also poses a whole raft of challenges and problems. The first and most dire is that different

⁷⁵ es-Sa’dī, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn ‘Abd Allāh. *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sa’di’s Ta’riḫ al-Sūdān down to 1613, and other Contemporary Documents*. Edited by John O Hunwick. *Islamic History and Civilization* 27. Leiden: Brill, 1999.

es-Sa’dī, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn ‘Abd Allāh. *Tarikh es-Soudan*. Edited by Octave Victor Houdas. Paris: Maisonneuve, 1964.

From now on the *Tarikh al-Sudan* (Hunwick) is cited with T/S-E and the *Tarikh al-Sudan* (Houdas) with T/S-F.

⁷⁶ Ka’ti. *Documents Arabes Relatifs à L’histoire du Soudan. Tarikh el-Fettâch ou chronique du chercheur pour servir à l’histoire des villes, des armées et des principaux personnages du Tekrour*. Edited by Octave Victor Houdas and M. Delafosse. Paris: Maisonneuve, 1913.

From now on referred to with T/F.

versions exist which have been amended by different authors. Levtzion has dissected this source in great detail.⁷⁷ According to him it is apparent that there are three different versions available, all with different contents and a range of authors. The urtext was supposedly written by Mahmud Ka'ti, probably born around 1510, who was an advisor to Askya Dawud, one of the most powerful rulers of Songhay. Levtzion however made clear that the *Tarikh al-Fattash* is the work of several minds, compiled by Ka'ti's son Ibn Mukhtar, who completed the chronicle in 1664. Another rather major problem with the *Tarikh al-Fattash* is that part of it is a forgery. In the early nineteenth century, Seku Ahmadu, ruler of Masina, saw himself as a successor to Songhay. He tried to gain control over a large portion of people on the banks and delta of the Niger but needed justification for doing so. He thus charged Alfa Nob to rewrite the *Tarikh al-Fattash* in light of these claims and had it circulate widely, leading to Manuscript C, the only part that mentions Ka'ti as author and is a complete fabrication.⁷⁸ This does not imply that these parts are useless by default, as a forgery only works when it is believable and thus has to adhere to a certain mindset but they obviously have to be treated differently and cannot be taken at face value regarding the explicit claims made. When such passages are used for specific purposes, ample warning will be given.

Another Sudanic source, the "Kano Chronicle," provides a list of kings that had ruled in Kano and reports on events surrounding their reign. Hunwick argues that it was compiled in the 1880s by writing down oral history that has a long tradition and that it was created in a response to the Fulani conquest in 1807 who in turn tried to rewrite the history of Kano, declaring that all Hausa rulers had been pagan heathens.⁷⁹ Thus the Kano Chronicle is not just a list but a document that tries to create a Muslim past that

⁷⁷ Levtzion, N. 'A Seventeenth-Century Chronicle by Ibn al-Mukhtār: A Critical Study of the "Ta'riḫ al-fattāsh"'. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 34, no. 3 (1 January 1971): 571–593.

⁷⁸ Hunwick, John O. 'Back to West African Zanj Again: A Document of Sale from Timbuktu'. *Sudanic Africa* no. 7 (1996): 53–60, P.56.

⁷⁹ Hunwick, John. 'A Historical Whodunit: The So-Called "Kano Chronicle" and Its Place in the Historiography of Kano'. *History in Africa* 21 (1 January 1994): 127–146, P.129.

could be used as an ideological weapon against the Fulani invaders. The values and ideas voiced in this document are thus those of the 19th century and has to be calibrated against other documents that were written earlier, like the Tarikhs, in order to use it with some confidence.

A further local source is the *Tedzkiret al-Nisian* that has received much less attention than the *Tarikh al-Fattash* and the *Tarikh al-Sudan*. It is an anonymous chronicle written in the first half of the 18th century, the last entry being the deposition of Pasha Babeker in November 1750. The author was apparently aware of the *Tarikh al-Sudan*, as some entries are a straight up copies of the latter. It is quite likely that he also had other works at his disposal that are unknown to us.⁸⁰

Another prime source are the works of Ahmed Baba who distinguished himself in writing about Muslim law. Born in Timbuktu, he was taken prisoner by the invading Moroccans and abducted to Marrakech where he embarked on a brilliant career as Muslim scholar. When he was set free he returned to his old hometown. He is seen as the brightest mind that Takrur has ever produced, churning out more than sixty works discussing the implications of Muslim law that were held in high esteem until the nineteenth century. Especially his “*Mi`raj al-su`ud*” (known in English as: “Ahmad Baba’s replies on slavery”) written in 1608 after his return to Timbuktu, is considered to be one of the finest works of Muslim scholarship. His ideas about the legality of slavery fit right into the existing framework of legal discussion that was one of the prime endeavours of the Sudanic and Saharan scholars and which finds its expression not only in heated exchanges about slavery but also, and primarily, about aspects of economic and financial exchange. On the other hand Ahmed Baba’s elaborations fit into the same category as the *Tarikhs*. He wanted to demonstrate that the people of Takrur are Muslims and therefore civilised and unenslavable. Thus, curiously, by trying to define a distinct Sudanic identity that was of worth he had to align it with North African ideas thereby bringing it closer to the Maghribian world, because that was the lens through which he

⁸⁰ Anonymous. *Tedzkiret en-nisiān fī akhbar molouk es-Soudān*. Edited by Octave Houdas. Publications de l’Ecole des Langues Orientales Vivantes ; Sér. 4,19/20. Paris: Maisonneuve, 1966.

had to frame his argument in order to make his case in Marrakech, who were in control of the Sudan at this point in time.

Apart from the large scale, major chronicles and treatises, each making up books of several hundred pages, there are also a number of smaller works, like the “Chronicles of Walata and Tichit”, or “The Ancient History of the Mauritanian Adrar and the Sons of Shams al-Din”⁸¹ and smaller letters and texts that will be mentioned within the text below. Another important text is the “Chronicles d’Agades”⁸² which were found in their current form in 1907, after having been put together by assembling several manuscripts. It is also clear that this work is the result of multiple authors, and was created against the backdrop of a much wider, well known body of work that was subsequently destroyed. This means that many exophoric references are not clear.⁸³

A further important text is the anonymous “Notice historique”, probably written sometime between 1657 and 1669 and translated by Houdas. Also, the “Replies to the questions of Askia al-hajj Muhammad I” by the North African scholar al-Maghili, written around 1498, most probably in Gao, is of primary importance, especially as al-Maghili was widely known as a Muslim scholar of stature but had come as an outsider to Songhay, which produced its own set of problems, as will be discussed further down.

The local Arabic chronicles, but also the works of Ahmad Baba and other minor sources were mostly compiled after the Moroccan invasion and have to be read in the light of being works that tried to create a certain identity in reaction to foreign invasions that were seen as oppressive, bringing with it strange customs of people who looked and spoke differently. They were the product of a reactionary attitude that gave the past a local Muslim flavour, serving the local Muslim authors in asserting their own identity and status in the face of a new political reality. The Tarikhs paint the Songhay empire in a light of glory in order to strengthen the Sudanic-Muslim identity towards the invaders,

⁸¹ Norris, H. T, and 'Abd al-Wadud al-Shamsadi. 'The Ancient History of the Mauritanian Adrar and the Sons of Shams al-Din'. In *Saharan Myth and Saga*, 126–159. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972.

⁸² Urvoy, Yves, ed. 'Chroniques d'Agades'. *Journal de la Société des Africanistes* IV (1934): 145–177.

⁸³ Yves (Chroniques d'Agades), P.145-148.

who were understood to come from a different cultural area, imposing their will on the Sudan, while at the same time trying to create an acceptable version of the future and a coming-to-terms with the new realities around them. It is instructive that the Askya is described in the Tarikhs as “Caliph” but Ahmad Baba, one of the most prolific scholars coming from Timbuktu and part of an earlier generation of writers denotes the Askya only as “Sultan”, despite him being abducted by the Moroccan invaders.⁸⁴ The Tarikhs, according to Moreas, were trying to be “projects of reconciliation between the three elites”, the Moroccan invaders, the Muslim scholars and the remains of the Songhay nobility,⁸⁵ by providing a platform of negotiation between the different factions. This project petered out quite quickly due to the Moroccans not being able and wanting to be part of such a deal. It is clear that the Tarikhs are not emotionless providers of raw source material but tried to form their contemporary present according to a certain vision of the future.

It is also important to point out that the sources available were created in the urban centres of the Middle Niger Bend and we know almost nothing about the rural areas surrounding them. This is a clear methodological issue as the majority of the population lived in the countryside and not in the cities. Unfortunately we do not have any sources that would tell us something about 16th or 17th century life that took place outside the towns or larger settlements of the Middle Niger Bend and thus we can only offer some very basic conjectures when the sources available provide hints towards the life outside a city’s boundary. Even archeology, the prime endeavour of which is uncovering remains of past rural life that was not recorded in writing, has largely concentrated on the cities of the Middle Niger Bend, mainly Djenne and Gao, whereas the written sources centre around Timbuktu.

A further problem is that these works were originally written in Arabic and as was (and still is) common practice with most authors who write in this language, no vowels were used. This can make it hard to discern the meaning of certain passages as ambigu-

⁸⁴ de Moraes Farias, Paulo. ‘Intellectual Innovation and Reinvention of the Sahel: The Seventeenth-Century Timbuktu Chronicles’. In *The Meanings of Timbuktu*, edited by Shamil Jeppie, 95–107. 1. publ. Cape Town: HSRC Press [u.a.], 2008, P.104.

⁸⁵ de Moraes Farias (The meanings of Timbuktu), P.97.

ties can creep in, especially as the writers of these sources were not native speakers of Arabic and sometimes produced faulty or oblique sentences, making it difficult to provide an exact translation in some cases. Another language related issue are the terms used by the authors. For example “Bambara”, which is an ethnic group in modern day Mali and who came into their own in the 17th century, was used by al-Sadi and other Muslim writers as a stand-in for “pagan” and by extension “enslavable barbarian”, an idea which they apparently took from Ibn Khaldun. This already shows a boundary between groups, as apparently al-Sadi and his peers saw themselves as a different part of Sudanic Africa having no relationship with some of their neighbours. It is often not used as an ethnic descriptor but refers to any non-Muslim as, in Hunwick’s words “(...) the proverbial barbarian hordes which threaten to overrun civilisation.” However sometimes it seems to be used not in this sense but in a more specific manner, e.g. referring to a group attacking Djenne.⁸⁶ In order not to add to the confusion and to avoid a further introduction of terms, this work uses available and widely used translations if possible and comments on them if necessary. Which is why the citations are given in English and French depending on the language used if a translation was already available. Furthermore, I am no linguist and as such do defer to the judgement of those who are.

The different sources pose another problem as they sometimes contradict each other. Especially the *Tarikh al-Fattash* and the *Tarikh al-Sudan* sometimes show diametrically opposed views on the same incident. Due to the lack of further sources which could provide additional information on certain issues it is often not possible to discern who was right or if both were wrong. One factor which led to this outcome was that the available chronicles are to some extent based on oral traditions like the “Sundiata” or the “Epic of Askya Mohammed”. Both were accounts on the rise and reign of two widely admired rulers and were not only told for their stories but also to legitimise their claims to power. They were in turn used by others to justify their own claims that were

⁸⁶ Sa’dī, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn ‘Abd Allāh. *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sa’di’s Ta’riḫ al-Sūdān down to 1613, and other Contemporary Documents*. Edited by John O Hunwick. *Islamic History and Civilization* 27. Leiden: Brill, 1999, P.XXX.

derived from these men.⁸⁷ The chronicles which descended from these oral traditions were all cast in a Muslim framework and follow a teleological approach, emphasising the truth of the Islamic faith, discounting the pagan past. That there was an interplay between oral traditions which were conceived by people living under traditional Soninke beliefs and the Muslim authors who in turn lived close to non-Muslim religious traditions can be seen by the terms used. The presence of sorcerers called the *sohanci*, the magical abilities of hunters and the accepted social world show not only a chronology but reflect the cultural transformation the Middle Niger Bend underwent during that period.⁸⁸ Other sources like the Kano Chronicles⁸⁹ are cast into the same framework and show a similar reliance on oral sources, Griot (bard) epics, court traditions, praise epithets of rulers (*kirarai*) and others.⁹⁰

Speaking of oral-turned-written sources, there are also modern oral sources which have survived in the spoken word to the present day. “The Epic of Askya Muhammed” is a prime example of this category, “The Epic of Sundiata” another. These sagas are still told by modern Griots in various forms. Thomas Hale describes a bard as a historian that acts as “time-binders”, linking:

*“(…) past to present and serves as a witness to events in the present, which he or she may convey to persons living in the future. In this sense, the griot's role as historian is somewhat more dynamic and interactive than what we have in the Western tradition (...)”*⁹¹

⁸⁷ Harrow, Kenneth W. ‘Islamic Literature in Africa’. In *The History of Islam in Africa*, edited by Nehemia Levtzion and Randall L Pouwels, 519–544. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2000, P.520.

⁸⁸ Harrow (Islamic Literature in Africa), P.521.

⁸⁹ Palmer, Herbert Richmond. *Sudanese Memoirs: Being Mainly Translations of a Number of Arabic Manuscripts Relating to the Central and Western Sudan*. Cass, 1967.

⁹⁰ Hunwick, John O. ‘Not yet the Kano Chronicle: King-Lists with and Without Narrative Elaboration from Nineteenth-Century Kano’. *Sudanic Africa* no. 4 (1993): 95–130, P.95.

⁹¹ Hale, Thomas A. *Griots and Griottes: Masters of Words and Music*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998, P.23.

Although telling the history of a people, modern empiricist notions were and are not part of the job description. Events, places and people serve as backgrounds to a greater story and are modified in order to tell lasting truths. Time is also perceived differently, especially birth and death are given more significance than the period in between.⁹² Griots are not external observers of the societies they sing about but state how the world ought to be. Every story has a moral component and through this lens explains how the present came into being. Hale gives the example of Askya Muhammad's successors who, by violating basic and sacred rules, fell from grace and destroyed the Songhay empire in the process. Thus the importance of Islam in some of the modern Griots accounts may be modern day interpretations in order to explain moral decay or virtue. Iliffe adds that although Griots are mentioned in contemporary sources, no "epic performance" is ever reported on prior to the 17th century. The local epic traditions came into being only relatively recently. Iliffe emphasises though that these epics drew from a large pool of preexisting oral history that had been passed on through the skills of the Griots.⁹³ As such it is useful to look at oral history and the epics that surround some of the key characters of the Middle Niger Bend's history. The influence of Griots and the traditions that were covered through and with oral sources is especially pertinent regarding the local Sudanic sources which often rest for a large part on oral history. With that being said the argument here will not rely on these accounts but use them only to lend additional support and frame an issue or line of reasoning, without it ever given the centre stage. This is not necessarily due to the quality of the oral sources, but more due to their quantity, content and the character of this study.

Although this overview gives the impression of a bountiful store of written sources, the reality is that sub-Saharan West Africa at this point in time was largely illiterate with its obvious repercussions on the availability of sources. In fact, the ability to read and write was so rare, that it was used by the Muslim scholars as a way of distinguishing themselves from other sections of society. This puts us in the situation that hardly any contemporary records from a non-Islamic viewpoint exist and every document we have was penned by a Muslim scholar who perceived his world through his own pious lens. It

⁹² Hale (Griots and Griottes), P.23.

⁹³ Iliffe (Honour in African History), P.22.

is thus sometimes required to use the descriptions gathered by modern field observations in order to explain the pre-colonial African past. The use of this “ethnographic present” is justified as archeological evidence suggests that material culture has not changed significantly⁹⁴ in many areas and also social rituals, like burial, have largely stayed the same as can be seen with the Dogon in modern eastern Mali. This does not mean though that there are no dangers to this method. Starting with the fact that the archeological evidence is quite often literally very thin on the ground there is the possibility of overreliance on modern ethnographic works. It is very tempting to take the modern day description as gospel and forget the fact that especially social forms which hardly leave any physical traces, like family structures, community cohesion or methods of resolving conflict can change quite rapidly. By not keeping this in mind one would represent the indigenous ethnicities as static concepts, which is to be avoided. It is very instructive however to look at how contemporary traditional African societies react to changes in ecology, like climate change or competition from other groups. This can be combined and calibrated with available historic data regarding the climate, availability of different types of crops, ores and the scale of human settlement of a given point in time, presenting us with a differentiated picture of the West African past. This is an especially fruitful approach inasmuch as the competition for economic and thus therefore also ecological niches plays an important part in the formation of a social group. McIntosh uses this idea in his “Pulse Model” and adds that a significant amount of stories and figures of speech which are used to separate people into different ethnic groups are due to ecological stress in an unpredictable environment.⁹⁵

Looking through the sources it also becomes clear that the only type of history possible is that of an elite-history. Contemporary chronicles had no interest in writing down the fates of the “normal man” and slaves or women were even less interesting. This means that we only ever have a view “from above”, which is in additionally peppered

⁹⁴ Austen, Ralph A. *African Economic History: Internal Development and External Dependency*. London: James Currey, 1987, P.16.

⁹⁵ McIntosh, Roderick J. ‘The Pulse Model: Genesis and Accommodation of Specialization in the Middle Niger’. *The Journal of African History* 34, no. 2 (1 January 1993): 181–220, P.181.

with a heavy helping of moralistic comment. This obviously leaves large gaps in our understanding of the societies of the Middle Niger Bend as we essentially leave out the large majority of the population and give only voice to those who thought themselves important. However there is no way around this problem, other than to write no history about the pre-colonial Middle Niger Bend at all.

Another problem is of quite recent origin. On the 31st March 2012, Gao, a major city in the northeast of Mali, was attacked and captured by forces of the MNLA (Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad) and Ansar al-Din (Defenders of the faith), Tuareg forces, that were intent on creating an independent state, called Azawad. One day later Timbuktu also fell into their hands and from there they quickly advanced south. In the meantime the jihadist group of Ansar al-Dine had won the infighting within the Tuareg camp and the secular MNLA rebels were sidelined and had to withdraw. Shaken up by the developments in their former colony, France sent 3000 soldiers into their former colony who pushed the Tuareg rebels back. It however was too late to save the famous libraries of Timbuktu which were destroyed by the jihadists. Only through the timely intervention of the librarians was it possible that 28000 of the 30000 manuscripts that had been housed in the libraries could be smuggled out to Bamako in time, where there are now in an undisclosed location, not accessible to outside researchers any more. That means, that the vast majority of the sources used here have already been published in various journals, although for most only a translation but no interpretation exists.

5. A short history of the Middle Niger Bend

5.1 The Rise of Songhay

Before the 17th century, the Middle Niger Bend was a very attractive place for human settlement. The central floodplain, stretching from Djenne far downstream, made agriculture easy and food plentiful. The desert in the 15th century being much farther in the north made cities like Gao, Timbuktu, Awdaghust and others part of the savannah and not of the desert; giving them a stable footing in their surroundings, as food was easily obtained from close by while at the same time building their trade emporiums. This made the area a prized possession for different powers that vied for control over the region.⁹⁶

By the tenth century the city of Gao in the northeastern corner of the Middle Niger Bend had become the centre of Songhay, then a small kingdom, establishing its hegemony over the trade routes which ran through the capital and brought gold and slaves from the south in exchange for Saharan salt and North African goods.⁹⁷ Initially though, the regional overlord was the Malian empire to whose demands Songhay had to bow until the former was shaken by succession struggles at the end of the fourteenth century.⁹⁸ This led to a fatal internal weakness which Berbers and others, like the Fulani,⁹⁹ exploited. The desert-dwellers conquered Timbuktu in 1433 along with other important

⁹⁶ Cissoko, Sekene Mody. 'The Songhay from the 12th to the 16th Century'. In *General History of Africa*, edited by Bethwell A Ogot, 187–210. Abridged ed. vol.5. Oxford: James Currey, 1999, P.187.

⁹⁷ Hunwick, John. 'Songhay: An Interpretative Essay'. In *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sa'di's Ta'rikh al-Sūdān down to 1613, and other Contemporary Documents*, edited by John O Hunwick, XXII–LXV. Islamic History and Civilization 27. Leiden: Brill, 1999, P.XXXIV.

⁹⁸ Hunwick, John. 'Songhay, Borno and the Hausa States, 1450-1600'. In *History of West Africa*, edited by J. F. Ade Ajayi and Michael Crowder, 323–370. 3rd ed. Harlow: Longman, 1985, P.346.

⁹⁹ French: Peul

cities like Walata and Nema and the Fulani increased pressure in the west, decreasing the power of Mali considerably.¹⁰⁰ Songhay's subsequent rise to greatness began under Sunni Ali (ruled from 1464(?) - 1492). He reorganised the empire's army into a well-structured and seasoned fighting force, commanded by competent leaders. With his soldiers he made use of the newly won freedom handed to him by the waning power of the Malian empire. Under Sunni Ali's rule Songhay pushed the Berbers back into the desert and conquered the areas defended by the Fulani, Bozo and others, establishing its authority over large swathes of the Middle Niger Region.¹⁰¹ Although the available accounts of Sunni Ali's campaigns are very unclear it is possible to draw a general outline of the empire at the time of his death in 1492.¹⁰² He had mainly pushed into the west and extended Songhay's sway from Gao in the east, running along the Niger towards Djenne in the southwest, encompassing its inland delta and the Bandiagara uplands.¹⁰³ In the northwest, the important trading city of Timbuktu was wrested from the Berbers.

These conquests not only resulted in territorial expansion but also changed the character of Songhay itself. After Sunni Ali the empire was now firmly placed in between the two worlds of the desert and the savanna. The first was the domain of nomadic pastoralists of the southern Sahara who traced their origins to Berber roots in North Africa. The latter were in most cases agriculturalists who felt attached to the wider world of sub-Saharan Africa. This cohabitation was only possible because of the flow of the Niger which provided a lifeline into more arid regions along which human society and civilisation could develop. Its flow pulled in people from the south and drew in the inhabit-

¹⁰⁰ Ly-Tall, Madina. 'The Decline of the Mali Empire'. In *UNESCO General History of Africa: Africa from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century*, edited by Bethwell A. Ogot, 5:172–186. University of California Pr, 1999, P.182.

¹⁰¹ Cissoko (The Songhay from the 12th to the 16th century), P.191.

¹⁰² Hunwick, John. 'The Middle Niger before 1500: Trade, Politics and the Implantation of Islam'. In *Sharī'a in Songhay: The Replies of al-Maghīlī to the Questions of Askia al-Ḥājj Muḥammad*, edited by John Hunwick, 1–28. *Fontes Historiae Africanæ* 5. Oxford: Published for the British Academy by the Oxford University Press, 1985, P.22.

¹⁰³ Hunwick (Songhay), P.XXXVIII.

ants of the desert, providing a communal habitat.¹⁰⁴ After the conquests Songhay became one large zone of “communitas”, which in the following decades would come to both be a blessing and a curse.

In the bosom of the newly created empire were several big Sudanic cities which had a strong influence on its character; especially Gao, Timbuktu and Djenne left their mark. These, like other major cities in sub-Saharan West Africa, built their fortunes from the trans-Saharan trade and were the beneficiaries of the power of the empires they were located in and became the economic, spiritual and administrative hubs of Songhay. They were a result and agitator of social change, being not only marketplaces of goods but also of ideas and social change.¹⁰⁵ Gao, Timbuktu and Djenne were not the first cities to arise in this area but harked back to a tradition established by towns like Walata or Aw-daghuṣṭ. Al-Sa’di describes reports in the *Tarikh al-Sudan*:

“The previous centre of commerce had been the town of Biru, [old name for Walata] to which caravans came from all directions. The cream of scholars and holymen, and the wealthy from every tribe and land settled there—men from Egypt, Awjila, Fezzan, Ghadames, Tuwat, Dar’a, Tafilalt, Fez, Sus, Bitu, etc. Little by little, together with [representatives of] all the branches of the Sanhaja, they moved to Timbuktu until they filled it to overflowing. Timbuktu’s growth brought about the ruin of Walata, for its development, as regards both religion and commerce, came entirely from the west [مغرب]. [That is the Maghrib - “west” or “sunset” in Arabic, encompassing modern day Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya.]”¹⁰⁶

Although later passages of the *Tarikh al-Sudan* make it clear that this strong emphasis on the cultural influence of the Maghrib is an exaggeration, it is nevertheless a comment which is in line with other sources that show an early link between the culture of the Sudan and North Africa.¹⁰⁷ The links were mainly run by traders who zipped

¹⁰⁴ Saad (Social History of Timbuktu), P.5.

¹⁰⁵ Gugler, Josef. *Urbanization and Social Change in West Africa*. Vol. 2. CUP Archive, 1978, P.11.

¹⁰⁶ T/S-E, P.30.

¹⁰⁷ Cleaveland (Becoming Walata), P.61.

along the trade routes that joined the centres of the Maghrib with the entrepôts of the Middle Niger Bend, which in turn were tightly bound to each other.

The town of Djenne sat at the southwestern corner of the Middle Niger Delta, an area which transformed annually into a vast, shallow floodplain, allowing for bountiful harvests and fishery, making this region not only one of the richest in the whole of Africa but also providing much of the foodstuffs of the empire. At the same time Djenne was part of the east-west trading routes of the savanna, developing into a major commercial entrepôt.¹⁰⁸ By virtue of being situated on the Niger it tied these trade routes into the north-south trade which shipped goods along the river, connecting the east-west trade to the northern outpost of Timbuktu. This city in turn became one of the lynchpins of the transsaharan trade, providing a platform for the exchange of vast quantities of gold, salt, slaves, horses and grain, ultimately becoming a vast storehouse. It sent its goods south towards Djenne and east to Gao, the administrative capital of the empire and seat of the rulers of Gao. Gao itself was also endowed with a substantial volume of mercantile turnover, but probably because it lacked the link to the east-west trade it never reached the spheres of Timbuktu or Djenne. Although dependent on the grain imports which the other two cities provided, it was the centre of political and military power and was thus in a position to dictate what happened in other parts of its realm. These different centres were not only religious, mercantile and administrative hubs but also pressure cookers for ideas which ran up and down the Niger, creating an extraordinary internal cultural dynamic.

The expansion of Songhay into the west not only increased its territorial size and stimulated its economy but also changed the cultural makeup of the empire as especially Timbuktu and Djenne were proud Muslim cities with a distinguished and independent learned class. Sunni Ali himself eventually converted to Islam and thus linked his exploits with this oriental religion.¹⁰⁹ His conversion was mainly due to it giving him easier access to the Muslim community within his empire which through their skills in liter-

¹⁰⁸ McIntosh, Roderick J., and Susan Keech McIntosh. 'The Inland Niger Delta before the Empire of Mali: Evidence from Jenne-Jeno'. *The Journal of African History* 22, no. 01 (1981): 1–22, P.21.

¹⁰⁹ Ly-Tall (The decline of the Mali empire), P.174.

acy and trade became increasingly important in the region. Even if Muslims were small in number, these abilities allowed them to have a large impact and high profile within social and political affairs.¹¹⁰ In addition many of Songhay's neighbours had converted to Islam and Sunni Ali could assert himself more easily as lawful ruler if he himself were a Muslim.¹¹¹ That Sunni Ali's conversion was mainly due to political and economic reasons is indicated by the fact that he was accused by the 'Ulema (community of Muslim scholars) as being insincere and impious in his worship, treating it more as a nuisance than performing it out of personal conviction:

*"He would leave the five daily acts of worship until the night, or until the following morning. Then, from a sitting position he would incline himself repeatedly, mentioning the names of the acts of worship."*¹¹²

He quite clearly did not rest his authority on this new religion but cultivated his image as magician-king instead, holding power not only through his physical strength and military victories but also by commanding the unseen, spiritual forces with spells and rituals.¹¹³ After all he had gained and increased his power as a leader of a traditional culture steeped in deeply entrenched pre-Islamic religious rituals and not by spearheading a Muslim movement. He had never lost a battle, created a large empire and established Songhay as regional hegemon all without referencing Islam in any way and it thus had no direct impact on his day-to-day ruling affairs. This does not mean that he did not see himself as a Muslim but that he simply had no incentive to listen to the Muslim estate and ruled according to the traditions that brought him to power and that had their base in pre-Islamic heritage.

¹¹⁰ Hanretta, Sean. *Islam and Social Change in French West Africa: History of an Emancipatory Community*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, P.35.

¹¹¹ Clarke, Peter B. *West Africa and Islam: A Study of Religious Development from the 8th to the 20th Century*. London: Edward Arnold, 1982, P. 49.

¹¹² T/S-E, P.96.

¹¹³ Hunwick, John. 'Religion and State in the Songhay Empire, 1464-1591'. In *Islam in Tropical Africa*, edited by I. M Lewis, 124-143. 2nd ed. London: International African Institute in assoc. with Hutchinson, 1980, P.127-132.

Hunwick argues that Sunni Ali was caught in a self-made quandary as he rose to power on using the traditional legitimising system, but it could not provide a sound ideological basis to hold his newly created empire together.¹¹⁴ He tried to merge both elements, pleasing both sides, while at the same time staying at the helm. On the one hand using the skills of the Muslims and hoping to tap into the unity they provided in the entrepôts of Timbuktu and Djenne and along the trade routes, on the other hand, according to al-Maghili, he did his utmost to prevent his court and household from taking on Is-

¹¹⁴ Lange's has a different thesis resting on the idea of multiple ethnic origins which has several implications that do not flow from the traditional "mainstream" thesis.

Whereas the traditional argument for the genesis of Songhay assumes a unified block-identity of their social makeup, Lange's argument assumes different factions within early Songhay, mainly a split between different Soninke factions and the Mande. Sunni Ali was part of one Soninke stock whereas Askya Muhammad was Soninke as well, but from a rivaling faction. (Lange, Dierk. *Ancient Kingdoms of West Africa*. Roll, 2004, P.533.)

Although an enlightening and spirited discussion, it is very difficult to lean to one side or the other as the evidence is remarkably thin in any case. With only fragments of texts existing, the Arabic originals lost, with just the French translation surviving and through resting an argument on myth and legend written down in the Tarikhs it all does not appear to be grounded on a strong basis. Lange's argument rests mainly on engravings found on tombstones, which he uses as main argument for his dynastic research, but they are very difficult to make sense of as the script used is very difficult to decipher and there is considerable disagreement on how to interpret certain letters. Even if an undisputed transcription were available the amount of evidence would still be very thin, especially as the Tarikhs paint a picture more in accordance with the traditional thesis. Despite the creative argument of Lange's thesis the amount of different sources speak more in favor of Delafosse's or Hunwick's approach which will be used in this work. This does not mean however that this is a clear cut matter - it probably never will be. In any case, the research status regarding this argument has little bearing on the main argument of this thesis but is mentioned nonetheless in order to get the chronology correctly laid out.

lamic practices on pain of death.¹¹⁵ There are indications that this stance was part of an ideological defensive move as there were signals that the magic-religious system which underpinned royal authority began to wither away, as it was not very well suited to provide legitimacy and authority in a multi-ethnic empire. Islam on the other hand could, as we will see in a later chapter, supply these and was thus making its influence felt, giving rise to the fear that it might eclipse the traditional ideological system.¹¹⁶

The liminal zone created by the conquests of Sunni Ali forced an exchange between the boundaries of the old belief systems, the world of the Muslim scholars and the Berbers from the desert. The scholars embodied this liminality as they were part of the world of the Sudan, but at the same time had links with the culture of the desert and North Africa. They were the outsiders in this case, who were as yet not deeply integrated into the Songhay administrative system. But as they provided an alternative ideological system and had undeniable power through their mercantile and scholarly expertise they posed a threat to the establishment with Sunni Ali at its top.

This led to an uneasy relationship between Sunni Ali and the Muslim community. In 1469 and 1486 Ali conducted large-scale purges of Muslim scholars, expelling many of them from their home as he suspected them of having cooperated with the Tuareg whom he had just driven back into the desert.¹¹⁷ The ‘Ulema of Timbuktu was suspected “for their alleged friendship with the Tuareg”,¹¹⁸ the latter just having lost control of Timbuktu but still posing a considerable threat to Sunni Ali’s rule.¹¹⁹ As the ‘Ulema did not immediately side unanimously with the new ruler, they were seen as a threat as

¹¹⁵ Hunwick (Religion and State in the Songhay Empire, 1464-1591), P.130.

¹¹⁶ Hunwick (Religion and State in the Songhay Empire, 1464-1591), P.129-130.

¹¹⁷ Clarke (West Africa and Islam), P. 48.

¹¹⁸ T/S-E, P.94.

¹¹⁹ According to Hunwick it is quite likely that what al-Sadi calls “Tuareg” are in fact Sanhaja, as Tuaregs would have lived further east in the region of Air. See T/S-E, P.35 (footnote).

well.¹²⁰ The Muslim scholars did not endorse this view and so the Muslim authors of the Tarikhs described him as a “(...) tyrant, a miscreant, an aggressor, a despot, and a butcher who killed so many human beings that only God Most High could count them.”¹²¹

The negative image painted of Sunni Ali by the authors of the Tarikhs however is to be read with caution. These writers were interested in emphasising the virtuous ways of Sunni Ali’s successor Askya Mohammed who raised the status of the ‘Ulema to unprecedented heights and lived through a very successful reign. The authors of the Tarikhs, who were part of this group, linked these two facts together. For them Askya Muhammed’s triumphs were possible because he rested his power on the Muslim community and their beliefs. They were thus interested in denigrating Sunni Ali, as he was not seen as a pious Muslim. By describing him as a monster he was shown as a foil to the wise and pious Askya Muhammed, putting the latter on a pedestal. By extension they did the same to the ‘Ulema and thus to themselves. At the same time the authors of the Tarikhs could not disguise a certain awe when speaking of Sunni Ali’s exploits, which in the long run had provided the basis for Songhay hegemony and the rule of Askya Muhammed, idol of Sa’di and Ibn Mukhtar:

“Il [Sunni Ali] fut toujours victorieux et saccagea tous les pays sur lesquels il avait jeté son dévolu. Aucune de ses armées, lui présent, ne fut mise en déroute: toujours vainqueur, jamais vaincu. Il ne laissa aucune région, aucune ville, aucun village, depuis le pays du Kanta jusqu’au Sibiridougou, sans l’attaquer à la tête de sa cavalerie, guerroyant contre les habitants et ravageant leur territoire.”¹²²

5.2 The War for Sunni Ali’s legacy and its aftermath

After Sunni Ali’s death in 1492 his son Abu Bakr Dao (Sunni Barou) was declared ruler of Songhay. In order to secure his authority he rejected Islam and with it the in-

¹²⁰ Levtzion, Nehemia. ‘Islam in West African Politics- Accommodation and Tension Between the “Ulamā” and the Political Authorities’. *Cahiers d’Études Africaines* 18, no. 71 (1978): 333–345, P.339.

¹²¹ T/S-E, P.91.

¹²² T/F, P.82.

creasingly influential Muslim elements of Songhay society, who challenged the traditional distribution of power,¹²³ instead trying to rest his authority on the pagan model of the magician-king which his father had so successfully employed at the beginning of his reign. The *Tarikh al-Fattash* says that: “Il avait des craintes pour sa souveraineté, comme c'était naturel de la part d'un roi (...)”¹²⁴ and with this strategy he tried to put his fears to rest, sidelining the Muslim scholars, clerics and merchants.

This rift between pagan and Muslim belief systems was exploited by Muhammed Ture, who had won fame as one of Sunni Ali's commanders.¹²⁵ Based with his troops in the northwest of Songhay, where Muslim authority was strongest, he seized the possibilities offered by Muslim influence and trade affluence which had provided new opportunities of social advancement through the spread of a new ideology and economic prowess. Eschewing traditional hereditary patterns of succession Muhammed Ture founded his claim on Muslim ideas of power instead, which demanded from a ruler to be an adherent of Islam.¹²⁶ Muhammed Ture was not of royal blood, his mother not being of Songhay descent, and he thus had no claim to the throne through right of birth,¹²⁷ unlike Sunni Barou. The ruler had normally always come from a recognised royal lineage which could trace its ancestry back to mythic antiquity. They were part of the creation story of their people and thus tied the past and the present, the living and the dead, together. He was not just a person but the gold standard of who they were, hence non-kin

¹²³ Kaba, Lansine. ‘The Pen, the Sword, and the Crown: Islam and Revolution in Songhay Reconsidered, 1464–1493’. *The Journal of African History* 25, no. 3 (1984): 241–56, P.248.

¹²⁴ T/F, P.103.

¹²⁵ Hunwick (Religion and State in the Songhay Empire), P.131.

¹²⁶ Kaba, Lansine. ‘Islam, Politics and Revolution in Songhay (1464-1493)’. In *Religion, Rebellion, Revolution: An Interdisciplinary and Cross-Cultural Collection of Essays*, edited by Bruce Lincoln. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1985, P.185.

¹²⁷ Hunwick (The Middle Niger before 1500), P.24.

In fact, oral sources claim that his mother was Sunni Ali's sister. In this case he would be technically of royal blood but so far down the line of succession that he could never lay claim to the throne through traditional rules of royal advancement.

could not become ruler.¹²⁸ In other words, Muhammed Ture had to find another way of claiming dominion, which Islam provided. By resting his claim to the throne on a Muslim religious ideology the rebel forces were provided with sacred warrants and holy legitimisation.¹²⁹ Not just Muhammed Ture but also lesser commanders who were stationed in the regions where Islam was strongest now had another avenue of social ascent apart from the old prescribed patterns which had been dominant under the early rule of Sunni Ali and his predecessors, providing Muhammed Ture with the military power he needed. Hunwick has convincingly argued that by declaring himself Muslim and playing on the fact that Gao had not yet been able to socially incorporate the conquered western parts of the empire into its core domains and with divisions still running deep in the minds of the population, Ture was able to secure a strong following behind him, challenging the pagan Sunni Barou and his eastern followers.¹³⁰ Lange dismisses this thesis and argues on ethnic grounds, framing Muhammed Ture as a Soninke champion of the Zarma, who used him as a vehicle to gain back influence they had lost under Sunni Ali. Although he rode to victory on their backs, this failed, as eventually Askya Muhammed pursued similar policies against the Zarma as Sunni Ali had done before. Lange thus emphasises continuity between the Sunni and the Askya dynasties but also contends that Islam was treated more favourably under the Askyas, which is the important point for the argument here.¹³¹ It is also quite likely that, apart from the religious-ideological conflict that opened up between the east and the west of the empire the sheer size of Songhay introduced other frontiers and conflicts where ethnic group identity certainly played its part. Berbers, Arabs, Songhay, Muslim traders, Sorko, caste people and so on all had to be put under the same one-size-fits-all umbrella of a common ideology, disregarding and thus often increasing social fissures. Muhammed Ture

¹²⁸ Azumah, John Alembillah. *The Legacy of Arab-Islam in Africa: A Quest for inter-Religious Dialogue*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2001, P.56-57.

¹²⁹ Kaba, Lansine. 'Islam, Politics and Revolution in Songhay (1464-1493)'. In *Religion, Rebellion, Revolution: An Interdisciplinary and Cross-Cultural Collection of Essays*, edited by Bruce Lincoln, 183–206. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1985, P.185.

¹³⁰ Hunwick (The Middle Niger before 1500), P.26.

¹³¹ Lange (Ancient Kingdoms of West Africa), P. 531-537.

played on that and bet on Islam. He met Sunni Barou's army near Gao on the 19th February 1493 and after "terrible losses"¹³² Muhammed Ture cashed in his wager.

With Muhammed Ture, now called Askya Muhammed, being victorious, claiming the throne and founding the new dynasty of the Askyas, a watershed moment in Songhay history had arrived. From now on it became clear that Islam was an irreversible major element of Songhay politics and although the seat of royal power remained in Gao, in the eastern, not-so-Muslim realm of the empire, the western region's power and thus Muslim influence rose. In stark contrast to Sunni Ali and his son, Askya Muhammed implemented Islam as state policy and used it as a tool to wield his power. By utilising the ideological power of the west he had to give it credence now. He was keen on amassing Muslim credentials by trying to utilise the support of the 'Ulema of Djenne and especially Timbuktu as he clamoured for ideological support in order to hold the western and eastern part of his empire together. By seeking the advice of Muslim scholars like al-Suyuti in Cairo,¹³³ al-Maghili in Gao and Qadi Mahmud in Timbuktu and by embarking on the hadj he tried to strengthen his image of a ruler who wanted to run an empire defined by Islam and not by ethnicity.

It is quite likely that the following djihad against the pagan Mossi stemmed directly from the urge to please the Muslim element in order to solidify his power. It did not only send an affirmative signal to the Muslims living in his empire but also sent a warning to the adherents of the traditional religions in case they were thinking of a counter-rebellion. This is underscored by the fact that this was the only holy war Askya Muhammed ever fought. Afterwards he apparently had no need for such an ideologically galvanising action anymore. On the contrary, his power seemed to grow to such an extent that he aimed most of his future military campaigns against other Muslim powers, like the Hausa, Soninke, Sanhaja or Fulani. Although all inhabitants of the Dar al-Islam, the "Land of Islam", were ordered by Muslim law to live in peace with one another he found and was granted legal loopholes by Muslim scholars like al-Maghili to lay waste to these Muslim lands and their peoples. Nevertheless, it was not as ideologically clear cut as a djihad against unbelievers and thus speaks for the power Askya Muhammed

¹³² T/F, P.106.

¹³³ T/S-E, P.105.

was able to wield after he had secured his domains against internal and external enemies. The difficulties of dealing with the issue of Muslim scholarship and the political implications it harboured has been explored in an article by Blum and Fisher. They convincingly dispel the notion that the different Muslim parties and Askya Muhammed worked effortlessly together to bring a new order to the empire.

According to Blum and Fisher, Gao, Timbuktu and al-Maghili had separate, distinct ideas about what Islam was. They point out that Gao was from the viewpoint of Timbuktu almost heathen ground but it was the Islam of the Songhay capital city that Muhammed Ture cum Askya Muhammed ultimately identified with as he rose to the position of Kurmina-Fari there in addition to his whole nobility being based in Gao. When installed as Kurmina-Fari however he had to deal with the Islamised west. So to a certain extent Askya Muhammed had to context switch his social identity. By doing that he crossed the boundary between Muslim and non-Muslim ideals of rule, thus carrying over ideas through the boundary. Consequently his claim to the throne based on Muslim credentials was not only an effort to make his ambitions acceptable to the Muslims of the west but also to the nobility of the east. He nevertheless had to cater to the old sentiments of rule that still reigned strong in Gao which had the potential to be interpreted as apostasy by the scholars of the west. He thus had created a liminal zone with regards to the accepted limits of legitimate rule. This however was not settled in his lifetime and would remain a constant feature of renegotiation under the rule of his successors. The *Tarikh al-Sudan* for its part is shrouded in silence regarding the development of the coup itself, it only records the aftermath. It records no prayers, goods delivered, manpower served or other forms of support. The *Tarikh al-Fattash* does, but unfortunately these passages are part of the 19th century forgery. This does not mean that these stories are completely wrong as some of the acting figures are also part of the genuine parts of this source.¹³⁴ It is striking that directly after the coup Askya Muhammed went on the hadj, led a djiha and showered the Muslim clerics with gifts, thus putting Islam clearly in the

¹³⁴ Although it could also be a device to induce apparent reliability.

limelight.¹³⁵ It is also obvious that the Tarikhs are enamoured with Askya Muhammed and that the inhabitants of Timbuktu were the winners of Askya Muhammed's coup which would have been unlikely if they had put up any resistance against such a change of power. What this leaves us with is the following: Askya Muhammed clearly thought that Islam was the way forward in tying his empire together but it is likely that his ideas about what Islam was good for did not align easily with those of the scholars of Timbuktu although the latter were not disinclined towards the Askya. He had come to power within the Gao system which was based on different ideals to those prevalent in Timbuktu's Muslim community but they both had an interest in working out a modus vivendi that would benefit them both. It also explains why other Askyas were to have major problems with the west. This dichotomy was never resolved and proved to be the downfall of Songhay. Askya Muhammed and later Askya Dawud were able to counteract such tendencies due to their enormous prestige, gathered through military exploits and their better than average handling of this ideological clash. Askya Muhammed was prudent enough to realise that it was one thing to come to power and another to hold on to it, consequently making a bet on the Muslim ideology. But despite his and Dawud's successes they were still oblivious to the ideological problems Askya Muhammed had summoned. The invitation of the famous North African scholar al-Maghili to Askya Muhammed's court was likely intended to further his Muslim credentials but in all probability it was a total disaster. Al-Maghili's hardline stance was despised by the scholars of Timbuktu and probably Gao as well and in turn he loathed them.¹³⁶ In the end the Askya reluctantly bowed to the Timbuktu school of thinking which already hints at the content of further confrontations. That he tried to fit into the Muslim ideology without abdicating his own powers is also shown through another tidbit. He went so far as to seek recognition of his rule by the Abbasid caliph, who had no real authority in

¹³⁵ Blum, Charlotte and Fisher, Humphrey. 'Love for Three Oranges, or, the Askiya's Dilemma: The Askiya, al-Maghili and Timbuktu, c. 1500 A.D.' *The Journal of African History* 34, no. 1 (1993): 65–91, P.67-73.

¹³⁶ Blum and Fisher (Love for Three Oranges), P.78-79.

Takrur but would lend further weight to the Askya's claims. The Moroccan historian al-Ifrani¹³⁷ (died in 1737 or 1738) wrote the following:

*“The aforementioned al-hajj Muhammed Sukya travelled to Egypt and the Hijaz in the late ninth century intending [to make a pilgrimage to] the Sacred House of God (...). In Egypt he met the Abbasid caliph and asked him to authorize him to rule the bilad al-Sudan and to be a vice-regent [khalifa] for him there. The Abbasid caliph delegated to him authority over the affairs of those regions and made him his lieutenant over the Muslims [who dwelt] beyond him. The pilgrim returned to his land and based his leadership on the principles of the sharia. (...) He also met in Egypt the imam (...) Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti and took from him his theological teachings and learned from him about what is lawful and what is forbidden. He returned to [bilad] al-Sudan and supported the Sunna and revived the path of justice.”*¹³⁸

Despite all the baggage such an ideological shift from Sunni Ali's doctrines entailed, Askya Mohammed was able to initially secure the support of the western provinces and provide an overarching clamp which held the Songhay empire together.¹³⁹

Askya Muhammed extended the Songhay empire considerably through military conquest and in 1528 its suzerainty stretched over a vast area.¹⁴⁰ It became the biggest empire this region of the world had ever seen until the French arrived in the early twentieth century. At its height it ruled over 1,400,000 sq. km:

¹³⁷ For more on al-Ifrani: Hunwick, John O. 'Askia al-Hajj Muhammad and His Successors: The Account of al-Imam al-Takruri'. *Sudanic Africa* 1 (1 January 1990): 85–89.

¹³⁸ Hunwick (Askia al-Hajj Muhammad and His Successors), P. 90-91.

¹³⁹ Maghīlī, Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Karīm. *Sharī'a in Songhay: The Replies of al-Maghīlī to the Questions of Askia al-Hājj Muḥammad*. Edited by John O Hunwick. *Fontes Historiae Africanae* 5. Oxford: Published for the British Academy by the Oxford University Press, 1985, P.98.

¹⁴⁰ Hiskett, M. 'An Islamic Tradition of Reform in the Western Sudan from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century'. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 25, no. 1/3 (1 January 1962): 577–596, P.578.

“He [the Askya] ruled over an area from the land of the Kanta [in the east] to the salt sea in the west, and what lay between, and from the edge of the land of Bendugu [close to the rainforests of the south] to Taghaza [salt mine in the Sahara], and what lay between them. He conquered all of them with the sword, as will be mentioned when his campaigns are enumerated, (...)”¹⁴¹

The extent of the empire presented complex problems of administration which Askya Muhammed not only tried to amend by using the Muslims’ expertise but also by broadening the basis of Songhay’s military apparatus. An enlargement of the infantry and cavalry and an extension of the Sorko Niger fleet allowed him to expand and entrench his authority beyond the banks of the Niger into the countryside. These campaigns were led and fought to a large part by his military commanders. Especially the Kurmina-Fari, the commander of the western provinces, second only to the Askya, played a key role in the expansion of Songhay.¹⁴² These wars came at a cost. Although Songhay had become independent from Mali and experienced a large scale expansion, trained soldiers were not easy to come by. This already started under Sunni Ali but is best exemplified by Umar, Askya Muhammed’s brother, who was concerned when the Askya used some of his own troops as cannon fodder when he wanted to get rid of some potentially troublesome internal social element.¹⁴³ These conflicts were essentially wars of attrition, with huge losses, and after being victorious the newly subjugated people were often not content about the situation and thus required force to keep them from rebelling. Songhay made itself ever more vulnerable as it began to overreach. The final irony is that Mali would eventually survive Songhay, despite it proving no military match for its army.

Askya Muhammed was deposed by his son Musa on 15 August 1529 after a reign of 36 years. The only other Askya who enjoyed a comparably long and prosperous reign was Askya Dawud (1549-83), who modelled his rule closely on the example pioneered by Askya Mohammed. Dawud rested his authority heavily on Muslim principles and was able to maintain the status quo with the help of the ‘Ulema whose teaching provid-

¹⁴¹ T/S-E, P.106.

¹⁴² Levtzion (Ancient Ghana and Mali), P.85.

¹⁴³ T/S-E, P.109.

ed internal ideological cohesion, enabling him to stave off forays of Songhay's neighbours like the Mossi to the south.¹⁴⁴ But during the last years before the Moroccan invasion, the empire fell into a steep decline, from which it did not recover, its political system disintegrating as succession squabbles ate away at the fabric of the state. Dawud's successors failed to expand the empire and in most cases ruled only for a couple of years, as they lacked his political prowess and circumstances went against them. They could not bring the different parts of Songhay under their complete control and the western and eastern part of Songhay again began to drift apart. Most successions and reigns were marked by major armed strife, assassinations or, as was the case of Askya Musa, civil war.

Again, a challenger, the Balma'a, military commander of Kabara (Timbuktu's harbour) and one of Askya Dawud's sons, was able to gain the support of the western provinces, like Askya Muhammed before him, and rose to claim the throne for himself. He played on the fact that Gao had become estranged from Timbuktu, the latter seeing itself being threatened by the Askyas. The *Tarikh al-Fattash* makes clear the extent of Timbuktu 'Ulema's dissatisfaction, saying that "Les musulmans avaient eu beaucoup à souffrir de lui (...)."¹⁴⁵ Like Muhammed Ture before him, the Balma'a had become friendly with the 'Ulema of Timbuktu, and he used them as a vehicle for legitimising an uprising against the ruling Askya. This process which had its roots in the ideological gap between the different schools of Islam and more traditional beliefs further fuelled by economic and political stresses hinted at, was borne differently by different social groups and also created new social ideas or changed the relationship between groups radically. The borders between the different social actors were constantly renegotiated where there was a liminal zone available that allowed such exchange to take place. When this process broke down, war and social disintegration were the result. Unlike Askya Muhammed, the Balma'a and his allies lost, but the cost in lives and stability for the empire was nevertheless severe, especially as, in the aftermath of the coup, the Askya reacted with brutal efficiency and went through the surviving ranks of the opposition, killing or

¹⁴⁴ Hunwick (Religion and State in the Songhay empire) P.139.

¹⁴⁵ T/F, P.230.

imprisoning the majority of its leaders.¹⁴⁶ This however also had the effect of destroying a large part of his command structure and demoralising many of his subjects even further, leaving his armed forces in tatters and his dominion wide open to any enemy who thought of invading. The disintegration of Songhay after Askya Dawud will be one of the main themes in the chapters to come.

5.3 The Moroccan factor

While Songhay came to prominence in the south the Arab confederation of the Banu Sa'di, coming from the southern areas of Morocco, replaced the declining Berber kingdoms as the prevailing power in north-west Africa during the 1450s. One of their initial holdouts was the Sus, a terminus for the Sudanic gold which came through the Sahara. Despite having fought against the Portuguese and displaying a general anti-Christian stance, they had no trouble in dealing with merchants from Christian Europe. They set up a flourishing business, trading gold, ivory and other African items against European arms, metals and chemical compounds like sulphur and saltpetre. In 1549 the Sa'dians incorporated Fez into their domains and four years later they occupied virtually the whole country, leaving only small pockets to their enemies, the Wattasids.¹⁴⁷

As a consequence of their rule in Morocco, they also controlled the northern counterparts of Timbuktu, Gao or Walata which represented the trans-Saharan termini of trade routes in Morocco, like Marrakesh and Sijilmassa. They not only brought goods but also information from the other side of the desert to the ears of the Moroccan ruler, al-Mansur. The Sa'dians were therefore not in the dark about the riches of its southern neighbour. Al-Sa'di describes it thusly:

*“This Sadian army found the land of the Sudan at that time to be one of the most favoured of the lands of God Most High in any direction, and the most luxurious, secure, and prosperous (...).”*¹⁴⁸

Morocco fought against European powers who pressed in from the north and the Ottoman empire who pushed its way into the Maghrib from the east¹⁴⁹ and against whom

¹⁴⁶ T/S-E, P.175-178.

¹⁴⁷ Hunwick (Songhay, Borno and the Hausa States), P.358.

¹⁴⁸ T/S-E, P.252.

it had to maintain and extend its borders.¹⁵⁰ Al-Zaiyani, a Moroccan historian and statesman (1734/35-1833) gives us the following insight:

*“Pendant qu’il séjournait à Fès, il [Moroccan ruler] apprit l’arrivée de ‘Ali Abu Hassun et de Salih basa avec une armée turque. Le temps lui manqua pour faire venir des troupes de Marrakech et du Hawz et il dut se suffire des Arabes du Garb ainsi que du petit corps de troupes qui était resté avec lui, à peu près six cents hommes. Il partit à la rencontre d’Abu Hassun et des Turcs. Le choc eut lieu à Kudyat al-Mahili dans la banlieue de Fès. Après qu’il eut mis en fuite les Turcs qui abandonnèrent leurs canons et leurs bagages, les soldats du Garb et les Huit le forcèrent à fuir en passant du côté d’Abu Hassun et le laissèrent en peine d’eux au milieu de son petit corps de troupes.”*¹⁵¹

The problem Morocco faced was that all the modern weapons, like cannons and guns, which it needed to defend itself, came from Europe, creating a huge trade imbalance. Morocco was in danger of overstretching itself militarily and financially and needed new sources of men and especially revenue.¹⁵² The Sa’dian ruler al-Mansur strived for implementing a policy which allowed him to increase his state income. However, the tax system was unsophisticated and thus state income small. Apart from the production of sugar there was no real export article. Lastly, the administration was

¹⁴⁹ Kaba, L. ‘Archers, Musketeers, and Mosquitoes: The Moroccan Invasion of the Sudan and the Songhay Resistance (1591–1612)’. *The Journal of African History* 22, no. 04 (2009): 457–475, P.460.

¹⁵⁰ al-Zaiyānī, Abu-’l-Qāsim Ibn-Aḥmad. *Le Maroc de 1631 à 1812*. Réimpr. de l’éd. Paris 1886. Publications de l’Ecole des Langues Orientales Vivantes ; Ser. 2,18. Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1969, P.8-10.

¹⁵¹ al-Zaiyānī, Abu-’l-Qāsim Ibn-Aḥmad. ‘Histoire de La Dynastie Sa’dide: Extrait de al-Turguman Al-mu’rib ‘an Duwal al-Masriq Wal Magrib d’Abu al-Qasim B. Ahmad b.’Ali B. Ibrahim al Zayyan’. Edited by Roger Le Tourneau, L Mougins, and H Hamburger. *Revue de l’occident Musulman et de la méditerrané* 23 (1977): 7–110, P.18.

¹⁵² Insoll, Timothy. ‘Timbuktu and Europe: Trade, Cities and Islam in Medieval West Africa’. In *The Medieval World*, edited by Peter Linehan and Janet L Nelson. London; New York: Routledge, 2003, P.469.

based on an inefficient bureaucracy. As Lansine Kaba puts it: “Morocco’s armament had outgrown its social system.”¹⁵³ The main way Morocco paid for its expenses was with gold coming from the Sahara. It was tempting to control its source instead of just obtaining it via trade, as it would cut out the middle man, increase their own profit, and thus redress the trade imbalance.¹⁵⁴ Although no better argument exists and it seems supported by the sources, the idea that al-Mansur was not aware that Songhay in general and Timbuktu especially had no direct access to the gold but was a transfer site, is still somewhat curious. Songhay’s status regarding the gold trade was no secret and could have been easily obtainable by merchants, let alone spies. Apart from the gold there was another resource though that struck the ruler’s fancy: slaves. Fighting against the Portuguese required soldiers and many of them were sourced from the Sudan and put to work with a weapon in their hands.¹⁵⁵ This argument, however, is also not very convincing as the slave trading routes across the desert were already working at their peak maximum¹⁵⁶ which could hardly have been improved by conquest.

The main obstacle to the execution of such a scheme of conquest was crossing the Sahara with enough soldiers, which was not deemed possible. Initially the naysayers seemed to be right: All his large scale attempts failed and only small, initial forays against the salt mines of Taghaza succeeded. Al-Mansur was in for the long haul though and his plans of gaining dominion over the Middle Niger Bend received a boost when a prisoner of the Askya escaped to Marrakesh and provided intelligence:

“Wuld Kirinfil [the prisoner] sent him [al-Mansur] a letter, announcing his arrival and providing intelligence about the Songhay folk, their wretched circumstances, their base natures, and their powerlessness, encouraging him to take possession of their land. (...)

¹⁵³ Kaba (Archers, Musketeers, and Mosquitoes), P.464.

¹⁵⁴ Hunwick (Songhay, Borno and the Hausa states), P.359.

¹⁵⁵ Zouber, Mahmoud Abdou. *Ahmad Bābā de Tombouctou (1556-1627): Sa Vie Et Son Oeuvre*. Publications de Département d’Islamologie de l’Université de Paris-Sorbonne 3. Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1977, P.45.

¹⁵⁶ See the section on slaves further down.

After receiving Wuld Kirinfil's letter, Mulay Ahmad sent a letter to the amir Askiya Ishaq [II] (...)''¹⁵⁷

This second letter starts with a greeting in which the Askya is addressed as “amir”, whereas al-Mansur describes himself further down as “caliph” and thus as his superior.¹⁵⁸ According to Islam it was his right to extract concessions from those who were below him in power in order to defend the lands of Islam from intruders. He based this claim on the victory at al-Ksar¹⁵⁹ and on the weakened state of the Ottoman empire which had received a crushing blow delivered from combined Christian European forces in 1571 at the Battle of Lepanto.¹⁶⁰ These two events combined gave Morocco the impression of being on a similar footing with the Ottoman empire whose ruler was usually seen as caliph. As Morocco felt itself propelled forward al-Mansur knew that they needed even more weapons to defend themselves against European incursions and Ottoman power which would do its utmost to crush Morocco.

Even after the first failed attempts, al-Mansur still thought it possible to cross the Sahara. He furthermore knew that his troops had an advantage because of their access to better weapon technology:

“Parmi les raisons qui poussèrent al-Mansûr à attaquer le Sudan, il y avait le fait qu'il disposait d'une quantité de canons, de mortiers, de fusils et de poudre, en provenance des territoires chrétiens, toutes choses qui ne se trouvaient pas au Maroc avant lui et n'étaient ni parvenues, ni connues au Sudan. Les conseillers s'inclinèrent.”¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁷ T/S-E, P.187.

¹⁵⁸ al-Mansur, Mulay Ahmad. ‘Letter from Mulay Ahmad al-Mansur to Askiya Ishaq II’. In *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sa‘di’s Ta’rīkh al-Sūdān down to 1613, and other Contemporary Documents*, edited by John O Hunwick, 294–296. Islamic History and Civilization 27. Leiden: Brill, 1999, P.294.

¹⁵⁹ Abitbol (Tombouctou et les Arma), P.40-41.

¹⁶⁰ Capponi, Niccolò. *Victory of the West: The Great Christian-Muslim Clash at the Battle of Lepanto*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2007.

¹⁶¹ al-Zaiyānī (Histoire de la Dynastie Sa’dide: Extrait de al-Turguman), P.41.

This would allow them to be effective with a smaller force reducing the logistical problems like access to food and increase the chance of success. The Moroccan ruler made exactly this point when he tried to justify his plans of invading the Sudan in front of his own 'Ulema at home:

“Aucun des gouvernements célèbres qui nous ont précédé n’a, (...), conçu une telle entreprise. (...) D’ailleurs les gouvernements qui nous ont précédé auraient éprouvé de grandes difficultés, s’ils avaient voulu exécuter l’entreprise que nous méditons, car leurs armées ne comprenaient que des cavaliers armés de lances et des archers; ils ne connaissaient ni la poudre, ni les armes à feu au bruit terrifiant. Encore aujourd’hui les gens du Sudan n’ont que des lances et des sabres, armes qui ne sauraient servir utilement contre les nouveaux engins de guerre. Il nous est donc aisé de combattre ces peuples et de guerroyer contre eux.”¹⁶²

This assessment of the weaponry employed make clear that a war between the two powers would pit the “modern” Moroccan army against Songhay’s “medieval” forces. Al-Mansur had a well-equipped, well-trained army, practised in the use of firearms and cannons. In Songhay firearms were not used and in fact were nearly a complete unknown, one reason being that long-ranged weapons were seen as unheroic, tainting the honour of those who used them.¹⁶³ A further element is that of geographic distance, as Morocco was closer to Europe, the originator of these type of weapons. Al-Mansur also had Spanish prisoners of war at his disposal, experienced men, who knew how to handle firearms and employed suitable tactics. Songhay was simply too far away from Europe and the Sahara had the effect of reducing the amount of and speed with which information could transfer across its expanse because of the harsh climate, effectively making the transfer of goods and new developments elsewhere in the world into the empire much slower. The combination of a moribund political system and the sheer difficulty of transmitting goods and information from Europe into the Sahel gave the Moroccans a definitive technological edge over the Songhay forces. For al-Mansur, everything appeared to be falling into place: he had an armament advantage, trained troops and

¹⁶² al-Ifrānī (Nozhet el-hādi), P.161-162.

¹⁶³ Iliffe (Honour in African History), P.21.

Songhay was afflicted by internal division and a much reduced army opening them up for invasion.

Trying to exploit these weaknesses of Songhay he sent letters to the Qadi of Timbuktu, trying to gain his support:

“What no believer and no committed Muslim is unaware of is that this task, whose necklace has been hung upon our noble neck (...) and it is a task not to be entrusted to other than our firm handle, and a necklace that has no coherence or harmony when strung upon a thread other than ours, since we have assumed its burdens to the exclusion of others, and people are in relation to it followers of those who are our followers.”¹⁶⁴

The “task” al-Mansur refers to is that of the leadership of the Islamic community. He presented himself as Caliph to the Qadi of Timbuktu and with it he automatically demanded his absolute obedience. Such support would allow for a much easier ideological justification and foundation for al-Mansur’s actions within Songhay if he were to conquer the empire. In the extreme case, there would have been the possibility that the whole west of the Songhay empire would have risen again against the Askya, joining the Moroccans. The Askya would then have faced a substantial army, well trained and with the most modern weapons available. The forces of the Askya, bled thin through the recent civil war and without such foreign reinforcements would not have stood a chance. Even if al-Mansur had only received the tacit approval of the Qadi, Timbuktu would have been an important base in which to resupply after the desert crossing and from which to launch attacks into Songhay. Furthermore, as Timbuktu was the meeting place between the different factions of the empire, the Berbers were also brought into the picture. These desert-dwellers had cavalry forces and were a great threat to any army which tried to cross the desert, as they knew the area and could easily launch surprise attacks. In addition they had areas and wells to which they could retreat in order to rest and restock, all of which a Moroccan army, far from home, would not have. With

¹⁶⁴ al-Mansur, Mulay Ahmad. ‘Letter from Mulay Ahmad al-Mansur to Qadi Umar B. Mahmud’. In *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sa‘di’s Ta’rīkh al-Sūdān down to 1613, and other Contemporary Documents*, edited by John O Hunwick, 299–301. *Islamic History and Civilization 27*. Leiden: Brill, 1999, P.299

the scholars of Timbuktu on their side, this problem would have been taken care of. That al-Mansur thought about establishing such a bridgehead at Timbuktu can be seen from this remark in his letter to the Qadi of Timbuktu:

“Additionally, be firm in belief that to all who give safe-conduct to our soldiers coming forth with their white flags [to pass] through these Sudanic lands - God willing - like the breaking dawn, and to our battalions clashing like tumultuous waves of the sea, we shall grant security.”¹⁶⁵

The reaction of the Qadi to all this was silence. For all we know, he did not even bother to answer al-Mansur and on the contrary was actively seeking to re-establish relationships with the Askya. We can infer this from the ‘Ulema’s reaction to the arrival of the Moroccan forces in Songhay, when they were asked for council by the Askya:

“Alors l’uléma de Tombouctou dit: J’ai un avis meilleur à proposer et qui me semble préférable. C’est que tu ordonnes aux habitants de cette ville de se transporter avec leurs biens de l’autre côté du Fleuve, tout en demeurant toi-même avec ton [the Askya’s] armée de ce côté-ci.”¹⁶⁶

The reasons for the Qadi’s silence regarding al-Mansur and subsequent direct support of the Askya’s army in face of the invasion are unknown. Judging from his reaction, it is likely that he dismissed the possibility of an incursion from the north and even if it were to happen, the invading force would be much too small to be of any threat to the Songhay empire, even in its weakened state. No one had ever managed to cross the Sahara with a large enough army to seriously threaten a somewhat organised opponent. At most all that was possible were raids, in the majority of cases by paying desert dwellers like the Tuareg and using them as mercenaries and not by employing one’s own regular army. As Songhay was still the most powerful force in the region, the only real option from the Qadi’s standpoint was to reestablish a working relationship with the Askya who would provide the military means in order to protect the city and its trade and therefore its power. Even though the relationship between the two parties was extremely strained, the empire was the only power which could enforce security in the re-

¹⁶⁵ al-Mansur, (Letter from Mulay Ahmad al-Mansur to Qadi Umar b. Mahmud) P.301.

¹⁶⁶ T/F, P. 269.

gion and give the 'Ulema a platform from which to launch its own theocratic claims. No other neighbouring power, like the Mossi or Jolof offered equal opportunities for the Muslim scholars even in the weak state Songhay was in. Morocco had always been an economic partner but never a political one, it was deemed too far away and thus not able to project its power into the Middle Niger region and did not appear in the political calculations of the 'Ulema. In the eyes of the Qadi, the 'Ulema and the Muslim merchants depended on and were part of Songhay, no matter the current situation, and the rhetoric of al-Mansur appeared as nothing but idle threats without any substance to back them up. Additionally, the Qadi did see himself first and foremost as a representative for the Muslim community within the empire and not as someone who was in charge of imperial policy himself. Al-Mansur did not realise that he had sent a letter to the wrong person: the Qadi did not see himself as filling the role the Moroccan ruler thought or hoped he would. Al-Mansur should have written to the Kurmina-Fari or the Timbuktu-Koi, champions of the west, instead.

5.4 The Moroccans attack

Al-Mansur thus assembled a force 6000 strong and sent them south, commanded by Pasha Djoudar. After twenty weeks of crossing the desert and suffering great losses, the Moroccan force reached the Niger at Kabara, situated in-between Gao and Timbuktu. Although Songhay had had ample warning of al-Mansur's intentions through the Qadi of Timbuktu and also through individuals who had spotted the invading force as it crossed the final part of the desert, they were almost completely unprepared.¹⁶⁷ While the Moroccans were advancing into the empire's domains, Askya Ishaq II was leading an invasion of his own against the Kala.¹⁶⁸ In addition Songhay had not only lost manpower through its internal conflicts, but also due to natural disasters which had hit the Middle Niger in the 1580. There was a plague in 1582 and 1586-88 is described as a time of hunger and high prices.¹⁶⁹ It is quite likely that these were the first serious har-

¹⁶⁷ T/S-E, P.188.

¹⁶⁸ Levtzion (Ancient Ghana and Mali), P.91.

¹⁶⁹ Hunwick (Songhay, Borno and the Hausa States), P.362.

bingers of the climate shift which would shape the Sahel ever stronger from now on, making the climate more arid and agriculture more difficult.

Askya Ishaq II immediately canceled his invasion of Kala when he finally realised that the Moroccan forces stood at the gates. Some half-hearted, hasty countermeasures were taken, but to no avail. A contemporary account, written by an anonymous Spaniard shortly after the events of 1591, reveals that:

*“A little farther on four Blacks were found seriously wounded. They were asked who had done this to them, and they said it was those same Guzarates [possibly a Tuareg faction]. On one of the Blacks was found letters that the king of Gao had written to the principal shaykhs of these countries, in which he told them to block the wells along the entire route so that Jawdar’s troops could not drink.”*¹⁷⁰

The anonymous Spaniard wrote this report in Marrakesh, and he thus would have received the reports about the campaign later on, which makes it unclear as to how his sources framed their reports and if they were driven by the desire to try to emphasise the disunity of Songhay. Internal strife, endangering the life of Muslims, may have been used by Morocco to justify an external force in order to renew security in the region.

The armies of Songhay and Morocco met at Tondibi, a spot half way between Timbuktu and Gao on the Niger. Although the Askya’s forces were superior in number they were routed by the Moroccan firearms. The victorious army of Pasha Djoudar took control over the Middle Niger Bend, electing Timbuktu as his capital. The Tarikh al-Fattash does report this move as not being opposed to by the citizens of Timbuktu and simply states that:

*“Les notables de la ville se portèrent à leur rencontre pour leur souhaiter la bienvenue, prêtèrent serment d’obéissance à Djoudar et lui offrirent l’hospitalité.”*¹⁷¹

Another lost chronicle, the “Al-Durar al-Hisan,” which was partially cited by Ibn Mukhtar, shows a similar attitude of Timbuktu’s inhabitants:

¹⁷⁰ Anonymous (An account of the Sa’dian conquest of Songhay by an Anonymous Spaniard) P.320-321.

¹⁷¹ T/F, P.278.

“Les Marocains installèrent leur camp en dehors des murs de Tombouctou, du côté d e l'est, dans la matinée du jeudi où commença la lune de redjeb, l'an 999 [25 avril 1591]. Les notables de la ville se portèrent à leur rencontre pour leur souhaiter la bienvenue, prêtèrent serment d'obéissance à Djoudar et lui offrirent l'hospitalité. Ensuite, celui-ci s'occupa de faire élever un fort à l'intérieur de la ville même et, lorsqu'il y eut réussi, il y entra avec son armée.”¹⁷²

This either means that the population of this town was not overly attached to Songhay and mainly interested in having a political situation which was conducive to the occupations of the town, namely trade, scholarly activity and artisanship. If this were to be the case, the name of the overlord did not matter, as long as he provided agreeable conditions. This view gains currency if one remembers the hard-fought struggles between Timbuktu and Gao and the civil wars, both of which had a negative impact of the life of the city. Although cited in the Fattash, the passage which follows does contradict this statement and the Tarikh al-Sudan is not in agreement either and makes it quite clear that the Qadi was either neutral or openly hostile to the Moroccans as they were threatening him:

“[The Moroccan’s] camped just to the south of the city of Timbuktu, where they spent thirty-five days. The jurist Qadi Abu Hafis ‘Umar, son of the Friend of God Most High, the jurist Mahmud, sent the muezzin Yahma to greet them on his behalf, but did not offer them hospitality (...). Incensed, Jawdar set before Yahma various kinds of fruits, dates, almonds, and a lot of sugar, and draped over him a scarlet cloak of broadcloth. Wise men did not think well of this, and the outcome proved them justified.”¹⁷³

The overall picture that all the chronicles give is that the ‘Ulema’s initial response was that of careful, hostile restraint, with some individuals leaning towards extremes while trying to make sense of the recent events. Before the invasion, Morocco had not been part of the calculations, it was not seen as part of the Middle Niger Bend and thus was not discussed in any form, there was no boundary between the two, no communities to speak of. This obviously changed after Djoudar had put Morocco’s flag onto the

¹⁷² T/F, P. 277-278.

¹⁷³ T/S-E, P.192.

banks of the Niger but what that exactly meant was not immediately clear to the scholar's and to the invaders. On the eve of April the 25th, 1591, it still could have gone both ways; either accommodation or hostile takeover - an aspect that will be discussed later on in detail. In the wake of his crushing defeat the Askya sent a message to Djoudar:

*"(...) pour lui demander de faire la paix avec lui, s'engageant à reconnaître la suzeraineté du sultan Moulai Abmed Ed-Dhéhébi et à lui payer l'impôt de capitation ainsi qu'un tribut. Djoudar, en réponse, lui écrivit qu'il n'était lui-même qu'un esclave exécutant des ordres et qu'il ne pouvait rien faire sans avoir consulté le sultan Moulai Ahmed (que Dieu l'assiste) et obtenu son assentiment."*¹⁷⁴

The Tarikh al-Sudan reports adds that:

*"(...) 100.000 [Mitqal] of gold and 1000 slaves, which he would personally hand over to the amir Muldy Ahmad, withdrawal of the army to Marrakesh, and return of the land to the askiya."*¹⁷⁵

The central point in this proposal for the Askya was that it would, if agreed to, avoid a permanent military occupation of Songhay which would place a heavy burden on his people as the foreign soldiers would demand supplies from the local population. In case of a constant occupation reinforcements would surely arrive as well, increasing the strain ever further. It would also make it very hard for the Askya to regroup and regain self-rule or at least keep some of his independence while the official overlord would be far away.

The Moroccan commander sent a letter to his master al-Mansur strongly suggesting to accept these terms, despite them not being in line with his initial wishes. In addition the move from Gao to Timbuktu was in direct opposition to the commands of Djoudar's master but he argued that Gao was not suited for housing an army, which is a curious statement, as the personal forces of the Askya had been stationed there. Timbuktu though had other advantages. Because of the scholarly activity, a large portion of the population had at least a basic grasp of the Arabic the invaders spoke. It was furthermore richer, whereas Gao had left Djoudar decidedly unimpressed in this respect. These riches came from trade, and although its control was not the prime objective, it made

¹⁷⁴ T/F, P.277.

¹⁷⁵ T/S-E, P.191.

economic and political sense to impose Moroccan control over such an area and to keep it under as close a surveillance as possible. The invaders now also could directly tap into one of the major Saharan trade routes allowing them to easily sent booty back to Morocco. His lord however did not take kindly to these changes in his plan:

*“When the emissary, Basoda Ajami, reached sultan Mulay Ahmad, he was the first to give him news of the conquest of the Sudan. But when the sultan read the letter he flew into a rage, dismissed Jawdar on the spot, and despatched Pasha Mahmud b. Zarqun at the head of eighty musketeers.”*¹⁷⁶

When this answer reached Djoudar a second battle was unavoidable. The Moroccans fought against another Songhay host at Bamba, routing and destroying it completely. Askya Ishaq II was cut off from most his followers and had to flee to Tinfini¹⁷⁷ and met his death at the hand of its inhabitants.¹⁷⁸

After being demoted Djoudar was left with the administrative-fiscal oversight as governor of the conquered lands. Pasha Mahmud b. Zarqun was to take over command of the army and thus was the new head of the operation.¹⁷⁹ As this exchange of messages took several months Djoudar had time to adapt to his new personal status. The modern Moroccan scholar Muhammed Aham al-Gharbi suggested that Djoudar was in fact toying with the idea of establishing his own kingdom on the Middle Niger Bend. According to him, he made an agreement with the Aqits, the leading family of Timbuktu, giving him rule over the city and its surroundings and leave the rest of Songhay to the Askyas. This would explain why al-Mansur was so angered by Djoudar’s proposal regarding the Askya and his move from Gao to Timbuktu. It would also explain the brutal tactics employed by Djoudar’s successor Muhammed b. Zarqun against the scholars of the city. Although a tantalising thesis, Saad dismisses it, emphasising that the sources do not suggest such a line of thinking.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁶ T/S-E, P.195.

¹⁷⁷ In modern day Burkina Faso.

¹⁷⁸ T/S-E, P.199.

¹⁷⁹ Saad (Social History of Timbuktu), P.171.

¹⁸⁰ Saad (Social History of Timbuktu), P.185.

The Moroccan invaders selected key strategic spots in the Middle Niger region for the erection of forts. Djenne, Wandiyaka, Koubi, Kouna, Sevi sur l'Issa-Ber, Tendirma, Issafay, Kabara, Timbuktu, Bamba, Bourem, Gao and Koukya.¹⁸¹ Their power radiated out into the countryside from these points but fell off to a low level quite quickly. The areas in between were held by intermediaries and were more or less a no-man's land. These open signs of foreign occupation and the conduct that went along with it were not always taken kindly to. The Moroccans erected a fort in Timbuktu itself, clearing the quarter of the Gadamsi merchants for this purpose, which gave rise to much ire.

“Aussi les habitants du quartier allèrent se plaindre au câdi Omar (Dieu lui fasse miséricorde!) et le prièrent d'intercéder auprès de Djoudar pour qu'il leur laissât le temps de chercher de par la ville des bâtiments où ils pourraient transporter leurs biens. Alors le câdi envoya son serviteur, l'assara-moundio Amar, pour parler à Djoudar et l'amener à leur accorder le délai nécessaire. Djoudar monta aussitôt à cheval, ainsi que les quelques personnes qui raccompagnaient, se rendit chez le câdi et lui dit: “C'est entendu, je me sou mets à tes ordres, mais de combien de jours [doit être le délai]?” D'un mois, répondit le câdi, et encore ceux d'entre eux qui pourront terminer leur déménagement en un mois sont bien rares. — Nous ne pouvons [sic!] attendre un mois, répartit Djoudar, le temps nous presse, mais nous attendrons quinze jours; ils n'ont qu'à se hâter d'évacuer les lieux.”¹⁸²

Despite such ill-received acts, it seems that Djoudar at least tried to respect the local power-structures by lending an ear to the intercessions of the Qadi. In the end though he was a soldier and had military objectives in mind. He was afraid of the rain and the sleeping sickness it would bring and of further attacks either from the surviving Songhay or from other groups which were not held in check by the power of an empire anymore - Bambara, Tuareg, Mossi and others stood at the gates. For example, the Tuareg invaded the important town of Ras-al-Ma on Lake Faguibine to the west of Timbuktu and it could only be saved through the timely arrival of a 2500 men strong cohort of

¹⁸¹ Abitbol (Tombouctou et les arma), P.70.

¹⁸² T/F, P.279-280.

enforcements which had arrived from Morocco.¹⁸³ Al-Sa'di makes clear that the surrounding groups, hitherto repelled and kept under control by a strong Songhay, immediately set out to carve out their share from Songhay's carcass:

*"The first to initiate such acts was Samba Lamdo, ruler of Danka, who laid waste much of the land of Ra's al-Ma', seizing people's property without regard. People were killed, and free persons taken [as slaves]. The Joghoranis likewise laid waste the lands of Bara and Dirma, while the land of Jenne was most brutally ravaged, north, south, east, and west, by the pagan Bambara. They sacked every territory, plundered every piece of property, and took free women as concubines, from whom they had children (...)"*¹⁸⁴

One of the main problems of the Arma, as the Moroccan invaders came to be known, was that they could not establish themselves securely in the Middle Niger Bend. Al-Mansur now tenuously ruled over a strip of land which wound along the Niger river terminating in the east at Gao and to the west at Timbuktu. Later on the invaders were also able to incorporate Djenne into their domain and other areas which lay in between these three cities along the Niger, but they never managed to hold on to more than that. Their numbers, initially 3000 soldiers plus double that as support personal,¹⁸⁵ were just too small and the support coming from the metropole was not enough and very irregular, never giving them the military capacity to dominate the other groups around them.

Al-Mansur and his successors initially sent reinforcements from Morocco,¹⁸⁶ beginning in 1593 with the arrival of Qa'id Bu-Ikhtiyar and in 1595 Pasha Mansur b. 'Abd al-Rahman came with a force as large as Djoudar's initial invading army. The last Pasha to arrive was Mahmud Longo in 1604, accompanied with 300 soldiers. He was followed in 1618 by the last 400 men strong reinforcement sent. They were mainly from an ethnic Berber background and thus in many ways closer to the Tuareg and the world of the Sahel and Sudan than a lot of the indigenous North Africans, who had made up the bulk of

¹⁸³ Kaba (Archers, Musketeers, and Mosquitoes), P.468.

¹⁸⁴ T/S-E, P.193.

¹⁸⁵ T/S-E, P.188.

¹⁸⁶ al-Zaiyānī (Histoire de la dynastie Sa'dide: Extrait de al-Turguman), P.46.

the initial invading forces.¹⁸⁷ Initially this commitment was rewarded with plunder brought to Morocco. In 1599 Marrakech received:

“(...) 10.000 hommes et 10.000 femmes esclaves, tous parvenus à la puberté, 400 charges de poudre d’or, 1.000 charges de défenses d’éléphant, de voiles du Sudan et de curiosités et 400 éléphants dont un seul arriva à destination.”¹⁸⁸

Although Askya Ishaq II had been defeated and the north of Songhay was now in control of foreigners, the south remained independent and coalesced itself around a newly appointed Askya of its own in Dendi, putting up a fight with the Moroccan forces without ever being able to drive them out.

“In the same year Hi-koi Sayyid Kiray-ije was sent raiding by Askiya Harun Dankataya b. al-amir Askiya Dawud, ruler of Dendi. The intention was to attack those owing allegiance to the Arma along the river.”¹⁸⁹

The fight against the remains of Songhay, (from now on: Dendi-Songhay) were marked by stalemates. Morocco was often able to win the fight but not the war:

“(...) quand l’armée marocaine s’était retirée vers Tombouctou, l’Askiya avait mobilisé les populations soudanaises et leurs voisins qui s’excitèrent mutuellement au combat et s’engagèrent vis-à-vis de lui à combattre jusqu’à la mort. Lorsqu’il apprit le retour de l’armée marocaine sur Gao, il marcha contre elle; mais dès que les deux troupes s’affrontèrent les hommes de l’Askiya se débandèrent et prirent la fuite en entendant le tonnerre des mortiers et des bombes et le roulement des tambours. Les Marocains les poursuivirent, tuant et faisant des prisonniers jusqu’au moment où la nuit les enveloppa. (...) il se lança à la poursuite de l’Askiya; il finit par le rejoindre et lui infligea une affreuse défaite. L’Askiya avec un petit nombre des siens s’enfuit et passa sur l’autre rive du Nil [Niger]. Le pacha Mahmûd continua à le poursuivre jusqu’au désert où il s’enfonça et mourut.”¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷ Abitbol (Tombouctou et les arma), P.71.

¹⁸⁸ al-Zaiyānī (Histoire de la dynastie Sa’dide: Extrait de al-Turguman), P.47.

¹⁸⁹ T/S-E, P.249.

¹⁹⁰ al-Zaiyānī (Histoire de la Dynastie Sa’dide: Extrait de al-Turguman), P.45.

These victories were often costly, not so much because they lost men in battle but to disease. At the same time, Dendi-Songhay was able to gain the cooperation of Kebbi, which we can infer from a letter sent by al-Mansur to their ruler, warning them of dire consequences if they were to continue their support of the Dendi-Askya.¹⁹¹ From 1604 to 1617 they took the offensive, invading and holding large swathes of the Niger River valley without the Moroccans being able to fight back. Dendi-Songhay had thus managed to cut the corridor between Djenne and Timbuktu, depriving the cities and regions further up on the river of their food supplies.¹⁹² The Dendi-Fari Bar managed to win a string of battles in 1610 by pushing into Masina, a very fertile region of the Sudan, replacing the Niger flood plains and securing the food supply for the Dendi-Songhay region.¹⁹³

Adding to these troubles on the military front, the invaders also felt the fallout of political turmoil at home. With the death of al-Mansur in 1603 Morocco slid into civil war which was bad news for their outpost on the Middle Niger Bend, as troops were gobbled up in North Africa instead of reinforcing their beleaguered and disease stricken soldiers on the other side of the desert. With the Moroccan invaders now on their own, the Fulani, Bambara, Zagrana and Tuareg all grew bolder in their attacks on neighbours as they did not fear retaliation in response to their raids and were not bound to a central power. Al-Sa'di described the situation in gloomy terms:

“Security turned to fear, luxury was changed into affliction and distress, and prosperity became woe and harshness. People began to attack one another throughout the length and breadth of the kingdom, raiding and preying upon property, [free] persons and slaves. Such iniquity became general, spreading, and becoming ever more serious and scandalous.”¹⁹⁴

Through the destruction of Songhay the Moroccans had unleashed the very forces which now put so much pressure on their own survival as there was no central overlord

¹⁹¹ Abitbol (Tombouctou et les arma), P.64.

¹⁹² Abitbol (Tombouctou et les arma), P.89.

¹⁹³ T/S-E, P.251-252.

¹⁹⁴ T/S-E, P.193.

available who could keep smaller entities in check and provided some kind of order. The Tarikh al-Fattash describes the chaos unleashed:

“Puis Dieu éteignit les feux de discorde [qui s'étaient allumés] entre les indigènes et les Marocains, ainsi que la haine [qui les divisait]. Il n'y eut plus que les Peuls [Fulani] guerriers qui firent éprouver des dommages au pays, ravageant les villes, pillant les biens et répandant le sang des musulmans, ainsi que les Touareg répandus de Gào à Dienné; les Zaghrâni d'ailleurs participèrent avec eux à ces ravages et à ces désordres. Quant aux Marocains, ils ne causèrent plus aucun dommage [aux gens du pays], une fois que furent éteints les feux de la révolte, et ne se livrèrent plus par eux-mêmes à aucune arrestation, se contentant de retenir les personnes qui leur étaient amenées par les soins des askia et des chefs indigènes du pays, et d'exiger des habitants les impôts, la dîme et la taxe de consommation sur les marchandises.”¹⁹⁵

The Moroccan invaders tried to bind the different local powers to themselves as vassals, which initially proved relatively easy as they were perceived as the strongest power in the region. It quickly became obvious however that they had to pay a steep price for their conquest. They were not indigenous to the region and thus dependent on supplies from Marrakech, not only in men but also in weapons which in turn had to be imported from Europe. Although the latter factor was probably unknown to the local chiefs it made itself felt in the very low number of soldiers the Moroccans could bring to the field in times of battle. The invaders began to recruit Songhay military personal and integrated it into its own ranks.¹⁹⁶ Nevertheless, the invaders were heavily reliant on mercenaries which lead Pasha Mansur, while moving against the Tuareg in 1718 or 1719, to say that the Moroccan forces should only ever be a maximum of 10 percent of the total forces:

“Une expédition contre les Touareg ne doit être faite avec les soldats marocains qu'autant que ceux-ci se seront adjoints neuf dixièmes de Touareg, en sorte que l'effectif des soldats réguliers ne soit que d'un dixième; alors tout Touareg qui

¹⁹⁵ T/F, P.94.

¹⁹⁶ Saad (Social History of Timbuktu), P.171.

fera une action d'éclat n'en aura pas le mérite qui reviendra seulement aux soldats réguliers."¹⁹⁷

This shows the extent of the dependence of the Moroccans on external troops which also indicates vulnerability as these 90+ percent could easily turn on the Moroccans themselves.

The sheer lack of their presence encouraged other political players to assert themselves and only pay superficial homage to the Moroccans. The Bambara, who had been under the control of Songhay, broke away and through intermarriage they slowly began to join forces with the Fulani, giving rise to the Massassi dynasty who began setting up an independent polity in Segu.¹⁹⁸ An anonymous Spanish text, written about 1600, shows the extent of this new "Empire of the Grand Foul" from the Sahel to Futa Djallon to the Upper Senegal, including the Bambuk gold fields.¹⁹⁹ When the Pasha demanded in 1598 that their leader Hamadi Amina come to Timbuktu, he refused, triggering a Moroccan expedition to Djenne/Masina in order to punish them. The Moroccans managed to conquer Djenne, but in 1629 the Fulani renounced their pact when they were no longer willing to pay their dues to the Moroccans. The Pasha had to cave in and the subjection of the Fulani became a complete farce.²⁰⁰ The Tuareg were split in their support of the new power on the Middle Niger but either way the Moroccans never managed to keep a tight reign on them, eventually being destroyed by their northern neighbours in 1737.²⁰¹

In the end Morocco did not gain the advantages al-Mansur had hoped for. Although initially he had bolstered his standing and brought wealth into his coffers, earning him the nickname al-Dhahabi "the golden", it was not enough to stave off the breakdown of his realm which had already set in before he had even set off towards the Sudan.²⁰² With

¹⁹⁷ Anonymous (Tedzkiret en-nisiān), P.43.

¹⁹⁸ Hiskett, Mervyn. *The Development of Islam in West Africa*. London: Longman, 1982, P.149.

¹⁹⁹ Levtzion (Ancient Ghana and Mali), P.98.

²⁰⁰ Abitbol (Tombouctou et les arma), P.94.

²⁰¹ Abitbol (Tombouctou et les arma), P.158.

²⁰² Hiskett (The Development of Islam in West Africa), P.39.

Morocco itself declining and, after al-Mansur's death in 1603, mired in succession struggles, the Arma could not set themselves up properly in the newly conquered territories. Distance and climatic conditions made communication between Timbuktu and Marrakech very difficult. Confronted with these problems, the metropole lost interest in its little outpost in the Sudan and communication slowly petered out.²⁰³ In the minority and without major reinforcements from Morocco, the invaders could not establish themselves as a distinct social group in the long term and reform society according to their own wishes. Instead, a new social group began to arise which melded Moroccan soldiers and the indigenous population and became known as the Arma.²⁰⁴ Thus despite the social situation changing there were also continuities blending the old with the new that harked recognisably back to older forms and institutions. The different social groups had to reinvent themselves after 1591 but did do so by echoing their very own traditions and values, a process that will be explored below.

²⁰³ Hiskett (The Course of Islam in Africa), P. 96-97.

²⁰⁴ Abitbol (Tombouctou et les Arma), P.71.

6. Muslims on the Middle Niger Bend

6.1 First Muslims

Before proceeding further into this chapter, discussing Islam and traditional forms of belief, it is useful to discuss the meaning of the term “religion” itself, as it is notoriously hard to pin down. The following paragraphs do not try to be comprehensive in any form or seek to give the final word on this matter but only serve to highlight the issues that are taken under consideration in this study from a conceptual point of view.

Religion usually assumes the belief in a supernatural force or forces and provides a set of ideals, derived from axioms, which mark the boundaries of social norms, differences between right and wrong and what is considered meaningful. As every individual takes part independently in communal religious behaviour he finds his social place and bearings within the society he lives in. This is why Durkheim put forward the idea that religion is a system of ideas that put man in relation to the wider society, by providing the links between the individual and the symbolic ideal of the community. It thus links the real world, the real state of society with the idea of how society should be and is consequently able to impose values and rules which individuals have to adhere to in order to reach that ideal community and in turn also provides the rationalisation of punishment if someone does not meet these guidelines. This also means that religion is also always political, as a ruler or a ruling class is not considered exempt from these rules, as they are only a means to the aim to reach that ideal society.²⁰⁵ Max Weber took the argument further by stating that the gods of local traditional religions provided the focal point of a group, unifying it. Misfortune did not come from the gods but because man did not adhere to the ways of the gods. God essentially became a king-like figure who had to be won over by offering gifts and through the performance of rituals of submis-

²⁰⁵ see E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life: A Study in Religious Sociology* (New York, 1954), 225-231, 296, 387, 418-424. in: Carlston, Kenneth. *Social Theory and African Tribal Organization: The Development of Socio-Legal Theory*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1968, P.11.

sion and conformity to his will.²⁰⁶ This intertwining of religious, political, natural and social ideas makes it difficult to divide out the supernatural parts and put them into a box with the sticker “religion” on it. Such a hard distinction does not exist but ideas about the supernatural are part of the natural and cultural world.

Unfortunately we have hardly any information at all at our disposal about pre-Islamic forms of supernatural belief on the Middle Niger Bend as writing itself came to this region with the first Muslims. This also means that a large part of the description of historic non-Islamic beliefs are either gleaned from heavily biased Muslim sources or from ethnographic studies that were conducted after the period under study (mostly in the latter half of the 20th century). Scholars of African cultures and religions often use terms such as “African traditional religion”, which is also used in this study in order to differentiate from other belief systems, like Christianity and Islam. This terminology, however, has been disapproved of as eurocentric by Isichei, especially since many African languages have no word for “belief” as it suffuses every other part of life on a most basic level.²⁰⁷ On the other hand, it is almost impossible not to use the word religion when discussing the supernatural, hence it will be employed here but with the mentioned caveat. Otherwise we will be, as Isichei pointed out, “debarred from writing anything about traditional religions at all”.²⁰⁸ This difference between the modern western attitude towards religion that sees it as separate from other aspects of life, such as medicine, and the traditional religious one also explains the, for modern Westerners, bewildering differences between different religious displays, forms and theories. Belief in the supernatural was always tightly linked to local conditions and ideas about life which in turn explains the tight link between religion and ethnicity, something we will come back to below. A further complication is that religion is not a static, but a highly fluid and flexible phenomenon depending on external circumstances that societies had to react to or wanted to mold. Indigenous religions spread through the works of holymen and adapted to deal with novel situations, the weather, sickness or other calamities. Obeng

²⁰⁶ Weber, Max. *The Sociology of Religion*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1963, P.2-43.

²⁰⁷ Isichei, Elizabeth. *The Religious Traditions of Africa: A History*. Westport, Conn. ; London: Praeger, 2004, P.9.

²⁰⁸ Isichei (The Religious Traditions of Africa), P.11.

notes that, like in many other areas, nothing was as convincing an argument to follow a religion as success: if a new holyman or shrine appeared to have “worked” and e.g. cured a sick person, people began to flock to this holyman’s shrine.²⁰⁹ That purely spiritual motives played no great part in religious change in West Africa was also noted by Trimingham. He summed it up with the words that “(...) religions have little chance of spreading upon their own merit.”²¹⁰ Religious ideas are not implemented for their own sake but have to prove themselves in times of human need.

According to Trimingham who rested his argument on a model initially developed by Horton, one of the main point of distinction Islam had regarding the indigenous religions was that it provided a single, codified set of beliefs that covered a huge area and in order to be the faith of so many diverse people, it was more abstract in its doctrine but had a rigid, yet powerful legal code, embracing every single aspect of life.²¹¹ Religious study in Islam was professionalised and undertaken by scholars, to whom those interested in the interpretation of Islam went to study. This scholarly tradition gave rise to four different schools of law (فقه (fiqh)), each with its own scholarly traditions, arguments, madrassas and universities, giving room to very abstract legal and metaphysical reasoning. Trimingham argues that the combination of this abstractness and the legalistic nature of its tenets meant that its doctrine had enough space to accommodate indigenous beliefs.²¹² This combination of rigidity and flexibility meant that although Islam was recognisable over a vast area, connecting humans by means of a similar spiritual idea, at the same time it could be what every believer wanted it to be. This allowed Islam to be accessible to people of widely different origin, dispersed over a vast area, promoting a pseudo-kingroup, to which all those who believe belong to, becoming “brothers” and “sisters”. The fact that Islam was a faith to which others were able to

²⁰⁹ Obeng, Pashington. ‘Religious Interactions in Pre-Twentieth-Century West Africa’. In: *Themes in West Africa’s History*, edited by Emmanuel Kwaku Akyeampong, 141–162. Western African Studies. Athens: Ohio University, 2006, P.146.

²¹⁰ Trimingham, J. Spencer. *Islam in West Africa: A Report of a Survey Undertaken in 1952*. London: Wyman & Sons, 1953, P.37-38.

²¹¹ Trimingham (The Influence of Islam Upon Africa), P.41.

²¹² Trimingham (The Influence of Islam upon Africa), P.45.

convert to meant that its ideas of righteousness and proper conduct were, in the words of Jack Goody “not set in too particularistic a mould.”²¹³ Islam and traditional beliefs thus lived side by side, influencing each other. Over time Islamic elements gradually affected the structure of society. At first Islam provided a parallel metaphysical and legal structure, filling “gaps” which the traditional religions did not occupy, like divorce. In areas where this practice was previously unknown its introduction influenced how families fitted into the overarching social system. In return Islam itself contributed quite a long list of angels, djinns, devils, holymen and arcane symbols and machinations that could be infused with local traditional meaning.

In Songhay, a whole universe of religious ideas began to be influenced by Muslim ideas. Local religious figures or dead ancestors could become Muslim saints, regional spirits are converted into djinns or the other way around. Despite the rulers being seen as orthodox Muslims, they recurred to practices which had their roots in pre-Islamic times but casting them in Muslim language thus bridging the gap between the old and the new. The *Tarikh al-Fattash* gives an example of that:

*“S'adressant alors au chérif, le prince lui dit: ”Seigneur, est-il possible à l'homme de voir les génies et de converser avec eux sans s'être au préalable mis en retraite en récitant des oraisons, des prières ou quelque chose d'analogue? — Cela est possible, lui répondit le chérif, et, si nous étions seuls en ce moment, je te le montrerais.”*²¹⁴

These “génies” were the spirits of dead Muslim holymen. This kind of asking the dead for advice was, according to Rouch, common in Songhay traditional religion.²¹⁵ As the Askya could now ask the advice of dead Muslim holymen he used an old, well established supernatural technique but refocused it on Islam, bringing it into the local religious fold. By tapping into the spiritual powers of the Muslim holymen and the apparent material benefits brought along with them, the Askyas tried to proliferate themselves while at the same time attract some of the benefits of Muslims. Lewis showed that Islam also recognised, although not necessarily condoned, the efficacy of magic and witch-

²¹³ Goody, Jack, ed. *Literacy in Traditional Societies*. Cambridge: C.U.P, 1968, P.2.

²¹⁴ T/F, P.39.

²¹⁵ Rouch (Les Songhay), P.67.

craft.²¹⁶ This enabled Islam to be perceived as a second but also familiar option, which gave it immediate value, as many of its concepts were not alien in any way. Consequently it undermined the authority of the old religions in the long run and triggered a change in perspective towards Islam. Islam was most successful where it provided a service which the old traditions did not offer and weakest were they did, for example healing rituals. At least the practical elements of Islam, amulets, prayer, etc. fitted very easily into the worldview of traditional religions, complementing them. It was the holymen who were in competition with one another, not so much the rituals themselves. Both groups were perceived as having access to the supernatural. Al-Bakri provides a classic example of this topos. He tells the story of the ruler of Mali, whose domain suffered a heavy drought and turned to Muslim holymen in order to make it rain. They outperformed their traditional counterparts and so he himself turned to Islam.²¹⁷

The basis of this intertwining model of religious ideas was first developed and analysed by Robin Horton over the course of three seminal articles and especially the dispersion of Islam seemed to provide a wonderful case in point.²¹⁸ Although Horton has not analysed the Middle Niger Bend and used much later data for his analysis, the model still works for this study here. However, this theory has been attacked on two fronts. The first objection is that traditional religions, or some of their aspects are also known to have gone supertribal, like Voodoo. This though is an unfair comparison, as mainly modern forces were responsible for this spread. Especially communication techniques have changed which all the expanding traditional religions employ, like the radio, television and so forth which is why it is considered a quite recent phenomenon. In the pre-colonial era information transmission was only conducted by word of mouth and thus

²¹⁶ Lewis, I. M, ed. *Islam in Tropical Africa*. 2nd ed. London: International African Institute in assoc. with Hutchinson, 1980, P.60-61.

²¹⁷ Owusu-Ansah, David. 'Prayer, Amulets, and Healing'. In *The History of Islam in Africa*, edited by Nehemia Levtzion and Randall L Pouwels, 477–488. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2000., P.479.

²¹⁸ Horton (African Conversion)

Horton (On the Rationality of Conversion. Part I)

Horton (On the Rationality of Conversion. Part II)

much slower as there was no possibility of rapid mass transmission of ideas to a large number of individuals across a large area. Before the dissemination of modern broadcast technologies of proselytisation Islam had the unique advantage of having a tool that allowed the spread of its message far more efficiently: script. It was the only religion in West Africa that could recourse to written texts, which gave their adherents power in the administrative, economic and religious sphere as well as the ability to always fall back on a text. The text and what it said could become holy and sacred (as indeed it is). This book and the beliefs fixed therein can easily be carried around, not so with trees, rivers or weather patterns which were the signs of gods in traditional religions. Islam was also structured differently, which is what Goody argued for. Instead of being concrete and thus bound to the environment it originated from, it managed to strike a balance between being abstract enough for enhanced flexibility and concrete enough for being able to touch people and become relevant in the every day life.

Another, and more serious, objection was raised by Fisher who engaged Horton in an exchange published in the “Africa: Journal of the International African Institute”. Without going into details, he points out that Horton has underestimated the pervasiveness of orthodox forms of Islam (and Christianity for that matter) and overestimated the staying power of traditional religious elements.²¹⁹ Horton rejected much of Fisher’s critique, accusing him of displaying traditional religions as “essentially static”,²²⁰ without providing any evidence to substantiate this claim. Horton has a point here as all the evidence points towards a vigorous dynamism involving Islam, traditional religions and other factors which radically changed the supernatural landscape of the Sudan and also Islam itself.²²¹ The Hausa and Songhay, for instance, had no singular supreme deity and

²¹⁹ Fisher (Conversion Reconsidered), P.27.

see also: Trimingham (The Influence of Islam upon Africa), P.44.

²²⁰ Horton (On the Rationality of Conversion. Part I), P.222.

²²¹ Fisher’s fault lies in the fact that he sees Islam essentially as an independent actor. If we accept that religions provide the ideal of a society and thus its moral and ideological framework than Islam must first of all appeal to the humans who seek, for whatever reason such a framework. These humans however are not a blank slate but live already in a political and social landscape which places demands, wishes and hopes in

thus the absoluteness of Allah did not play a central role in their spiritual life, after they described themselves as Muslims. In the whole of West Africa, the role of the prophet is played down, and in some regions, the taboo on the pig is actually inverted. In many cases the rituals received new clothes but the underlying schemata changed only marginally at first. This factor gains even more momentum if one considers that the sharia, the most concrete expression of the Islamic faith, only deals with a restricted set of issues in a legalistic sense, like illicit sexual relationships, thievery, alcohol, etc. This means that parallel to sharia courts there always existed secular authorities that handed out judgements. However, as both deal with how a human should conduct himself they dealt with the same issue and thus influenced each other strongly. A further problem is that of bias. The sources we have mainly report from a Muslim perspective. They thus had an interest in leaving out elements which may have been common, but which they thought of as wrong or embarrassing.

Nevertheless, the following sections and chapters will also show a whole host of examples that show how traditional religions and Islam influenced each other, the sources paint a very clear picture in this regard. In order to provide one initial example of this mutual relationship the following excerpt from the work of al-Maghili,²²² a scholar hailing from Tuwat (in the modern central desert region of Algeria), is used. He was asked by Askya Muhammed what to do with individuals who perform suspicious practices:

“As for one who claims to have knowledge of the future (...), then he is a liar and an unbeliever and whoever gives him credit is an unbeliever. Such people must be forced to recant on pain of death. (...) Similarly every sorcerer and enchantress should be forced to recant on pain of death, and similarly anyone who

them. If Islam does not yield to these wishes, is not useful in fulfilling these wishes, then it will be rejected. Thus Islam has to be able to be an ideology to many people, all who live in vastly different environments and that is only possible if Islam itself is extremely flexible.

²²² More on al-Maghili see: Sharī'a in Songhay

claims to have talismans or amulets or the like for obtaining good fortune or defeating armies and so on."²²³

This citation is part of a much longer and more detailed question. Askya Muhammed would not have inquired al-Maghili's opinion on this matter if it were not a pressing issue. This means that the practices described were widely used even by, as al-Maghili dismissively calls them, "venal scholars",²²⁴ actually referring to scholars of high local standing, who saw themselves as pious. Consequently, an intertwining of religious ideas went on in the highest strata of religious learning and authority that the Middle Niger Bend had to offer. Many adherents of traditional religions did not necessarily divide between Islam and indigenous religious systems but used different rituals and ideas depending on if it worked or not, which riled up many of those who saw themselves as harbingers of Muslim prudence, like for example al-Maghili.

This attitude makes sense however if considering that the supernatural and the natural were tightly interlocked. The supernatural made no sense without the immediacy of the natural. This was also true in many ways for the Islam on the Middle Niger Bend as for example the Tarikh al-Sudan shows:

"Here is another example of his [holymān] baraka. Once, during an epidemic in Timbuktu when few escaped sickness, he gathered wood and carried it back on his head to town and sold it. All who used it for firewood and warmed themselves with it were cured, and recovered immediately. He did this again, and people realised what was happening and told one other. They rushed to buy the firewood, and God brought the epidemic to an end through his [the holymān's] baraka."²²⁵

The Muslim holymān clearly did not separate himself in terms of religious attitude but showed his more "magical" side because he interacted with the population on a level

²²³ Maghīlī, Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Karīm. *Sharī'a in Songhay: The Replies of al-Maghīlī to the Questions of Askia al-Hājī Muḥammad*. Edited by John O Hunwick. Fontes Historiae Africanae 5. Oxford: Published for the British Academy by the Oxford University Press, 1985, P.91.

²²⁴ Maghīlī, (Sharī'a in Songhay), P.65.

²²⁵ T/S-E, P.82.

they both were familiar with. On the other hand al-Sadi wrote this story because he wanted to emphasise the power of his peer group. Another concept that gets highlighted in this citation is that the hidden realm of the supernatural could itself only be accessed by secret knowledge, acquired through years of training. That a Muslim holyman possessed such knowledge was proven by his “baraka”,²²⁶ his “blessing”. Because he was blessed he was able to perform his supernatural feats. It was considered a force from a divine source which was able to bring spiritual and material benefits to those who have it. It can be passed on and is the mark of a pious man,²²⁷ of his legitimacy to guide others according to what is right and wrong in God’s eyes. It was also a power quite similar in concept to those of the holymen of the traditional religions and accordingly he could be called upon by non-Muslims as well who were eager to use his powers for their benefit.

The authority and the persuasive power of a holyman came through his concrete ability to channel healing power through his baraka. Seeing was believing. Consequently it was important for such an individual to protect his baraka. This was a problem which we will encounter later on in abundance. The flipside of baraka is the power to curse as well. The Tarikhs cite several examples of pious Muslims putting a malediction on someone else, causing dire trouble for the afflicted. An example would be that of the Kabara-Farma who unjustly took a rice plantation from a member of the ‘Ulema in Timbuktu. A student of the scholar, wrote “quelque chose et traça certains caractères” on a piece of paper, hung it around the neck of a ram and killed it with a spear. Just a few hours later, the Kabara-farma was killed by a spear.²²⁸ What becomes apparent again is the immediacy. Islam had in this instance a very practical dimension and left the abstract, theoretical theological sphere. This was often tested and achieved through

²²⁶ Owusu-Ansah (Prayer, Amulets, and Healing), P.481.

²²⁷ An exhaustive study of baraka and its manifestations in Morocco may be found in: Westermarck, Edward. *Ritual and Belief in Morocco*. First Edition edition. Random House Value Publishing, 1988, chapters 1 and 2.

See also the brief but valuable discussion in: Turner, Bryan S. *Weber and Islam: A Critical Study*. London; Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974, chapter 4.

²²⁸ T/F, P.238.

straight out copying. Muslim holymen took tried ideas from traditional religion wherever they saw fit. A similar concept of a pervasive supernatural power that suffuses the natural world exists in traditional pre-Islamic religions: nyama.²²⁹ It was considered the power that breathed life into the world. Releasing nyama by killing animals or people was considered dangerous and required knowledge of the occult. Similarly the reforming of nyama by for example forging a piece of steel required similar spiritual knowledge. Theoretically “baraka” and “nyama” might be very different conceptually but in everyday application they were very similar, which meant that one could easily be transformed into the other. Whatever a Muslim holyman did was seen as an Islamic ritual, not a traditional one. The Tarikhs, the Kano Chronicle and other documents are full of examples in which non-Islamic practices were adopted by Muslim holymen and which find no resemblance in rituals or beliefs held in the Muslim heartlands of Egypt, or the Arabian peninsula.

This also points towards another rather modern problem which is one of terminology which makes discrete categories out of a continuum. Although often used as a terminological shortcut, in a strict sense there is no such thing as “orthodox Islam” in the sense that the Islam of the Arab core areas is the “correct” form of Islam. There is no clear-cut way of discerning a “proper” Muslim from a “Muslim in name only”. This means that rituals and beliefs that a Muslim in one area holds dear and is intimately tied to his spiritual world is scorned for it by another Muslim a thousand miles away. What is clear is that religious ideas which came from Mecca and Medina and traditional West African beliefs form a tight, interwoven tapestry and to use terms like “dualism” or “parallelism” does not do this justice. From the point of view of many scholars of Islam, this view of Islam is often seen as a temporary syncretist stage. If there is no such thing as “orthodox” or “correct” Islam, however, this makes no sense at all. Systems of belief are in a constant state of flux, adapt to local circumstances and being moulded by pre-

²²⁹ for a fuller explanation see e.g.:

Tamari, Tal. *Les Castes de l’Afrique Occidentale: Artisans et Musiciens Endogames*. Sociétés Africaines. Nanterre: Société d’ethnologie, 1997.

also: McNaughton, Patrick R. *The Mande Blacksmiths: Knowledge, Power, and Art in West Africa*. Midland Book. Indiana University Press, 1993.

dominant powers and their needs, the latter sometimes claiming their view as the only right one, making it “orthodox”, and it depends on the sway they hold over society if they can make it the accepted standard. “Orthodox” is what local society decides is the standard form of belief which might be very different from what another group has agreed upon. The Islam of the Arab peninsula is as syncretist as that of West Africa and both can lay claim to being orthodox. This does not mean that a differentiation cannot be made. As African Islam has developed within a context of local traditional religions, it is in many cases more heavily kinship-based and its rituals often hark back to rituals of old, whereas other forms of Islam emphasise e.g. more its mystical aspects. It is nothing new for Islam to take on local religious elements. Muhammed himself, initially, did not see Islam as incompatible with pagan expressions of religion and only over a very long time period it was decided what was Islamic or non-Islamic.²³⁰ One of the most prominent examples is the Ka’aba, which was a centre of prayer long before the advent of Islam. In sub-Saharan Africa a very similar process had taken place, leading to a unique blend of Islam and pre-Islamic local belief, that took on a dynamic of its own, providing locals with a useful and rich spiritual world.

Levtzion and Pouwels²³¹ developed a three stage process in order to explain the development of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa. Depending on the spread of Islam different groups called themselves Muslim which reconfigured what “Islam” meant. The first stage was introduced by merchants involved in the transsaharan trade, linking the Sahel with the Maghrib. They lived primarily in towns, often in separate quarters, secluded from the local population. This phase is often called “minority” or “quarantine” Islam. The second stage saw an extension of Islam into the nobility and gentry of the host country. Rulers and the upper classes adopted Islam, although it remained confined to these social circles, the spiritual life outside these groups remained largely unperturbed. This phase runs under the name of “court” Islam. The third and final stage can be called “majority” Islam as by now Islam has spread from the towns and courts into the coun-

²³⁰ Gilliland, Dean S. *African Religion Meets Islam: Religious Change in Northern Nigeria*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986, P.70.

²³¹ Levtzion and Pouwels (*The History of Islam in Africa*), see also Trimmingham (*A History of Islam in West Africa*) and a variety of other works.

tryside, bringing sweeping religious change with it. Numbers of believers as well as their adherence to the local orthodoxy of Islam are supposed to rise from stage one to stage three.

In earlier times Muslims often lived in a different settlement close by giving rise to a double city structure as can be seen through archaeological and written evidence at Gao.²³² It became central tenet of their self-identification that they lived apart. They were foreigners, not natives, they were Muslims, not pagans, they were traders, not farmers. They often saw themselves as being in a perpetual diasporic state and were linked to others within their diaspora group. Perinbam points out that they developed their own code of conduct and cultural expression which made them constant strangers but also enabled them to having a shared experience which made relationships over long distances possible, thus providing a much needed currency in trade: trust.²³³ Lydon argues that “Muslim religious practice, which promoted the acquisition of literacy, provided structure and agency that shaped the activities of trans-Saharan traders.”²³⁴ They tried to define the levels of contact with other groups on their own terms. They had specific jobs that only Muslims were able to do: long-distance trade and Muslim scholarship. In this sense they were different to castes,²³⁵ there was no mystique surrounding the jobs themselves, trade and teaching were decidedly worldly and non-mysterious activities, but they were highly social activities. A long distance trader had to be a Muslim, because all the other long-distance traders were Muslims as well and would not trade with a non-Muslim. A similar logic can be applied to teaching. This is one of the main point that supports the “stages” thesis as the distinction between Muslims and pagans is quite sharp here. The trouble is that the only sources we have come from Muslims

²³² Insoll (The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa), 206-218.

²³³ Perinbam, B. Marie. ‘The Julus in Western Sudanese History: Long-Distance Traders and Developers of Resources’. In *West African Culture Dynamics: Archeological and Historical Perspectives*, 455–475. Le Hague: Mouton, 1980, P.470.

²³⁴ Ghislaine (On Trans-Saharan Trails), P.3.

²³⁵ Castes were for example discussed in length by Tal Tamari: Tamari, Tal. *Les castes de l’Afrique occidentale: Artisans et musiciens endogames*. Sociétés Africaines. Nanterre: Société d’ethnologie, 1997.

whose ideals about a good Muslim life came from North Africa. They wanted to be northerners which is why they segregated themselves from the rest of the Sudan in their writings. Al-Sadi announced that Timbuktu's "development, as regards both religion and commerce, came entirely from the west [the Maghrib i.e. North Africa],"²³⁶ showcasing this desire, despite him living on the Middle Niger Bend all his life.

Haidara points out that the intellectual rise of the towns in that region coincides with the breakdown of the Almoravid realm in al-Andalus. Many Muslims who fled the doomed Muslim foothold in Spain settled in Ifriqia (Arabic term for western Maghrib) and also crossed the Sahara into the towns to its south,²³⁷ engaging in the trans-Saharan trade. These Muslim merchants and craftsmen were soon joined by Muslim scholars whose life spun around the interpretation of the Quran. They came because thriving sub-Saharan urban centres like Kankan, Walata, Timbuktu and Dia began to generate enough money for patronage to become possible. Levtzion points out that this process was further aided by the fact that the role of merchant, cleric and scholar was not distinct but placed on a continuum, forming a Muslim estate.²³⁸ In the 15th and 16th century Timbuktu, Djenne and Gao developed into the focal points of this trade in sub-Saharan West Africa. Although the emphasis in this case is often laid on Djenne and Timbuktu, Gao also had significant mercantile turnover as witnessed by the "(...) grandes pirogues, mille barques appartenant l'askia, sans compter les pirogues des commerçants, celles des filles de l'askia et celles des habitants de la ville [Gao]."²³⁹ The number of ships can only be explained if they were used for commercial purposes.

The Muslims living in these towns presented themselves as distinct but it is unlikely that they were, at least to such a large degree as they painted themselves to be. They

²³⁶ T/S-E, P.30.

²³⁷ Haïdara, Ismaël Diadié. *L'Espagne musulmane et l'Afrique subsaharienne*. Bamako: Editions Donniya, 1997, P.57.

²³⁸ Levtzion, Nehemia, Humphrey J Fisher, and N. Levtzion, eds. 'Merchants vs. Scholars and Clerics in West Africa: Differential and Complementary Roles'. In *Rural and Urban Islam in West Africa*, 21–37. Boulder, Colo: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1987, P.24.

²³⁹ T/F, P.270.

were different, because they had access to a different - the Muslim - world, but at the same time they were strongly involved and connected with the Sudan as they were deeply bound to its political system and notions of honour, as we will see in the next chapter on “Honour”. In this sense then Muslims were a highly specialised endogamous group that in addition also had highly arcane abilities the workings of which they did not disclose: amulets, spells and other occult practices were solely to be performed by Muslim specialists that were able to read and write, which meant that they were part of the Muslim scholar/merchant estate. In toto, Muslims on the Middle Niger Bend had caste-like features, in that they were seen to possess a highly specialised and occult skill set but other central abilities were out in the open and it was clear how they worked. The relationship between these two spheres, the “open” and the “hidden” was clearly exploited by the members of the Muslim estate themselves as their freedom of trade and their status depended on their perceived mystical powers and these powers were vindicated when merchants made a windfall on their trades.

Horton criticises the three stage thesis, pointing out that there are areas and times where the reverse was true.²⁴⁰ He is certainly right that e.g. under Usman dan Fodio, Islam was propagated from the countryside into the cities and not the other way around. In the case of the Middle Niger Bend however the three stage framework applies to Songhay and to a certain extent also to the Arma, which is the reason for it being used here in a modified form. The idea used here is that the initial cohort of Muslims formed a nucleus of believers that erected solid boundaries between them and the rest of the Sudan - partly because they wanted to do so, partly because they were forced to do so. The boundary was not just erected mentally but also physically by them living in separate towns or quarters that were physically removed from the “indigenous” population. This nucleus began to grow bigger, with larger numbers of Muslims appearing and it also became less focused, its boundaries becoming blurred. This does not mean that there was a “core” whose edges became watered down but that the nucleus was defined via its boundaries. Initially these boundaries were quite solid but they began to become very porous indeed. However the “three stages” framework should not be overstressed and taken for what it is - it is almost too general a model, a weakness it shares with

²⁴⁰ Horton (On the Rationality of Conversion. Part II), P.395.

Trimingham's description of Islam as the "second option" and it does not provide an explanation why people were drawn to Islam, nor does it highlight the social processes involved and most importantly and problematically it fixes the perspective on Islam as the active agency, which is difficult to defend as shown above. It is mentioned here because it actually provides a good starting point for the introduction of Islam on the Middle Niger Bend.

This process took a long time in any case but according to Saad, Timbuktu housed about 200-300 Muslim scholars in the 16th century.²⁴¹ This was an extraordinarily large number and was only made possible by the constant residence of committed local individuals. Djenne also began to house a number of eminent Muslim scholars like Abi Bakr Baghayogho.²⁴² Realising the importance of this new class, the nobility began to support the scholars, beginning with Mansa Musa of Mali in the 14th century,²⁴³ a path further followed by the Songhay rulers, starting with a reluctant Sunni Ali. The rulers who used Islam as a doctrine which allowed them to hold their empire together in ideological terms tied themselves with this decision to the Muslim scholars and vice versa. This led to a situation which Leo Africanus (ca. 1480 to ca. 1550) described thusly in his "Descriptions of Africa":

*"Here are great store of doctors, judges, priests, and other learned men, that are bountifully maintained at the kings cost and charges. And hither are brought divers manuscripts or written bookes out of Barbarie, which are sold for more money than any other merchandize."*²⁴⁴

Additionally, the rulers of Mali and Songhay knew that their wealth stood and fell with the Muslim traders, who controlled the gold, salt and slave trade. Hunwick has shown that this change in Songhay policy came with the victory of Muhammed Ture against Sunni Barou.²⁴⁵ The old 'magicians' and soothsayers authority had declined and

²⁴¹ Saad (Social History of Timbuktu), P.82.

²⁴² T/S-E, P.26.

²⁴³ Saad (Social History of Timbuktu), P.88.

²⁴⁴ Africanus, Leo. *The History and Description of Africa and of the Notable Things therein Contained*. Vol. 3. London: Hakluyt Society, 1896, P.825.

²⁴⁵ Hunwick (Religion and State in the Songhay empire), P.135.

their functions now fell to the Qadis and Imams. Islamic baraka and erudition replaced pagan Songhay “magic” as spiritual and ideological currency. Songhay absorbed these Islamic elements into the state structure and thus utilised the prestige and skills this new religion brought with it. This meant that the relationship between the Muslim and the ruling estate was constantly renegotiated, which is the subject of the next section.

6.2 The merging of the worlds - Sudan and Bidan

The members of the Muslim community on the Middle Niger Bend, the ‘Ulema, dithered constantly between several options of conduct. The first one was active dissent, undermining the authority of the imperfect Islamic rule and his estate. Not many followed this line of thinking, not least of all because they usually found a quick death. According to the *Tarikh al-Sudan*, Sunni Ali had attacked the Muslims of Timbuktu merely on the suspicion of them being hostile to his rule.²⁴⁶ On the other hand, if successful, these revolutionaries could bring far-reaching change, as was brought in the nineteenth century with Usman dan Fodio.

The second option was to withdraw from the public and recreate a form of quarantine Islam. Muslims would cease to interfere with politics at all and try to live a form of Islam they considered pure, trying to maintain their distance to the traditional religions and ways of living, staying “the other” while conserving a liminal situation indefinitely. This gave all of its members the impression of keeping their eclectic identity and therefore a sense of belonging to a special group. They could also evade conflict by not being openly associated with any local power. This was very appealing for a group that was living in an area that was more or less constantly at war. By not being seen as part of a certain political entity, they were left alone, because everyone wanted to use their services while they remained non-partisan. Tying into this aspect is the idea of the mediator. As Levtzion points out, Muslims were seen as neutrals they were often called upon to moderate in conflicts. This position allowed them to build up a network of favours and brought them in contact with local powerful figures. These advantages furthered their position and prestige and at the same time gave them an aura of invincibility as they were often part of a conflict but were never harmed by its consequences. This reli-

²⁴⁶ T/S-E, P.94.

gious-political factor combined with their role as arbiters and diplomats allowed them to wield considerable influence within sub-Saharan West Africa.²⁴⁷

This option was considered the theoretical optimum for many of the Muslim estate but it was difficult to maintain as trade and ultimately artisanship was only possible by interacting with others. Although Islam was very much in favour of commerce, after all Muhammed himself had been a very successful merchant, in West Africa the role of the merchant was often played down for reasons of spiritual purity. It is worth remembering that the local chronicles were written by Muslims scholars who were aware of the stance of the Quran towards merchants and who themselves had been engaged in trading activities or had relatives who did so. Nevertheless a sense of incompatibility between pious and commercial endeavours seemed to have been prevalent. At the same time, however, it was seen as a positive sign if scholars could support themselves. This ambiguity is exemplified by the story ascribed to have happened to the highly regarded scholar and mystic Sidi Yaha brought to us in the Tarikh al-Sudan:

“At first he avoided business dealings—may God Most High have mercy on him—but later he engaged in them. By his account, he used to see the Prophet—may God bless him and grant him peace— every night [in a dream]. Then he began to see him only once a week, then once a month and finally once a year. He was asked about the reason for this and replied, 'I think it simply has to do with my engaging in business'. So he was asked why he did not, therefore, give it up. He replied, 'I do not want to have to be dependent upon people for my needs'. Observe then—may God have mercy on us and on you—what misfortunes business can bring, even though this divinely favoured shaykh scrupulously avoided any forbidden practices.”²⁴⁸

We see here the diasporic train of thought. By remaining an untainted scholar he was able to remove himself from worldly affairs and remain in a purer Muslim state. It was not just that trade meant meddling with worldly affairs which was by definition of a lower status than trying to learn more about god but trade also meant interacting with non-Muslims and to a certain extent bowing to their whims, to compromise. By not do-

²⁴⁷ Levtzion (Islam in West African Politics), P.335-337.

²⁴⁸ Hunwick (Songhay), P.LVI.

ing so he stayed part of an idealised Muslim world and a fast part of the diasporic network. It shows the yearning for a “purity”, of living his life in a self made Dar al-Islam, that was unattainable, but thought after. As a trader, though, one had to deal with the common man and the local nobility which took him away from the purity of Islam as he had to sometimes make do with compromises.

The third option for the Muslim estate was to resign to the spiritual non-Muslim reality around them and consign themselves to their niche as servants of the ruling class, while trying to gain favour for the implementation of little, non-threatening changes, in favour of Islam. With this they followed the idea that a rule is better than no rule, as anarchy would lead to total chaos and jettison all the gains Islam had made. The majority opted for this model, because it was the only one with real long-term prospects and looked feasible from a numerical standpoint. Consequently, they had a strong interest in forming the community they lived in towards their own ideals and organised their surroundings in a way that would serve them best, socially and geographically. Over time the social and therefore religious dynamics changed and the social geography changed along with it. Not only did the topology of a space alter, with different buildings and squares created or torn down and people moving closer to each other, but how a space was used changed as well. Mosques, baths and the layout of Gao, Timbuktu and Djenne became heavily influenced by Muslim ideas about architecture. In this respect it is highly informative that Mansa Musa, the Malian ruler under whom Songhay was ruled before it achieved independence, was supposed to have brought the Muslim architect al-Sahili from the Arabian peninsula into the Sudan who then built the great mosques at Gao and Timbuktu and a royal palace.²⁴⁹ Architecture also provides clues into Islam’s supertribal character. Van Dyke points out that every town and village touched by this faith eventually received a Mosque a graveyard and tombstones became engraved with Islamic scripture²⁵⁰ and the great Mosque of Djenne and the Djingeberber in Timbuktu were built. However the main argument is that the Muslim estate constantly interacted

²⁴⁹ Hunwick (Songhay), P.LVI.

²⁵⁰ van Dyke, Kristina. ‘Beyond Monument Lies Empire: Mapping Songhay Space in Tenth- to Sixteenth-Century West Africa’. *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* no. 48 (1 October 2005): 33–44, P. 43.

with the ruling estate in a very concrete fashion as is evidenced by every single source available as has already been shown in the chapter on “A short history of the Middle Niger Bend”, especially with regards to Askya Muhammed.

Despite most members of the Muslim estate opted for this third model, their outlook was pinned across the Sahara to which expanses they felt they belonged to. They saw themselves as “whites”, as Bidan, culturally part of the desert, not of the Savannah, tracing their descent to Berber or Arab roots. They claim that the centres of learning, like the Sankore mosque, had been founded by desert nomads (Tuareg of the Ineskmen), thus the Bidan were the creators of knowledge and culture, not the blacks. Al-Sadi described the whites in the following manner:

“The area of the Sahara they roam over covers a distance of two months [by two months] travel between the lands of the sudan and the lands of Islam. They profess the religion of Islam and are Sunnis, waging jihad against the blacks.”²⁵¹

The short excerpt above further shows where al-Sadi, author of the *Tarikh al-Sudan*, put himself, which colours his opinions quite substantially. If he had seen himself as a black, he would not have described the raids of the Bidan as “jihads” but condemned them. For him, the distinction was clear: Bidan equaled Muslim, Sudan did not. He actually emphasises the physical distance between the land of Islam and the land of the blacks. The main determiner as to who was Bidan and who was Sudan was genealogy which was prone to reworking, as for example the Kel Intasar bear witness to²⁵² and as we will see later with a famous family of scholars, the Aqits. Although trying to count themselves to the Bidan, the Sudan actually had an own, strong form of Muslim scholarship and community, represented by towns such as Djenne. This town is often considered the twin sister of Timbuktu, was attached even deeper to the Sudan, the “black”, world than Timbuktu or Walata which had comparatively strong links into the desert. This is exemplified by the Baghayogho family. Although some male members supplied the Qadi for Timbuktu, they originally stemmed from Djenne.²⁵³ This shows that in both

²⁵¹ T/S-E, P.35.

²⁵² Norris, Harry. ‘A Summary of the History of the Eastern Kel Intasar Attributed to Ibn al-Najib (circa 1710-1720)’. *Maghreb Review* 3, no. 2 (April 1979): 36–40.

²⁵³ T/S-E, P.26.

cities Sudan and Bidan held important and respected positions as a matter of course. The Sudan gave birth to the Djoula and the Wangara, who provided another major Muslim influence. Hunwick and Lovejoy make clear that they were part of the Mande ethnicity and became one of the pillars of West African sub-Saharan Muslim scholarship and trade.²⁵⁴ Their importance becomes clear when considering that a city-quarter of Timbuktu was called “Wangara-Counda”.²⁵⁵ The Tarikh al-Sudan further mentions a “Wangari named Ndafu”²⁵⁶ and the Tarikh al-Fattash speaks of “(...) deux hommes originaires du Ouaugara”,²⁵⁷ hinting at a sizeable community. Thus it was very unclear who was white and who was black and at what point in time.

Intermarriage also played a role as to whom a group or individual was pigeonholed into. Over time, some Wolof, Tukulor, Soninke, Mande and Bambara groups were incorporated into the white world and sometimes Arab-Berber groups became blacks. We see this in the following example:

*“There they [Masina] found the Sanhaja of the braided hair, since this is their dwelling place. They stayed with them until the dependents they had left behind caught up with them. Then Maghani went to the Baghana-fari, told him their story, and explained what he was after. The Baghana-fari welcomed them and treated them with honour, inviting them to pasture wherever they wished in his lands. He appointed Maghani sultan of the people who had accompanied him. The Fulani of his group and of the Sangare began to migrate there and settle with him.”*²⁵⁸

This shows that there was an extensive exchange between the people of the savanna (Masina whose people were located just north of Djenne) and the people of the desert, as they likely knew each other, otherwise this welcome would have been unlikely. It al-

²⁵⁴ Hunwick (West Africa, Islam and the Arab World), P.25.

²⁵⁵ Lovejoy, Paul E. ‘The Role of the Wangara in the Economic Transformation of the Central Sudan in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries’. *The Journal of African History* 19, no. 2 (1 January 1978): 173–193, P.176.

²⁵⁶ T/S-E, P.220.

²⁵⁷ T/F, P.306.

²⁵⁸ T/S-E, P.238.

so emphasises how migration within the region was possible and how unclear the difference between social groups was, one could easily morph into the other. This intertwining of worlds also showed itself when Sunni Ali drove the Bidan out of Timbuktu and made some of their groups subsidiaries to his empire. After that the relationship was not immediately resolved peacefully. Al-Sadi described the following episode:

*“The evil oppressor [Sunni Ali] set about killing or humiliating those scholars who remained in Timbuktu, for their alleged friendship with the Tuareg, and membership in their elite, for which reason he hated them.”*²⁵⁹

Sunni Ali regarded the scholars as something of a fifth column because of these links. This purge took place just after he had conquered Timbuktu and driven the Tuareg out. He prosecuted the scholars not because of their Muslim credentials but because they potentially undermined his rule as he thought they were not bound or reliant on him. The confusion becomes even greater when considering that Hunwick assumes that those that al-Sadi describes as Tuareg are actually Sanhaja, a different group of desert nomads.²⁶⁰ But because Sunni-Ali was long dead when al-Sadi wrote, he projected back his own assumptions about the makeup of the local Berber population, which had changed significantly over the course of one hundred years. This episode shows that the leading scholarly families and the governor of Timbuktu also saw themselves as Sanhaja. Sunni Ali thus had not just attacked allies but family. This family, however, now lived in Songhay and would remain there for over 100 years. The tensions that were to crop up between Gao and Timbuktu thus go back right to the founding of the larger Songhay Empire under Sunni Ali and shows how deeply the Middle Niger Bend was involved with desert society and politics.

Many members of the Muslim estate linked the two shores of the desert via family relationships which is an indicator how close these two shores of the desert began to edge toward each other culturally as the following example from the *Tarikh al-Fattash* shows:

“Le chérif hassanide Ahmed Es-Seqli s'établit donc à Tombouctou. Il y épousa une femme arabe du Tafilalet [in modern day Morocco] nommée Zeïneb

²⁵⁹ T/S-E, P.94.

²⁶⁰ see footnote: T/S-E, P.94.

dont il eut [trois fils], Mozaouir, Muhammed et Souleïman, et [deux filles], Raqiya et Zeïneb."²⁶¹

It is significant that the woman was of "arab" origin, as this indicated not just a link into North Africa but further into the Muslim heartland, to those who were the first Muslims. Although living in the Sudan the mentioned Ahmed al-Seqli was explicitly associated with the Arab Bidan world, not the black Sudan realm. Over these social links not only religious learning was transmitted but also a tradition of trade. While it moved house, however, the quality of this trade changed from a desert based mercantile activity to a Sahelian economy which had a much wider sway. The Middle Niger Bend was the intersection of three different trading worlds: the local trade, the long-distance Sahelian trade and the trans-Saharan trade. Each with their own qualities and wants. Coming along with the trade and religion that Muslims spread by them crossing the Sahara into the Sudan, were, as Levtzion points out, also new industries, like weaving and other branches of a highly developed textile industry, which were, at least in the beginning, carried out by Muslims. They not only distinguished themselves by their religion from non-Muslims, but also by their economic activities.²⁶²

Many scholars of Timbuktu could, in truth or fancy, trace their lineage back to the oases of the desert like Walata, long after it was reduced to a minor trading town. Osswald has drawn a diagram that shows these relationships.²⁶³ The scholars never forgot these links into the desert and made use of them in times of need as shown when Sunni Ali purged Timbuktu and many of its inhabitants fled to Walata, Fututi or Tishit where they often originally came from and still had relatives. After the situation had calmed down again many found their way back, reestablishing a net of family and friendship relations across a vast expanse. This also becomes clear after the Moroccan incursion into the Sudan. In October 1593, the then commander of the invading forces, Mahmud Zarqun, demanded that:

"(...) everyone should gather in the Sankore mosque on the following day, (...) 17 October 1593, to swear allegiance to the sultan Mulay Ahmad. According-

²⁶¹ T/F, P.37.

²⁶² Levtzion (Ancient Ghana and Mali), P.120.

²⁶³ Osswald (Die Handelsstädte der Westsahara): Fold-out at the end of the book.

ly the people gathered, and on the first day the people of Tuwat, the Fezzan, and Awjila, and similar folk proclaimed their allegiance. The people of Walata, Wadan, and similar folk did the same on Tuesday the 23rd."²⁶⁴

Osswald states that it is quite obvious here that this did not literally mean that these people came all the way down from the Fezzan but that al-Sadi speaks about city quarters.²⁶⁵ Those who originally came from a certain desert-settlement moved into a specific quarter in order to remain part of their original social group. Thus many of the scholars in these towns saw themselves not of Sudanic "black African" descent but considered themselves as Berbers or Arabs. This glosses over the fact that Walata's ethnic makeup changed over time, every different group leaving its traces. In support, Cleaveland further points out that Walata was first known as "Biru", a Mande (black) name and was in the orbit of the Ghanian and Malian empires, then as "Iwalatan", which was a Berber name, marking its cultural shift into the desert and finally, under Songhay, as "Walata", which is the Arabised form of "Iwalatan".²⁶⁶ The Tarikhs further support this claim saying that before Sunni Ali's conquest, Timbuktu was controlled by Sanhaja and the Imam of the Sankore at that time was a Bidan, a "white".²⁶⁷ The relationship between the desert and the towns becomes even clearer when considering that the sons of Tuareg leaders were sent to Timbuktu in order to receive an education from the local Qadis and consequently lived in the town for several years:

*"Awasamba [son of the Maghsharen koi] had grown up in the qadi's household, and had studied with him. He had grown to maturity among them and had become part of the family."*²⁶⁸

Members of the Aqit family, descended from "Ahmad b. Umar b. Muhammed Aqit b. Umar b. Yahya b. Guddala al-Sanhaji [Sanhaja] al-Tinbukti, [the one from Timbuktu]

²⁶⁴ T/S-E, P.219.

²⁶⁵ Osswald (Die Handelsstädte der Westsahara), P.283.

²⁶⁶ Cleaveland, Timothy. 'Timbuktu and Walata: Lineages and Higher Education'. In *The Meanings of Timbuktu*, edited by Shamil Jeppie. 1. publ. Cape Town: HSRC Press in association with CODESRIA, 2008., P.79-80.

²⁶⁷ Triaud (Islam et societies soudanaise au moyen age), P.190.

²⁶⁸ T/S-E, P.206.

(...)",²⁶⁹ manned the post of the Qadi of Timbuktu many times, effectively being a dynasty. They explicitly placed its origins in the desert and not in the Savannah. Because of their aforementioned Sanhaja background they had long standing and strong links into the desert world. At first, however, the Aqits had tried to sequester themselves socially:

*"As for Muhammed Aqit, the paternal grandfather of the jurist Qadi Mahmud, he was of the folk of Masina. I heard the erudite jurist Ahmad Baba—may God have mercy on him—say, 'It was only hatred of the Fulani living close by that caused him to move from there to Biru. It is said that although he was sure that he would never intermarry with them, he was afraid that his children might do so, [so he moved] lest their lineage be compromised.'"*²⁷⁰

Thus the ancestor of the famous Aqit clan originally came from Masina, a region just north of Djenne (close to modern day Mopti), which is clearly Sudan country, thus we can assume that he himself grew up being Sudan. He, however, saw the purity of his lineage endangered by Fulani living close by, as he himself identified with the Bidan, thus moving to Walata, then called Biru. As the town at that time still carried the Mande name it is quite likely that it was still under at least the nominal dominion of the Sudan but it was obviously much closer to the desert, the Bidan world. The reworking of this identity was apparently successful, otherwise the Aqits would not eventually have come to be identified as "Sanhaja", which is a clear marker of being a Bidan.²⁷¹ The link between space and liminality here becomes quite clear as a territorial passage introduced a new frontier. Muhammed Aqit suddenly had to deal with inducing a transformation of

²⁶⁹ T/S-E, P.52.

²⁷⁰ T/S-E, P.49-50.

²⁷¹ According to local oral history, written down in 1895, some Sanhaja moved to Masina after they had fled the southern Sahara (Hodh). Even if we take this story at face value it becomes clear, if we follow this account, that the Sanhaja intermingled with the Fulani on a large scale.

See: Anonymous. 'The Sultans of Masina'. In *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sa'di's Ta'rikh al-Sūdān down to 1613, and other Contemporary Documents*, edited by John O Hunwick, 237–242. Islamic History and Civilization 27. Leiden: Brill, 1999.

his social position and it fits Van Gennep's idea that "(...) the passage from one social position to another is identified with a territorial passage (...)".²⁷²

Once firmly settled in entrepôts like Timbuktu or Djenne, the revenue they generated found their way into the local Muslims traders' pockets which was then used to finance the scholars. The steady income trade and artisanal skill laid the foundation for scholarly activity which in itself generated no direct revenue. This relationship was not purely parasitic, as the non-scholarly Muslims gained ideological support not only in the political sphere but also for contracts that were only recognised when their author was respected. Levtzion points out that this was a virtuous circle: the higher the number of Muslims, the less chance there was of religious persecution, contracts based on Muslim law became stronger, etc.²⁷³ That especially law was one of the strengths of the Muslims can be seen by contracts witnessed in the sources. The following example comes from a manuscript written in the 15th century by an Andalusian who had fled to Timbuktu:

*"I bought this illuminated book called al Shifa' by the Qadi 'Iyad from its first owner Muhammed b. 'Umar in a [legally] valid sale, for the sum of 45 mithqahls of gold cash (dhabab 'ayn) paid in its entirety to the one from whom it was purchased with the witness of our companions. This took place two months after our arrival in Tuwat coming from our land (bilad) of Toldeo, [sic!] capital of the Goths. And we are now on our way Most to the bilad al-sudan, asking of God Most High that He should grant us repose there. I, the servant of his Lord 'Ali b. Ziyad al-Quti, wrote [this in] the month of Muharram of the year 873 of the Prophet hijra"*²⁷⁴

²⁷² Fisher (Liminality, Hijra and the City), P.149.

²⁷³ Lincoln, Bruce. 'Notes Toward a Theory of Religion and Revolution'. In *Religion, Rebellion, Revolution: An Interdisciplinary and Cross-Cultural Collection of Essays*, edited by Bruce Lincoln, 266–292. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1985, P.269.

²⁷⁴ The date corresponds to 21 July - 18 August 1468. see: Hunwick, John. 'Studies in Ta'rikh al-Fattash, III: Ka'ti Origins'. *Sudanic Africa* 12 (2001): 111–114, P.114.

Another example is the “Al-Muhkam fi ‘l-lugha”, a dictionary compiled by an Andalusian scholar which had been copied in Timbuktu in 1570.²⁷⁵ Even for such rather minor work a whole contract was written up and put at the beginning of the manuscript. It identified the author, the scribe, the employer, confirmation of ownership, salary, confirmation of payment and a statement confirming the validity of the contract. Hunwick provides specific analysis that this was highly formalised and similar prefaces can be found in other works, giving evidence that a whole legal system was in place, dealing with contracts and ensuring their binding power.²⁷⁶ This gave an incentive to the scholars to carry the Muslim faith into ever wider circles so as to grow the alms revenue base. The more religious services they provided, rituals, building works, amulets, etc. the more they became dependent on the revenue others created. Without the Muslim scholars, the long-distance trading system would have been impossible to set up and maintain as only the scholars who could put a legal system in place were able to implement tools like deferred payment, delivery contracts and schedules and also provided trust, the latter being a highly priced commodity as it provided an element of stability. In reverse, without the trade and thus interactions with an ever growing number of peoples the penetration of Islam would have been hampered pushing the idealised form of a Muslim Sudan out of reach.

With increased fortune, increased political influence followed. At some point it became a matter of course that Muslim counsellors and scholars were part of the inner council of the Askya. In the final days of the empire, the Askya met with his most trusted councillors in order to figure out what to do against the approaching Moroccan army, according to the *Tarikh al-Fattash*, two of those attendant were: “(...) le cādi [of Gao] (...) et ses principaux assistants, et il leur avait demandé conseil sur la ligne de conduite à adopter; un uléma de Tombouctou était également présent à cette réunion.”²⁷⁷ This

²⁷⁵ Hunwick, John. ‘A Supplement to Infaq al-Maysur: The Biographical Notes of ‘Abd al-Qadir B. al-Mustafa’. *Sudanic Africa* no. 7 (1996): 35–51., P. 43-49.

²⁷⁶ Hunwick, John O. ‘West African Arabic Manuscript Colophons II: A Sixteenth-Century Timbuktu Copy of the Muhkam of Ibn Sida’. *Sudanic Africa* 13 (2012): 131–149., P.137.

²⁷⁷ T/F, P.268.

shows that the Muslim community was deeply embedded into the political life of Songhay and that the majority of the 'Ulema had chosen the path of integration. The Middle Niger Bend had become their home, despite many of them emphasising that they originally stemmed from the Maghrib or the Sahara as a matter of pride.

Nevertheless, the scholars living, studying and teaching on the frontiers of Islam had a strong feeling of distance from the Muslim heartlands, of being on their own. Muhammed Bello said in 1812 that: "I am living on the fringe of the Sudan—the Sudan where paganism and dark ignorance prevail"²⁷⁸ mirroring the sentiment of the Muslim estate of the Middle Niger Bend 200 years before. This perception of "remoteness" led to the establishment of an independent scholarly tradition, that centred around local needs. A work that gives an insight into this scholarship is the "Nayl al-Ibtihaj",²⁷⁹ a celebrated work composed by Ahmad Baba, where he gives a complete biography of all the Maliki scholars not listed in the al-Dibaj of Ibn Farhun. In analysing this volume, Haidara was able to find out the distribution of disciplines taught at the University of Sankore in the 16th century in Timbuktu.²⁸⁰ The highest consideration was given to "Law", then the "Science of the Quran", followed by "Traditions". A great number of other subjects, like mathematics, medicine and poetry were also studied but not in such depth. The high status of law emphasises the abilities needed and expected of Muslim scholars. The capacity to deal with legal issues was apparently in high demand which supports the thesis that Timbuktu was a lynchpin of trade. Trade is dependent on an at least implicit framework of law which makes liabilities clear and provides merchants with security, stability and thus predictability. In this sense it is not surprising that the "Science of the Quran" comes in at second place, although with quite a distance. The study of law ultimately rests on the study of the Quran as all fatwas and legal ideas rest on the mental framework it creates. That "Traditions" take the third spot is due to the influence of the Maliki school of Islam which puts great emphasis on them. The high standing of "Law", the "Science of the Quran" and "Traditions" also show that there was a clear interest in applying the Muslim way of life to local conditions, which is a

²⁷⁸ Isichei (The Religious Traditions of Africa), P.56.

²⁷⁹ Translation: "Jubilation Regarding the Embroidery Upon the Dibaj"

²⁸⁰ Haidara (L'Espagne musulmane et l'Afrique subsaharienne), P.58.

reflection of the struggle of finding a way to make Islam relevant to locals which was the direct road to syncretism. The interplay between theological reasoning and its concrete expression in social life through law gave birth to new categories and communal standards. It especially placed a heavier emphasis on individual rights and responsibilities which stood in contrast to a right derived from kinship, ancestry or marriage. It furthermore introduced the judicial specialist, the Qadi, Arabic for “judge” creating a completely new class of people who were identified by their occupation and not by their family or ethnic bonds.

According to Cleaveland, these “Qadis” do not compare to the modern, common understanding of an arbiter of law, that is, a person who is put into office by a civil authority charged with the task of enforcing the law and on whose decisions police and policy makers have to act - a judge on the Middle Niger Bend was none of that. There was no police force, no official code of law, no courtroom or any means of actually enforcing a judge's decision. People could not even be forced to appear before a Qadi. The only real power he had was that of persuasion. The judge's power depended on his ability to sway the opinions of his fellow men, which required high social standing.²⁸¹ It was his only source of power and they accordingly became flustered quickly when it was under attack as we will see later. The courts were one of the main areas in which society was reshaped and reborn. The Qadi then was the embodiment of the liminal zone. He stood between these two worlds acting as arbiter, but as he had no direct authority he could not simply enforce his will, his interpretation of things, on any given party but was essentially a negotiator. The judge was a master negotiator, especially when arguing with the nobility, as we will be argued shortly in great detail, not someone who could impose his view on others. So in order to be able to judge he had to adapt to local sentiments but reframe them, giving them a coat of Islam. The courtroom thus provides a link between low- and highstatus as well as between Sudan and Bidan individual. In this context it is worth pointing out that the aforementioned first Qadi of Djenne had been appointed on the recommendation of Muhammed Aqit, who we know originally came from Masina, which is close to Djenne but moved to Walata and then to Timbuktu. He had reconstructed his family's identity into a Bidan one, but it is highly

²⁸¹ Cleaveland (Becoming Walata), P.83.

unlikely that his presence in Djenne at that time came down to chance. It is much more probable that the Aqit family still had family links into Masina, into the Sudan, which were now reactivated (or had never been dormant) in order to put a member of the family into a highly influential position of a highly influential town. This means that the Aqits had never shed their Sudan, their black, identity completely but switched back and forth between identities as the situation demanded, flipping back between their lateral identity markers. They were highly successful in taking on Sudan and Bidan elements, using them as was appropriate.

In areas where sharia courts and indigenous courts existed side by side, the former gained status through its attachment to the high prestige part of the population, such as merchants, scholars or political authorities. An example is the first Qadi of Djenne, Muhammed Fodiye Sanu, appointed by Askya Muhammed, who:

*“(...) was the first person there to give judgements in disputes in conformity with the shari’a. Prior to that, people had had their disputes settled through agreement by the khatib, [leader of prayers in a mosque] as is the habit of the sudan, whereas the Bidan litigate before qadis. This is how things are customarily done by them to this day.”*²⁸²

The implication is that the Qadi is actually a highly learned individual fully trained for the job of judge, whereas the Khatib is not. The Tarikh al-Sudan implies the hierarchy Khatib-Imam-Qadi²⁸³ which is why the Bidan, according to al-Sadi, went to the Qadi in case of arbitration, because his word was worth more than that of a Khatib. It becomes clear that before Askya Muhammed there was a clear split between a “Bidan” Islam and a “Sudan” Islam that found its expression in very concrete realisations of life, namely the justice system. Only after Askya Muhammed had secured his Muslim credentials did he make sure that one of the central facets of his power as ruler, namely to judge people, was put under the umbrella of a Muslim ideology, thus sending out a clear signal as to how he thought to run his empire. With this he made the position of Qadi a black as well as a white institution as Askya Muhammed himself was a proud Sudan. The Qadi was the hinge between the worldly powers of the local rulers and other no-

²⁸² T/S-E, P.26.

²⁸³ T/S-E, P.27.

blemen and needs and wishes of the population on the one hand and the insubstantial realm of law, religion and science on the other. The latter three should not be seen as different concepts but as a whole - in Songhay, they were one. Law derived its authority from religion and science was a means to investigate the will of God.

Those concerned with Muslim law thus provided a “communitas”, a zone where powerful officials, merchants, scholars and locals could meet and lay down their terms. These judges were available in every larger settlement of the Middle Niger Bend which had a decent sized Muslim population and every one of them created a “communitas” and a liminal zone. It is here that the Muslim ideal, that there is no hierarchy in Islam, came to full bore as no one had to pass a test to become a Qadi but simply had to have some standing within the community he lived in. It has to be stressed here that these Qadis were not outsiders who came into the Sudan and reformed it. They were indigenous people who had grown up in the area and had a deep attachment to where they had been born. They, as well as the other scholars - Muhammed Aqit, al-Sadi, Ahmad Baba, Ibn Mukhtar, just to name a few - all showed a deep connection and affection to the Bilad al-Sudan which they considered above all else their home despite often self-identifying as Bidan. This attachment becomes abundantly clear when analysing their behaviour and writing just before and after the Moroccan invasion as we will see in the chapter on “Honour” and “The social dissolution of the Middle Niger Bend”. They were in frequent contact with Sudan traders, rulers and judges thus fusing these two groups together. Both groups, however, were outsiders in a religious and political sense as they were Muslims and derived their understanding of the world from this perspective which was quite different from that of the nobility, as we will see later. What we see here then is an indigenous transformation of society, fusing Sudanic and Bidan elements together without completely shedding the distinction between the two.

6.3 The merging of the worlds - Rulers and the Muslim estate

In many places Islam was and still is not preached as a comprehensive theology. As long as some minimum requirements are fulfilled, usually in the effort of satisfying the five pillars of Islam and at a minimum the recitation of the shahada (“I bear witness that there is no god but Allah, (...)”) an individual is considered a Muslim. Trimingham re-

marks that even if observance of these requirements might be far from perfect, they serve to introduce the framework of Islam into the community.²⁸⁴ Within this framework the old beliefs continued to exist but were recalibrated. The local holyman became a Muslim diviner and ritual and cult, a key element of the religious experience, were touched by Islam as well. Religious rites, which linked the everyday life to the eternal realm, now began to point towards a Muslim heaven. The Muslim idea of eternity though is embedded in the universalistic approach of Islam and with that the whole spiritual and therefore the life of the individual and of communities was attached to a supra-ethnic ideology. This trait of Muslim thinking was useful for empire builders like Sunni Ali.

Goody emphasises that one of the basic features of Islam is its cross-ethnic aspect, consequently the importance of immediate family and community ties is reduced as it puts relationship through faith above all.²⁸⁵ Ironically it was this exact aspect of kinship however that hampered the adoption of Islam. In traditional African society it is family ties that determine to which community an individual belongs. The Muslim scholars and traders were seen as a separate lineage of which Islam was just a part of their identity, standing next to their occupation, their places of dwelling, heritage and general way of daily living. Islam was thus seen as part of a specific ethnicity and not as a universal belief system that transcended or reformed kinship ties. The traditional belief systems were deeply rooted in the whole worldview of an individual and provided community cohesion through a variety of spiritually infused community rituals.

As the identity of a social group and its boundaries in the physical as well as metaphorical sense are shaped by local variables, kin, and all that it entails, supernatural beliefs, relationship ideals, mores, etc. becomes the primary rallying point for an individual. As present day scholar Mbiti argues, he has to be born into a certain kin in order to be recognised as the follower of the religious world that these people adhered to as only they had links to the magico-material world around them.²⁸⁶ The individual had access to the world through the group and his identity was shaped by this mode of dealing with

²⁸⁴ Trimmingham (The Influence of Islam upon Africa), P.47.

²⁸⁵ Goody (Literacy in Traditional Societies), P.2.

²⁸⁶ Mbiti (African Religions and Philosophy), P.101.

reality. The idea of conversion was completely alien as there was nothing to convert from or to as ethnic identity was decided at birth. The modern notion that religion and other spheres of life are separate does not hold true in pre-colonial Africa. As Mbiti puts it:

“(…) a person cannot be converted from one tribal religion to another: he has to be born in the particular society in order to participate in the entire religious life of the people”²⁸⁷

A conversion to Islam therefore not only meant to abdicate one's old religion but also to remove oneself from the ties of the community and the family. Ferguson makes the point that religion was thus not just something personal but deeply political as it concerned the whole life of the community.²⁸⁸ This restricted the ability of the individual to convert and was a serious roadblock in the progress of Islam. Conversion always meant giving up one's old identity and assuming a new one. A case in point are those of the pagan Bambara, a social group on the Middle Niger Bend, who converted to Islam. Levtzion showed that they became known as the Marka, as a completely different ethnic group.²⁸⁹ Giving up one's group identity meant also the shedding of protection and support an individual received from that group in exchange for an uncertain future in a minority position. It was simply put, a bad deal. Thus even where Islam gained a foothold, it was always on terms set by the converts, never by the proselytisers who favoured a much more careful approach to conversion than zealous Muslims like al-Maghili. The Kano Chronicle shows that sacred places of old were in constant use even when Islam made its influence felt and Islam was only successful where it allowed space for these very material, assuring forms of traditional religion.

²⁸⁷ Mbiti (African Religions and Philosophy), P.101.

²⁸⁸ Ferguson, John. 'The Nature of Tribal Religion'. In *Traditional Religion in West Africa*, edited by E. A. Ade Adegbola, 242–243. Accra: Asempa, 1983, P.242.

²⁸⁹ Levtzion, Nehemia. 'The Differential Impact of Islam among the Soninke and the Manding'. In *Papers Presented to the International Conference on Manding Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies, 30 June - 3 July 1972*. London: University of London, 1972, P.5.

Although Mbiti greatly contributed to our understanding of African religious life, if his ideas were to hold true in an absolute sense, conversion would not only have been difficult but outright impossible. What Mbiti overlooks is the fact that no society is static and that the boundaries of an ethnicity are constantly fluctuating and new ideas permeate through them, sometimes allowing rapid change to happen within a social group. Again, the core of Mbiti's idea is sound and has great explanatory power in that it makes clear why Islam stalled for so long. There are still many African communities who, although having been in contact with Islam for over a thousand years, like the Dogon in modern day Mali, are still largely adherents of traditional religions. But there are ways in which a human can switch his kinship identity. One of the most powerful ones flows out from the idea that in certain circumstances kinship did not matter so much compared to other qualities a human might have. Having a certain skill, like the blacksmith or tailor or being a nobleman or powerful merchant sometimes meant more. Especially in towns these identity traits could sometimes come to the foreground allowing not only new identities to appear, like that of the blacksmith, but could be so strong that castes came into being, which were solely defined by a certain skill or specific trait. Some ethnicities also had (and still have) what is called "special relationships" or "joking relationships" which is something which can still be found in modern day Mali e.g. between the Bozo and the Dogon. They stood in a certain relationship to each other and are e.g. not allowed to hurt one other but at the same time they also had mutual taboos like being forbidden to marry across into the other group. A "special relationship" however already meant that they saw themselves as somewhat tied to each other, they were establishing a common identity against other ethnicities who were not part of that "special relationship." It is quite possible that at some point these two identities began to merge into one, in fact, they already had to a limited extent. There is no reason why Islam should be excluded from all these processes. If being of a certain stock, being part of a distinct religion was not in the foreground, but profession was, then conversion into the Muslim belief system became much less threatening. If a "special relationship" existed between a group of Muslims and a group of believers of a traditional religion, it is likely that they also exchanged religious ideas. The aforementioned inclusion of Muslim religious practices into non-Islamic supernatural customs, also paved such a way.

This link between kinship and the supernatural had implications for rule as authority as the Sudanic rulers well understood. Adherents expected from their rulers a certain behaviour and a shrewd king used this world-view to attain great power, as can be seen in the concept of the magician-king, used by Sunni Ali. As ruler, he was not only expected to lead in battle and shape the empire through his politics but he also had to use his magic powers for the good of his people. He had unique supernatural powers which provided him with the legitimacy to rule as he was the supreme magician and focal point of magico-religious rites, on which the rulers magical powers rested. Although Sunni Ali rested his might on such a supertribal idea of power, these traditional religions had a very local character. The link between magical authority and locality was also made by al-Maghili:

“Sunni Ali’s father was the sultan of their people and his mother was from the land of Fara and they are an unbelieving people who worship idols of trees and stones; (...)

These idols have custodians who look after them and interpret to them on their [sc. the people’s] behalf. Among these people are soothsayers and magicians to whom they likewise have recourse. Now Sunni ‘Ali, from childhood to manhood used to frequent them a great deal to the extent that he grew up among them and became stamped with their pattern of polytheism and with their customs.”²⁹⁰

Although al-Maghili saw in Sunni Ali one of his arch enemies, this point would have been completely incomprehensible if such a “worship of idols of trees and stones” had been alien to the Middle Niger Bend. It is in fact quite likely that Sunni Ali used such locations in order to gain access to these powers and also claim the authority that went with them as he did not build his reign on Muslim ideas of rule but very much on traditional notions of leadership. Thus rule was linked to the supernatural and the supernatural was linked to location. Every village had its own rituals and magic, which could differ significantly from the next, the authority of the ruler was on very shaky foundations as he could not be sure that their ideology of authority provided him with legitimacy. The Mande world was structured around such supernatural notions and interacted heavily with ideas about status and identity. The beliefs and their connected practises

²⁹⁰ Maghīlī (Sharī‘a in Songhay), P.206-207.

varied considerably between different ethnicities and groups within them. Rouch reports that Songhay religion put a strong emphasis on ancestor cults and animal sacrifice.²⁹¹ Riesman described the Fulani stressing their beliefs in ghosts, spirits and witchcraft.²⁹² Paques gave account of the Bambara who believed in forces of nature which invisibly penetrated the whole world and into which one had to tap in order to change the course of an illness or the future.²⁹³ It should be added however that these reports come from ethnographic studies and not from historic sources. We simply do not have data on 16th or 17th century non-Islamic traditions other than a few seldom bits given to us by Muslim contemporaries. As mentioned, al-Maghili speaks of trees and animals that are venerated.²⁹⁴ Al-Sadi and the Tarikh al-Fattash provide similar tales of holy animals and landscape features.²⁹⁵ These contemporary authors did not describe these phenomena in a comprehensive or systematic manner though and it is thus difficult to make more specific generalisations. We can only assume that the general ideas of these non-Islamic beliefs have their roots in pre-Islamic times although the specifics might have changed considerably. Indigenous religions provided elements which constructed an overarching sense of community in a specific locale. Gilliland mentions that through their communal outlook which was rooted in the natural world of their immediate surroundings, they were largely self contained.²⁹⁶ McIntosh, carrying out research in Djenne-Djenno, has provided ample evidence for this kind of thinking, stressing that “deep-time core values” linked to visions of what a landscape means spiritually were of overarching importance in the inhabitants’ thinking.²⁹⁷ That ritual, magic and thus authority is embedded in the landscape was also put forward by Prussin in her seminal work on “Islamic

²⁹¹ Rouch (Les Songhay), P.67.

²⁹² Riesman, Paul. *Freedom in Fulani Social Life: An Introspective Ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977, P.96.

²⁹³ Paques, Viviana. *Les Bambara*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1954, P.81.

²⁹⁴ Maghīlī (Sharī’a in Songhay), P.77.

²⁹⁵ e.g.: T/S-E, P.6.

²⁹⁶ Gilliland (African Religion Meets Islam), P.14.

²⁹⁷ McIntosh (Ancient Middle Niger)

Design in West Africa”²⁹⁸ and somewhat further developed by van Dyke.²⁹⁹ Conrad, discussing Mansa Musa, ruler of Mali in the 14th century, emphasised that this merging idea of power, the supernatural and the landscape meant that the location of the ruler was not just a place where government happened but a well of spiritual power.³⁰⁰ 200 years later this way of thinking was still used to justify rule as the Tarikh al-Sudan shows with Askya Dawud’s claim for the throne. In this case it was important to know when his predecessor died in order to be near Gao and the throne so that his claims as ruler could be enforced immediately and create facts:

“At the beginning of 956 Askya Ishaq went to Kukiya and there contracted the illness from which he died. When his condition became serious, friends of Kurmina-fari Dawud secretly sent word telling him to come [to Gao]. (...) Dawud then went to Gao, and had scarcely reached there when the aforementioned Arib-anda-farma died. He went on to Kukiya, arriving there before Askya Ishaq died. Hi-koi Musa sharply upbraided him, saying, 'Who told you to do this? Whom did you consult about it? Return home immediately'. Dawud did so, and soon afterwards Askya Ishaq died, whereupon Musa summoned Dawud back again.”³⁰¹

Place, magic and rule were mutually reinforcing - the king ruled from a certain place because it had supernatural properties and the place had supernatural powers because the king, who himself had magical powers, was at that place. Without having direct proof from the sources one can assume that this is one of the reasons Gao was so important. The Askya was the ruler because of the magical qualities Gao had and Gao had its magical qualities because of the Askya. Which is why Gao was always the focal point of Songhay. Despite the Tarikhs being mainly written in and to the glory of Timbuktu it becomes clear that Gao was more important overall. This was the price won or

²⁹⁸ Prussin, Labelle. *Hatumere: Islamic Design in West Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.

²⁹⁹ van Dyke (Beyond Monument Lies Empire)

³⁰⁰ Conrad, David C. ‘A Town Called Dakajalan: The Sunjata Tradition and the Question of Ancient Mali’s Capital’. *The Journal of African History* 35, no. 3 (1 January 1994): 355–377, P.365.

³⁰¹ T/S-E, P.141.

defended in rebellions and it was the focal point of the anger and hopes of the scholars of Timbuktu. In a sense the inhabitants of Timbuktu drew their identity from this town as a city that was different in regards to Gao.

The relationship between the supernatural and rule did not pass the Muslim estate by. Initially some of the Muslim estate tried to keep Islam and their lives “pure” by keeping to themselves in separate settlements or city quarters thus keeping themselves out of politics nor only metaphorically but also physically. But soon enough the flexibility of the Muslim faith was put to work which in some ways then fostered more orthodox elements. Once the number of Muslims had reached a certain threshold in terms of numbers because their belief was able to make itself palatable to locals, the influence and duration of an entrenched Muslim elite group arose. This group, whose influence depended on the current social order, was a powerful local conservative force, especially if one considers the fact that these were specialists who prided themselves on studying the written word of God. Hanretta argues that they used the idea that the purpose of a written code is to make it immune to changes.³⁰² As Sanneh points out, Islam is, like many other such religions, less tolerant of perceived change or unorthodox practices regarding perceived core tenets of the creed.³⁰³ The interplay between a text and its interpretation is one of the central topics not only of Islam, but also of modern history and philosophy and is far from being put to rest. The vast amount of literature and thought produced regarding this issue will not be discussed here and can be read up elsewhere.³⁰⁴ Nevertheless, Islam still allows major differences in interpretation, as the different sects within Islam demonstrate,³⁰⁵ but nevertheless it is not as easily malleable as a religion which purely relies on oral transmission of its contents. Given the Muslim belief in one supreme authority and their sense of religious and thus moral superiority

³⁰² Hanretta (Islam and Social Change in French West Africa), P.38.

³⁰³ Sanneh, Lamin Ousman. *The Crown and the Turban: Muslims and West African Pluralism*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997, P.53.

³⁰⁴ For example: Foucault, Derrida, Hayden White. Also and directly used in this work: Horton and Goody among others have all written extensively about this subject.

³⁰⁵ Rogerson, Barnaby. *The Heirs of the Prophet Muhammad: And the Roots of the Sunni-Shia Schism*. London: Abacus, 2006.

because they are in harmony with the absolute truth, which was codified according to the instructions of God himself and survives in a medium which is not subject to the effects of word of mouth communication and erudition, followers were, according to Kaba, inflexible towards other practices and resisted submission to a secular ruler who they thought based his power on a different cosmology.³⁰⁶

The main exemplar of such thinking was the already mentioned Muhammed al-Maghili (1430-1503), a Muslim jurist from the Maghrib and close advisor to Askya Muhammed. As the latter desired to use Islam as a political tool, he wanted to raise his Muslim credentials by inviting this famous Muslim jurist to his court. He argued strongly against peaceful coexistence with non-Muslims. Asked by the Askya how he was to treat “syncretists” al-Maghili answered:

“As for the people whose conduct you described, [i.e. those who mixed Muslim with animist beliefs] they are polytheists without doubt, for in accordance with the literal interpretation of the ruling, one may be adjudged an unbeliever for less than that, (...)”³⁰⁷

We can see here that he used exactly the “immutability of script” argument by invoking the “literal interpretation”. This argument created a border between those who bowed to his interpretation and those he considered not adhering to his standards. He urged Askya Muhammed to use his authority in order to cleanse Songhay from these traditional religious influences and advised him how to treat those who did not adhere to this strict form of Islam:

“So make jihad against them, killing their men and enslaving their women and children and seizing their property in accordance with what we put forward in the Reply to the previous Question. If they persist in their polytheism, burn the custodians of their shrines and their gods, (...)”³⁰⁸

“Similarly every sorcerer and enchantress should be forced to recant on pain of death, and similarly anyone who claims to have talismans or amulets or the like for obtaining good fortune or defeating armies and so on. Whoever re-

³⁰⁶ Kaba (Islam, Politics and Revolution in Songhay), P.186.

³⁰⁷ Maghīlī (Sharīʿa in Songhay), P.78.

³⁰⁸ Maghīlī (Sharīʿa in Songhay), P.78.

nounces these things should be left in peace, but whoever persists should be killed."³⁰⁹

So al-Maghili, who was not at all familiar with the Sudan, made a sharp distinction between Islam and local beliefs, thus creating a division between his way of thinking that that of the vast majority of locals. These strong opinions were not left unchallenged by other Muslim scholars. Just one example shall be given here: Abi Zayd al-Qayrawani, a scholar who lived in Tunis 500 years before al-Maghili, but whose works were still authoritative a thousand years later, gave explicit permission for amulets and charms:

*"It is not wrong in making charms (ruqya) against the evil eye and other evils, nor in using the prayer of seeking refuge in God, (...) or to use charms containing verses of the Qur'an or some other good words, or to wear amulets (Ma'adha) containing verses of the Qur'an."*³¹⁰

But al-Maghili keeps piling it on, with no moderation showing - not only denying the local scholars all competence regarding matters of Islam but even accusing them of being heathens:

*"Despite this they possess books which they study and have tales and histories [which they relate]. Among them are judges and exegetes who make pronouncements concerning God's religion and claim that they are among the scholars who are (among) the heirs of the prophets and that it is our duty to emulate them. I ask of God Most High that He aid me to bear this burden which the heavens and the earth declined to bear."*³¹¹

and further:

"It is clear from the Qur'an, the Sunna and the consensus of the scholars that many of the learned men of this community are but to be classed among the venal scholars who falsely devour men's wealth and debar folk from God's path.

³⁰⁹ Maghīlī (Sharī'a in Songhay), P.91.

³¹⁰ Ibn-Abī-Zaid al-Qairawānī, 'Abdallāh. *The Risāla: Treatise on Mālikī Law of 'Abdallāh Ibn-Abī-Zayd al-Qayrawānī (922 - 996); an annot. transl.* Edited by Joseph Kenny. 1. print. Minna, Nigeria: Islamic Education Trust, 1992., P.228.

³¹¹ Maghīlī (Sharī'a in Songhay), P.61.

They are robbers of religion and are more harmful to the Muslims than all other miscreants."³¹²

According to Blum and Fisher, al-Maghili's visit was most likely a disaster as his stance was utterly incompatible with the social, religious and political realities of the Middle Niger Bend. The *Tarikh al-Sudan* does not mention his visit at all, and the *Tarikh al-Fattash* passages that do so are from the forged sections. Al-Maghili's visit only alienated the different Muslim factions from each other. Instead of giving the Middle Niger Bend an inclusive ideology, the 'Ulema was driven away from the ruler until the latter made clear that al-Maghili is not to be taken seriously.³¹³ It shows the tug-of-war between those who vied for more accommodation in order to make Islam "at home" in the Sudan and those who wanted Islam to stick closer to the orthodox opinion of other Muslim regions. The latter group included scholars like al-Maghili who were afraid that in the end Islam would become "watered down" to such a degree that it would become indistinguishable from the local traditional religions. This would then also mean that the distinct status Muslim scholars had were to disappear as they would become part of the society around them and with it they would lose the benefits such a status brought with it. The boundary had become porous but al-Maghili harked back to the attitudes before this time. He was a proponent of Muslims sequestering themselves off of those he considered heathens. He had furthermore strong tendencies of favouring a violent solution in order to promote his Muslim values, as can be witnessed in his stance on Jews.³¹⁴

The strategy that was actually implemented by the rulers of the Middle Niger Bend as well as by the local religious estate is best shown by al-Anusammani (exact dates unknown but he lived around 1543). He was one of al-Maghili's pupils and lived in the Sudan. He was a scholar from Agades or Tagidda, a Sanhaja, a Bidan who lived close to

³¹² Maghīlī (*Sharī'a* in Songhay), P.65.

³¹³ Blum and Fisher (*Love for Three Oranges*), P.74.

³¹⁴ Hunwick, John. 'Muhammad B. 'Abd al-Karim al-Maghīlī: His Life and Influence'. In *Sharī'a in Songhay: The Replies of al-Maghīlī to the Questions of Askia al-Hājj Muḥammad*, edited by John O Hunwick, 29–48. *Fontes Historiae Africae* 5. Oxford: Published for the British Academy by the Oxford University Press, 1985, P.36-37.

the Sudan all his life and was in contact with the Qadi's of Timbuktu.³¹⁵ Writing to Askya Muhammed after the latter had consulted him on religious matters, he gives us a prime example of how Muslim thinking was adapted to local circumstances by arguing that there are several categories of Muslims:

“As for the Fourth Category, should you come across them, then give them time so that they can learn and understand the meaning of what they utter. Do not kill them with the swords of the unitarians. (...)

The Fifth Category: people who utter: ‘There is no god but God, Muhammed is the Messenger of God’ and have belief in the content of what they utter and are firm in their conviction without any vacillation or disavowal which they conceal in their hearts, (...)

*The Sixth Category: people who utter: ‘There is no god but God, Muhammed is the Messenger of God’ and believe in the content of what they utter and are firm in their conviction without any vacillation or disavowal which they conceal in their hearts, (...)*³¹⁶

Al-Anusammani opened up the space for a “graded” Islam that was able to hold different ideas about the supernatural within itself, providing the “gaps” that could be filled with pre-Islamic notions as Horton argued for. The discussion about the “purity” of Islam was a constant feature on the Middle Niger Bend that also had its share of shrill voices from clerics who advertised an uncompromising version of their faith. Although quite flexible in doctrine for the most part as tolerance allowed peaceful coexistence which lay in the interests of the Muslim merchants, these absolutist tendencies flared up regularly.³¹⁷

Once Islam was accepted by a majority as a self-identifying force in terms of kinship and locality the ruler could rally them to unity as he was recognised as the spiritually legitimised ruler which is why it was so appealing to them in general and Askya

³¹⁵ al-Anusammani, Al-'Aqib. 'Al-'Aqib al-Anusammani's Replies to the Questions of Askya al-Hajj Muhammad: The Surviving Fragment'. Edited by John O. Hunwick. *Sudanic Africa* 2 (1 January 1991): 139–163, P.142.

³¹⁶ al-Anusammani (Al-'Aqib al-Anusammani's Replies), P.156-157.

³¹⁷ Hanretta (Islam and Social Change in French West Africa), P.36.

Muhammed especially. Askya Muhammed and Askya Dawud for example are both credited with baraka and hurma which furthered their status with the 'Ulema and at the same time showed their non-Muslim subjects a form of magic which they could use to the benefit of the empire. The Askyas, like their royal colleagues in Hausa, Bornu and many other areas of West Africa, ruled over a largely non-Islamic population. They did not push for Islam as a comprehensive state ideology but more as part of the glue which held his people together.³¹⁸ Islamic elements, such as baraka and hurma and devices like Amulets, Djinns and spells provided just that.

The rulers of the Sudanic polities often dithered between Islam and old practices which was fine to a certain degree as al-Anusammani has shown. Sometimes using one in conscious rejection of the other, sometimes fusing them into a single element, which often made the Muslim clerics unhappy, as they saw Islam tainted with unholy practices. This was not only a characteristic of the rulers of Songhay, but for every other king of the region as well. The Kano Chronicle gives an example of that. Yaji, a ruler of Kano, said to his Muslim clerics: "I want you to make prayer so that I may conquer the men of Santulo, (...)."³¹⁹ Later on, though, his son Kanajeji went to his traditional holymen who instructed him to follow certain non-Islam procedures: "Whatever you wish for in this world, do as our forefathers did of old." Kanajeji said: "Show me, and I will do even as they did."³²⁰ Another concrete example of this interplay is the description of the battle for Gao in the Tarikh al-Sudan. Askya Ishaq relied, according to oral traditions, vainly, on the presence of three guardian spirits, the "toorey" - the ox, the snake and the hen - to grant him victory against the Moroccans.³²¹ The Muslim dimension on the other hand is expressed by Askya Muhammed's prayer during the battle of Bargantche: "O mon Dieu, je l'implore en souvenir de ce jour où je me suis tenu auprès

³¹⁸ Azumah, John Alembillah. *The Legacy of Arab-Islam in Africa: A Quest for inter-Religious Dialogue*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2001, P.60. (correctpagenr)

³¹⁹ Palmer (Sudanese Memoirs), P.105.

³²⁰ Palmer (Sudanese Memoirs), P.108.

³²¹ Hale, Thomas A. *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist: Narrative Interpreters of the Songhay Empire: Narrative Interpreter of the Songhay Empire*. University Press of Florida, 1990, P.257.

de la tête de ton Envoyé dans son mausolée et où je t'ai demandé de me venir en aide dans toutes les difficultés que j'éprouverais (...).”³²²

This tug of war between “venal Islam” and “orthodox Islam” was never really resolved as the chapter on “honour” will show, as especially the nobility still relied on local traditional power structures that were tied to local supernatural practices. For the rulers of Songhay this situation was far from ideal as it hints towards an inbuilt strain between the different Muslim factions within the empire and by extension, between the ruling and the religious estate in Songhay. Some part of the Muslim estate was always criticising the ruler, thus working against the unification agenda a regent had. This led to grievances which were often formulated by members of the ‘Ulema who did not assign to the status quo and who either attacked the current state of political affairs or other members of the ‘Ulema who they considered overzealous or too compromising. In contrast to pre-Islamic religions, this was more serious, as disenfranchised Muslim elements did not content themselves with local demands but wanted their view of Islam to be the one used in the whole of the Middle Niger Bend. So in a sense the rulers of Songhay had, by propelling forward a delocalised, superkinship ideology also rendered grievances delocalised and made it possible for them being broadcast across the whole of the empire, enabling large scale rebellion, as will be shown in the chapter on “The social dissolution of the Middle Niger Bend”. By uniting the empire they had made it much more vulnerable on the whole.

On the other hand, this shows that Islam had become an integral part of the Middle Niger Bend and that the ruling estate had come to terms with the Muslims estate and vice versa. This culminated in Muslim councillors becoming close advisors to the Askys as pointed out above. Another important hint at to what extend the Muslim estate saw its existence very much tied into the political and social life of the Sudan is given witness to by the reaction of the Qadi of Timbuktu to an offer of al-Mansur as we will see now.

³²² T/F, P.133.

6.4 The fall and dispersion of the Muslim estate

With the fall of Songhay, the Muslim estate had to deal with the invaders whose notions of the social place of the Muslim estate was different than what they had hoped it would be. As the Arma wanted to control the Middle Niger Bend, they first targeted the 'Ulema of Timbuktu. Al-Mansur sent the Qadi of Timbuktu a letter with the following offer:

*“Every one to whom you give shelter; to him shall we give shelter, so as to display your good qualities, to recognise your status with us, and to elevate and proclaim your venerated position and high rank with us.”*³²³

With that, the Moroccan ruler touched upon a sore spot of the 'Ulema, as their hurma had been largely ignored by Askya Ban and also Askya Ishaq II. The importance of this point also becomes clear by looking at the concept of “hurma”: “sanctity”. The concept of hurma is too complex to explain here in full, but in essence hurma could be possessed by a holyman or a place and it represented a blessed state that others could appeal to to further their own agenda. If individuals asked for intercession from someone who was in possession of hurma, for example a Muslim scholar, and the demands were consistently not met, the hurma was lost. Hurma gained its divisive force through the idea that it represents the holy and untouchable of a place or man. A man with hurma has sanctity and complete immunity, which makes him the perfect place to run to if a crown prince got in trouble with the Askya. Hurma is not limited to the holyman and his dwelling but also for example the Quran. Some individuals placed this holy book on their heads in order to protect themselves against blows, the logic being that the attacker would not dare to hurt someone who hid behind the hurma of the holy Quran.³²⁴ By hurting the defender, the attacker would by extension attack the hurma of the Quran. This concept was a problem for the rulers of the Middle Niger Bend as it essentially removed the possibility of accessing uncooperative members of the Muslim estate by the nobility but in reverse it was still possible, creating an imbalance in power-relations.

³²³ al-Mansur (Letter from Mulay Ahmad al-Mansur to Qadi Umar B. Mahmud), P.301.

³²⁴ T/S-E, P.121.

Rulers that had to fight internal opposition could not allow this and thus violated the hurma of some holymen. Askya Musa, for example, the successor to Askya Muhammed, often turned a blind eye to such theological matters, provoking the curse of a holyman which, according to the chroniclers, caused his assassination after only three years in office.³²⁵ This caused further internal divisions within the empire that external powers tried to exploit and ultimately led to the demise of the empire as well as the Muslim estate on the Middle Niger Bend.

The problem for the Muslim scholars lay in the fact that this was one of their main ways of meeting the ruling estate on an even or even elevated footing, because it made it very clear that they were able to defy the power of any ruler. If rulers trespassed and did not recognise the hurma of a place or of a holy man, they not only violated a religious taboo but also rendered the opinion of those who saw themselves as representing Islam superfluous, at least regarding ruling the empire. By ignoring hurma, the Askya also ignored the 'Ulema. This was then no system anymore in which the sharia determined right or wrong and the last Askyas had not exactly respected this claim of the 'Ulema. By promising the Qadi that he, al-Mansur, would recognise hurma and his status, even elevating it, he essentially told him that he would see the 'Ulema as advisors and as intercessors between him, the ruler, and God.

No reaction came forth from the Qadi. For all we know, he ignored al-Mansur completely, for reasons pointed out later, aligning himself with the rulers of Songhay. The Moroccan ruler was probably well aware of the scholars that sat in on the Askya's council, one of his own spies sat in on it as well after all. After his successful conquest, Djoudar consequently dealt with the scholars accordingly. When he approached Timbuktu, he camped outside the city and the Qadi sent out a messenger which did not go down well:

*"Incensed, Jawdar set before Yahma [the messenger] various kinds of fruits, dates, almonds, and a lot of sugar; and draped over him a scarlet cloak of broad-cloth. Wise men did not think well of this, and the outcome proved them justified."*³²⁶

³²⁵ Hunwick (Secular Power and Religious Authority in Muslim Society), P.190.

³²⁶ T/S-E, P.192.

According to Hunwick these luxury items were brought from Morocco and the meeting was set up to insult the Qadi.³²⁷ This means that the Moroccans were aware of the power that the religious estate in Timbuktu had and that they meant to rule over them not with them. This led to a short, tense period, during which the two parties kept their mutual distance. This period saw its end in October 1591, when unrest broke out in Timbuktu. It was quickly quelled but the city and its inhabitants had yet to pay the full price for their disobedience. The day of reckoning came two years later, after Pasha Mahmud had finished a campaign fighting against the Tuaregs and the Dendi-Askya. According to the Tarikh al-Sudan he began to “(...) arrange the arrest of the jurists (...)”.³²⁸ The first step was to announce a raid on the peoples homes for weapons, with the explicit exception of one jurist. Consequently everyone deposited their valuables in this house as they were afraid that they would be robbed blind otherwise.³²⁹ The next day though, every single house, including this safe-house, was searched and the Moroccans demanded that everyone gather at the Sankore mosque to swear allegiance to al-Mansur. The jurists and scholars were to go last and when they arrived they were either shot or laid in chains and sold into slavery.³³⁰ Then:

*“(...) Pasha Mahmud entered their houses and removed all the valuables, household goods, and furnishings in quantities that none but God could measure, some being the scholars' own property and some the property of those who had deposited it with them. His followers plundered whatever they could lay their hands on, and brought dishonour upon the scholars, stripping their folk and committing acts of indecency. They took them to the fort and imprisoned them there with the men for six months.”*³³¹

The Pasha thus not only wanted to discipline the scholars but rather root them out completely. He not only abducted them but also annihilated their material foundation by taking their wealth and tried to blemish their reputation by violating their women. Those

³²⁷ T/S-E, P.192, see footnote.

³²⁸ T/S-E, P.218.

³²⁹ T/S-E, P.219.

³³⁰ T/S-E, P.219.

³³¹ T/S-E, P.220.

scholars who managed to escape the proceedings did not return or only at a much later date. They used their aforementioned links into the savannah or the desert. The Tarikh al-Sudan reports for example:

“So Shams al-Din [a scholar of Timbuktu and nephew of the Qadi] went to Isa b. Sulayman al-Barbushi, shaykh of the Awlad Abd al-Rahman, whose tents at the time were north of Taghaza [a salt-mine in the very north of modern day Mali], and entered into his protection (hurma). He asked him to take him to the town of Wada, so Isa took him there himself, as he requested.”³³²

Many individuals and families retraced their steps backwards to Walata and other desert towns and returned to it starting new literary traditions.³³³ The same goes for Dia and other cities. We do not know what happened in Gao, but it is possible that its fate was similar. Here again it becomes apparent that the civilisation that had developed on the Middle Niger Bend was deeply tied to its neighbours. After 1600, many of the scholars who had not been part of the top strata of scholars, the lesser Alfes, left the towns of the Middle Niger Bend as well, joining their more famous peers. They had close links to the local population as their background was often rooted there as they had originally come from villages in the vicinity of the great centres in order to receive a Muslim education. They had stayed as tailors or in other artisanal fields but now moved out into the countryside after the economic decline set in, spreading the faith they had studied.

With this return to the country of their forefathers into the north and south, scholarship on the Middle Niger Bend died. The merger of Bidan and black culture on the banks of the Niger had been stopped in its tracks. ‘Abdullah Ibn Muhammed, born in 1766/7, author of the Tazyin al-Waraqat, an eminent pre-Djihadi Fulani scholar³³⁴ wrote that:

³³² T/S-E, P.223.

³³³ Cleaveland (Becoming Walata), P.55.

³³⁴ Ibn Muhammad, Abd Allah. Tazyin al-Waraqat. Edited by Mervyn Hiskett. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1963, P.1-6.

*“(...) ‘Kirbasi’ is the name of a king across the river, and he is one of the sons of Askia [Muhammed], the Amir of Sughay the just. But his people have changed since his time, and have become unbelievers; (...)”*³³⁵

Thus the avantgarde of the Sudan scholarship of the 18th century did not think highly of the Middle Niger Bend, even calling them “unbelievers” although he clearly thought so that it had once been a centre of Muslim culture, otherwise Askya Muhammed would not have been described as a “just”, read Muslim, ruler. The falling standard of scholarship can be seen in the Tadzkirot al-Nisian. Its author refers to his great-grandfather as “(...) le grand-père de mon père nommé El-Fa[Alfa]-El-Amin-ben-Muhammed-Soud, le maître d’école (...)”³³⁶ thus describing him as an “Alfa”, a lower scholar. With the falling standards of erudition in Timbuktu the education gap between the Alfes that remained in the towns and fully fledged scholars and merchants had closed. Saad argues that the title Alfa which had been reserved as an honorific for scholars became more generally applied to everyone who had a basic grasp on reading and writing and Muslim scholarship.³³⁷ This led to a decline in status for the scholars themselves except for those families who could trace their ancestry back to a famous scholar, as they now benefited from a relative increase in status even if no current member was learned himself. They were able to draw on a form of nostalgia. The Aqits, a family who had produced several Qadis and other venerated scholars are a prime example of this mechanism.³³⁸

The decline of scholarship can also be seen in terms of which books were cited later on. Al-Sadi’s work was copied in relatively large numbers and snippets were inserted in other works like the Tadzkirot al-Nisian, the Tarikh al-Fattash was so important that it became subject to forgery in order to further political aims in the 18th century and al-Maghili was one of scholars referred to by the djihadists under Usman Dan Fodio. Although the Tarikh al-Fattash and the Tarikh al-Sudan were finished only after the Moroccan invasion and the fall of the Muslim estate, their authors were children of the

³³⁵ Ibn Muhammad (Tazyin), P.127.

³³⁶ Anonymous (Tadzkirot), P.5.

³³⁷ Saad (Social History of Timbuktu), P.107 and 123.

³³⁸ Saad (Social History of Timbuktu), P.123.

Songhay empire under whose umbrella they had grown up and lived the majority of their adult life. They were, together with Ahmad Baba and a handful of others the final generation of intellectuals that were a direct outgrowth of the scholarly traditions of the Middle Niger Bend. The *Tedzkiret* itself was only produced in the 18th century and there are hardly any scholarly documents from the time between the *Tarikh al-Sudan* and the *Tadzkiret*. Ahmad Baba mainly wrote in Morocco. This alone is a hint regarding the level of scholarship and debate that reigned on the Middle Niger Bend in this era. Between the beginning of the 17th century until the 18th century there were simply no scholars of note on the Middle Niger Bend that produced something with a lasting impact. Even those with noteworthy credentials like al-Maghili's pupil al-Anusammani survived only in a few fragments or not at all. The Arma themselves did not produce any scholars of note.

In the twilight of their learned culture, the local scholars reacted to the changing situation by becoming even more adamant in stating that their culture derived from the Maghrib, which was perceived as a beacon of learning and culture. It almost appears as a kind of Stockholm syndrome as al-Sadi was not the only one who desperately tried to make himself more Maghribian or even saw himself as being part of the Maghrib although they lived on the southern edge of the Sahara. The tragedy was that most North Africans saw down on them, calling them “‘abd”, “slave”, which is a term even used today.³³⁹ Although calling up on the Maghrib as cultural home is an exaggeration, the scholars of the Middle Niger Bend certainly had links into the lower half of the Sahara and to the oasis-dwellings there, linking them to the social groups roaming this area who were Bidan. Al-Sadi wrote the *Tarikh al-Sudan* after the Moroccan invasion, when the society he grew up in had been on its knees and Muslim scholarship and culture had fled either north or south. Hence his was an anachronistic attempt to link himself into a strong and burgeoning Muslim culture that just had arrived on the banks on the Niger by force. Through al-Sadi's work runs a schism though: on the one hand he was desperate to link the Middle Niger Bend to one of the lighthouses of Muslim civilisation, which in this case was North Africa, including Morocco, as was demonstrated above. His problem was, however, that one of the lighthouse guards had just invaded his own culture.

³³⁹ Hunwick (West Africa, Islam and the Arab World), P.88.

From al-Sadi's perspectives he had been abused by his own brother, which shines through quite clearly when he describes the Moroccan invasion as reason for acts as this:

“ (...) [The] ruler of Danka, who laid waste much of the land of Ra's al-Ma, seizing people's property without regard. People were killed, and free persons taken [as slaves]. The Joghoranis likewise laid waste the lands of Bara and Dirma, while the land of Jenne was most brutally ravaged, north, south, east, and west, by the pagan Bambara. They sacked every territory, plundered every piece of property, and took free women as concubines, from whom they had children who were raised as majus [Magician: i.e. non-Muslims] (...)”³⁴⁰

Here al-Sadi not only argues that the Middle Niger Bend declined, but reverted back into a more brutish era. That the children were raised as non-Muslims is a reversal to the time of the Djahiliyyah, the “era of ignorance” which is the moniker for the period of history that ends when the teachings of Islam come to be known. For al-Sadi, whose work is deeply teleological, this was the worst of all judgements he could cast. In a sense he is certainly right: the penetration of Muslim thought into the region was slowed down as the high level Muslim scholarship was dependent on the waqf system, a system of patronage that funded and appreciated their studies. An empire like Songhay had been more in need for the expertise such scholars could leverage in providing an overarching ideology, trade and justice system that became of ever greater importance the less individuals dealt with each other on a regular face to face basis, which is why they funded them. The new, smaller, polities of the Middle Niger Bend had no need for universities and scholars that dealt with abstract religious reasoning, as such Islam was not state policy anymore, as it had been under Songhay. The Tarikh al-Fattash supports exactly that when it describes the decline of the scholarly Timbuktu:

“Cependant, lorsque ces personnages furent partis pour l'exil, Tombouctou devint [comme] un corps sans âme. Sa vie fut bouleversée, ses conditions d'existence devinrent tout autres et ses mœurs se modifièrent. La plus basse classe de la population devint la plus élevée et la classe la plus élevée devint la plus basse; la pire canaille eut le pas sur la noblesse. On vendit les choses de la religion contre

³⁴⁰ T/S-E, P.193.

*des biens de ce monde et l'on troqua l'erreur contre la foi. Les règles de la justice furent supprimées, la tradition devint lettre morte, les doctrines nouvelles se firent jour et il ne resta plus à cette époque personne dans la ville qui observât la loi ni qui marchât dans le sentier de la crainte de Dieu, à l'exception seulement de Muhammed Baghayogho ben Ahmed (Dieu lui fasse miséricorde!).*ⁿ³⁴¹

Everything that went away, the scholars, the sold religious paraphernalia, the decline of the rule of law, were exactly those parts that relied on the money external donors brought in and the needs of an empire demanded.

Although many of those who had links to the Bidan world set their footsteps along this path, those who considered themselves Sudan moved to the east and the south. Exemplary of this trend are the Wangara,³⁴² who had originally come from the west and had been part of the empire of Mali but had shifted their allegiance to the Songhay empire until it fell in 1591. The Wangara had not only furthered the trade in the Sudan but also the Maliki school of Muslim thought and they also spread the first ideas about Sufi mysticism, probably importing it from North Africa.³⁴³ They did not consider themselves Bidan but Sudan. They spoke Songhay and were embedded into the empire's social fabric. Although they thought themselves as "apart" they relied on the security Songhay's armies had provided and had made themselves at home in its political and social institutions without which trade would have been impossible. After the empire's fall many fled to the south-east, to the Hausa states - Borgu, Borno, Kano and others - where their brethren had already established a presence, which was culturally closer than the Moroccans and which provided greater security.³⁴⁴ Kankan, Mabruk, Kong, Agadis and Katsina, and other cities, all of them part of the Sudan world began to appear in the records as centres of learning where standards of thinking and conduct were discussed and set.³⁴⁵

³⁴¹ T/F, P.308.

³⁴² Also known as Djoula, depending on the locale in question. In the west, Wangara was used, in the east Djoula.

³⁴³ Hiskett (The Development of Islam in West Africa), P.46.

³⁴⁴ Hiskett (The Development of Islam in West Africa), P.46.

³⁴⁵ Hiskett (The Development of Islam in West Africa), P. 155.

The fire of Sudanic Islam was stoked again in 1675 when adherents of Nasir al-Din preached in the rural areas of Futa Toro against worldly rulers. A hundred years later the Wolof were subject to similar messages and Usman dan Fodio also came from a rural background and not from an urban scholarly centre.³⁴⁶ This last point is highly significant as it indicates that the interests of the scholars of the countryside did not align easily with those of the powerful. The relationship between the urban scholarly elite and the aristocracy had been sometimes difficult but it was always assumed that these two groups communicated with each other and worked together. Even in times of Songhay rebellions, the scholars of Timbuktu and Djenne supported aristocrats, be they contenders or holders of the throne in Gao. This relationship began to change and the scholars dissociated themselves from the ruling elite and accommodated themselves with the peasantry. This led to an upheaval against the reigning powers in Sokoto and Masina which would have been impossible with the structures which had been in place before the Moroccan conquest as the scholar during these times had an intrinsic interest in keeping the current political structures alive. Even in times of rebellion they were not interested in a system change but at best a change in the person of the ruler. This becomes clear if one considers that the 'Ulemas of Dia, Djenne and Timbuktu were openly hostile to these leaders like Shaykh Ahmad of Masina.³⁴⁷ This last point is beyond of the scope of this study, but it is important to recognise that the structures which lead to this outcome had their foundation in the beginning of the seventeenth century when the trajectory of Islamic learning and diffusion changed.

At the end of the day, the Arma did not destroy Sudanic Islam in 1593 but they dispersed it, giving rise to more local forms and to new centres of scholarship over a wide area. The black and white groups that became dominant on the Middle Niger Bend were highly mobile, which stood in stark contrast to the spiritual castles of the Sahel like Djenne or Timbuktu. Their range was thus much higher, allowing them to spread their faith over a larger area. In the north, this is probably one of the reasons why all of the

³⁴⁶ Levtzion, Nehemia. 'Rural and Urban Islam in West Africa'. In *Rural and Urban Islam in West Africa*, edited by Nehemia Levtzion and Humphrey J Fisher, 1–20. Boulder, Colo: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1987, P.9.

³⁴⁷ Levtzion (Rural and Urban Islam in West Africa), P.9.

Berber factions, in all their different forms, had become Muslim by the middle of the eighteenth century at the latest. The Moroccan invasion tore down the barrier to the south which Songhay had erected giving these marauding and proselytising groups a much wider range into the Savanna as well.³⁴⁸ They became representatives for the interests of peasants as they had lines of communication to people of power. This increased the conversion rate and in some cases lead to a radical interpretation of Islam.

Many villagers had sent their sons to learn with Muslim scholars in the cities. Islam had opened an umbrella under which different ethnicities met and learnt its tenets. Muslim learning thus became part of the social structure of the discursive undercurrent of society - not only in the cities, but also in the villages and with the nomads when the pupils returned home and passed on and applied what they had learned. As a result, centres of scholarship began to dot the region of the Middle Niger Bend and were integrated into a much more rural lifestyle instead of being concentrated in towns. This allowed common ethic and legal norms to be established over a wider area, especially as these newly learned proselytised and in general had a high social standing in their native surroundings. McDougall makes clear that these religious hubs also gained economic functions as the Muslims scholars had links to the wider world of the desert and North African scholarship and began to link the rural areas into the economic world of these clans.³⁴⁹ This development in the world of the blacks and the Bidan, the old link between Muslim religion and lineage began to disappear. Osswald writes that the Sanhaja Berbers were on their final way out. Looking at the lineages of local scholars he contends that the Arabisation of the region was finalised by the turn of the 16th century.³⁵⁰ Timbuktu had been the crossroads where Bidan and Sudan scholars had met, learned from each other and then dispersed again into other centres like Walata, Dia and Shinqit

³⁴⁸ Willis, John Ralph. 'The Western Sudan from the Moroccan Invasion (1591) to the Death of al-Mukhtar al-Kunti (1811)'. In *History of West Africa*, edited by J. F. Ade Ajayi and Michael Crowder, 531–576. 3rd ed. Harlow: Longman, 1985, P.560-561.

³⁴⁹ McDougall, E. A. 'The Economics of Islam in the Southern Sahara: The Rise of the Kunta Clan'. In *Rural and Urban Islam in West Africa*, edited by Nehemia Levtzion and Humphrey J Fisher, 39–54. Boulder, Colo: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1987, P.53.

³⁵⁰ Osswald (Die Handelsstädte der Westsahara), P.285.

where their localised Muslim culture took on a life of its own.³⁵¹ The fall of Timbuktu actually increased this effect as the remaining scholars left the city and settled in the countryside. It marks the switch from an Islam based on the Middle Niger Bend to an Islam that was split between Bidan and Sudan.

The Moroccans had no inclination towards combining the Bidan and the Sudan, they wanted to establish dominance on their own terms. The difference between the situation of the Middle Niger Bend scholars under Songhay and the Arma however was that under the latter they lost the political power which they had gained under Songhay. The Arma thought not to be dependent on the Muslim estate in order to prove their right of stay, as their legitimacy was coming from Marrakech and was rooted in the better arms. It was one of the main mistakes of the Arma administration that they did not strive for a comprehensive, convincing ideology that justified their presence. The scholars had been the link between different powerful factions on the Middle Niger Bend, which at least some of the Askyas had understood, the Arma on the contrary killed and abducted them. Consequently they not only strengthened the distinction between Bidan and Sudan but also between the ruling estate and the religious estate. It is due to this ideological shortcoming they were also never able to develop a stable ruling system or gain genuine local support. As they were never able to gain unquestioned power they were in no position to do so and never established a framework in which negotiation could happen as the basics were missing: political stability, security and the ability to look beyond the bare necessities for life. Al-Sadi said that:

*“(...) security turned to fear, luxury was changed into affliction and distress, and prosperity became woe and harshness. People began to attack one another throughout the length and breadth of the kingdom, raiding and preying upon property, [free] persons and slaves. Such iniquity became general, spreading, and becoming ever more serious and scandalous.”*³⁵²

Under Songhay there had been, at least until Askya Dawud, a modus vivendi between the Muslim scholars and the warrior rulers that led to a stable administration of the region. With the destruction of the scholarly class and the failure of the Arma admin-

³⁵¹ Osswald (Die Handelsstädte der Westsahara), P.295.

³⁵² T/S-E, P.193.

istration to establish itself securely, no new pact between scholars and warriors was forthcoming and thus no new core of a strong new civilisation could develop.

7. Honour, Islam and the Arma

One of the central traits of West African nobility was honour. It was a measure of social distinction, determining the social rank of each individual within Middle Niger Bend society. Sardan writes that for the Songhay, before the colonial conquest, honour was considered the normal state of being. Linguistically there was no difference between “He is a human” and “He is a noble” (i.e. an individual with honour), having no honour meant not being a human. Those without honour were captives - i.e. slaves.³⁵³ Consequently, honour often became more precious than life itself and non-violable, something sacred. If honour was nonetheless impinged on, a part of the individual’s humanity was taken away. In this sense it links with the supernatural which was infused with equal qualities. In Peristiany’s words: “It is above all its relation to the ultimate source of the sacred within each individual that brings honor into the religious sphere.”³⁵⁴ Hence, rituals of honour and rituals of religion were often linked or the same, as in the rites of passage.³⁵⁵ Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers point out that these rites showed “how things are” and provide legitimacy to the social order and therefore give guidance to honourable behaviour.³⁵⁶ They further argue that honour and religious devotion also share the element of reciprocity.³⁵⁷ In religion man prays and a divine force answers, in society honourable man demands to be treated with respect according to his honour. Thus the drive to achieve honour is triggered by the desire to belong. To be recognised as a man of honour automatically means to be part of a value system and thus to belong to a social group. Not having honour usually means exclusion as one has crossed

³⁵³ de Sardan, Jean-Pierre Olivier. *Les sociétés Songhay-Zarma (Niger-Mali): Chefs, guerriers, esclaves, paysans*. KARTHALA Editions, 1984, P.36.

³⁵⁴ Peristiany (Honor and Grace in Anthropology), P.2.

³⁵⁵ For example: Marriage, passage into adulthood, etc.

³⁵⁶ Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers (Honor and Grace in Anthropology), P.2.

³⁵⁷ Peristiany, John George, Julian Alfred Pitt-Rivers, and Julian Alfred Pitt-Rivers. ‘Postscript: The Place of Grace in Anthropology’. In *Honor and Grace in Anthropology*, 215–246. Cambridge University Press Cambridge, 1992., P.216.

the boundary that a group has surrounded itself with. Accepting certain notions of honour and being accepted on the basis of these by others is one of the core prerequisites of belonging to a social group. Honour defined the social boundaries of the different social groups of the Middle Niger Bend. As it was one of the fundamental parameters of political power, rulers and Muslims vied for control over the religious and thus honorific framework. Honour was asked for and was bestowed in return. Thus the link between religion, honour and society was sealed.

As honour is part of an individual's identity, it exists in the form of a self-description but is also dependent on ascriptions from others. Everyone thinks he is entitled to respect, seeing himself as honourable in some form, but only radiates this by others recognising this claim and treating this individual with honour. So, although we claim honour as individuals it can only be expressed in a group. This means that every individual is reliant on the standards of honour the group has set for itself. What honour actually is, is thus negotiated and defined by the members of a group through internal discourse and in turn by social interaction through its boundaries with other groups. This means that ideas of honour within a group are not fixed and are dependent on the social circumstances and that individual ideas of honour are formed by collective notions of what honour is. Such boundaries are permeable and are changed if challenged by powerful ideas that have a life of their own or they are strengthened when others are seen as dangerous. The problem that arises is that different social groups can share the same social world. Muslim traders and Bidan living in Timbuktu were a distinct social group from the Songhay warrior-nobles but they both lived under the spell of the Askya in the Songhay empire, thus sharing the same social world. Sharing however meant that individuals had to constantly serve two honour codices depending on whom they interacted with and what their goals were. This led to clashes between different ideas and thus between individuals and social groups.

There is a difference between vertical and horizontal honour, which ties in to Handelman's "lateral" and "hierarchical" markers of social distinction mentioned before.³⁵⁸ The first is the claim to be respected by one's equals, the latter is the demand of being honoured by those of a different social rank. Appiah argues similarly, stating that honour

³⁵⁸ see chapter 2

between individuals of the same rank is without graduation.³⁵⁹ Appiah also adds that horizontal honour can also be competitive. Although honour as being based on belonging to the same social group is without gradation there is also the competitive aspect that is triggered in order to distinguish oneself from peers who are part of the same social group or the desire to climb up the ranks. This is why competition for honours can only take place within the framework of horizontal honour. Being part of a certain group means being part of a specific honour system only applicable to that group. Thus being a noble means being a person of some form of honour, it is the very centre of being a noble. It is imbued via birth and cannot be lost inside the social group that recognises it. This is why every action of an individual always impinges upon the honour of the whole group or strata that individual is associated with. Consequently excessive violation of these social norms demands ostracisation of this individual because he challenges the basis of this group's cohesion.

Consequently, only a Songhay warrior-noble was able to challenge another warrior-noble to a duel. Only a Muslim scholar could argue with another Muslim scholar about interpretations of law and Islam. Competitive honour only makes sense if the vertical honour is recognised. Otherwise a challenge might be interpreted as an insult to honour as an individual of lower vertical rank challenging someone of higher vertical rank is basically dragging the latter down and by accepting the higher ranking individual would accept this. Conversely, it meant that the lower ranking individual, by not accepting notions of vertical honour supplied by the society he moved in, challenged the whole system which put him in a precarious position even towards his peers who themselves had to protect their status from individuals of lower vertical status. However, upheavals in the stratifications of a vertical system of honour can take place. Recognised upper strata honourable social groups might bestow a higher status on lower groups as e.g. recognition for services rendered. Another avenue is that lower status groups become successful at an endeavour that is one of the status markers of higher status groups. If power is a high status marker and honour is achieved through material means than those who acquire wealth automatically become powerful members of society and

³⁵⁹ Appiah, Anthony. *Eine Frage der Ehre: Oder wie es zu moralischen Revolutionen kommt*. München: Beck, 2011, P.32.

thus might usurp the places of honour held by the old guard. Slaves that became successful military commanders were seen as dangerous upstarts as they challenged warrior-nobles on their own territory of honour, which is why they sometimes got punished through no fault of their own, in order to remind them, and the rest of society, that they were still slaves. In order to prevent this from happening Songhay had a distinction in its military units. Cavalry was manned by free nobles but infantry and archers were often slaves. Equestrian warfare was seen as the heights of honour, battles fought with ranged weapons were despised and infantry was fodder for the riders' blades. This attitude was to cost Songhay dearly when the Moroccans arrived with their muskets.

According to Illife, until the coming of Islam, the values of honorific conduct were the main ideological motivator of behaviour within Middle Niger Bend society.³⁶⁰ Rouch reports that respecting elders and following the rites of passage (e.g. birth, marriage, death)³⁶¹ were derived from traditional religions. Skill in battle, audacity, valour, kindness, defending the family were all part of the ideal of honour prevalent on the Middle Niger Bend and wrapped up in the term "Lord of the Route". Rituals associated with such notions modulated the political system of Songhay, Borno and other polities on the Niger. Consequently, as Abou-Zeid has shown, in order to increase one's honour instead of just retaining it, in most cases one had to leave a passive state and strive for accumulating honour through acts which granted distinction and superiority.³⁶² This was most strikingly achieved by putting others to shame, as it emphasises difference. As one seeks the attention of peers the best victim for such an approach to honour is by using an entity outside of one's own society as a stirrup for upping one's own honour. Examples of this were small-scale raiding of neighbouring settlements, enslavement of its inhabitants and acquiring the associated booty. A step up from these uncoordinated attempts of acquiring honour was large-scale war. This type of honour is part of the ex-

³⁶⁰ Illife (Honour in African History), P.1.

³⁶¹ Rouch (Les Songhay) P.67.

³⁶² Abou-Zeid, A. 'Honour and Shame Among the Bedouins of Egypt'. In *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society*, edited by J. G Peristiany and Julio Caro Baroja, 243–260. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1965, P.258.

planation why the empire's ruling elite was filled with warriors and dominated by their demands.

Such regulators of society were not immediately washed away with the advent of Islam. Especially in the eastern part of Songhay, where the power of the Muslim estate was weakest and the warrior's sway strongest, older, pre-Islamic notions of honour were kept alive much longer. An ideological split began to develop between the east, Gao and the west, Timbuktu and Djenne. In the latter cities it was possible to gain honour by adhering to Muslim ideals whereas in the east, political power still rested on proving to be a noble, a man of honour in the old style. Those who filled the office of Balma'a, Koi or Fari were all warrior-nobles, not scholars, and thus thrived in a system that was geared towards emphasising the qualities of a fighting man. War was seen as one of the prime avenues of winning prestige by performing glorious deeds. Battle was the litmus test of a noble and in the crucible of battle power was gained or lost. Without struggle there was no honour. So warriors had to fight on even in the face of defeat. This self-evident fact for Middle Niger Bend societies is illustrated by the result of a skirmish where Songhay warriors were attacked by a much larger enemy force. Fifteen died and nine survived but because they fought, even in the face of defeat and death, they were not taken prisoners but sent back as free men to Askya Dawud with the comment that "such valorous folk did not deserve to die".³⁶³ Another story follows this topos - the enemy approached but a general insisted on finishing his game of Mankala:

"The askiya sent word to Dankulku, who was 'Lord of the Route'³⁶⁴ at that time, to tell his men to put their lances at the ready. The messenger found him playing Sudanic chess, but Dankulku ignored the messenger, since he was absorbed in his game. When the unbelievers got really close the askiya himself rode out and yelled at Dankulku, 'What is going on? The unbelievers are upon us'. Dankulku said nothing until he had finished his play, then he turned to him and said, 'Shame on you! What a coward you are! You are not worthy to be an amir'.

³⁶³ T/S-E, P.147.

³⁶⁴ In this case the word probably means "commander of the foot-soldiers."

Then he executed some battle manoeuvres, which led to the unbelievers' defeat and flight."³⁶⁵

Dankulku's valour is exemplified by not taking his enemy seriously. He was so sure of his ability as a warrior that it was out of the question for him to lose, whereas the Askya is presented as a careful man - a coward. His general on the other hand, demonstrated by his dismissive attitude towards an approaching adversary shows power. Whereas the Askya saw the approaching enemy in terms of horizontal honour, thus accepting those who attacked him as equals, the general did not. He maintained vertical honour, clearly stating his superiority. By not taking the enemy seriously he elevated himself above them and he demonstrated this by his "battle manoeuvres". What already becomes apparent here is the influence of Islam on traditional attitudes of honour. Dankulku scolded the Askya as not being "worthy to be an amir", i.e. a Muslim leader. As a Muslim he should not be afraid of advancing heathens, they cannot win, because god is not on their side. It has to be kept in mind, though, that this episode was written down by al-Sadi, a Muslim scholar, so it is possible that he phrased the story in such a way that would emphasise this teleological element. What it also shows however is how traditional notions of honour could be recast in Muslim terms without changing them all that much. This did not always work as we will see later, but it shows a way, how the two could interact and create something new.

What this episode further demonstrates is that high officials had their own mind and were ready to oppose the Askya. Despite having a bureaucratic system, Gao, as well as Borno and other powers in the area, were only ever able to impose limited control over its provinces and its governors. The capital's authority was permanently undermined by local power-figures that controlled the provinces, cities or other vital positions, trying to get their own way. Although the position of the Dendi-Farmi, Timbuktu-Koi, etc. were offices, their power was also heavily dependent on the individuals filling them. Despite every title having a role associated with it, which gave it a rough shape, a strong official could expand his responsibilities, while a weak one was squashed by other nobles and left with an empty title and usually lost even that quickly thereafter. The position of the Kurmina-Fari and others depended directly on them being able to utilise the power they

³⁶⁵ T/S-E, P.128.

were able to tap into and could only rely to a very limited degree of the imbued authority of the office itself.

In this sense, honour is only worthwhile if it is recognised by others in society, making it a highly opaque medium for gaining promotion as it is subjective and prone to manipulation. The honour of a title and the honour of a person were tied together, furthering the status of the person who filled a certain office. Yet by attacking either the honour of the person or the office he held through spreading rumours or making him appear weak, the social rank could be manipulated. One of many incidents mentioned in the *Tarikh al-Sudan* shall be used as an illustration for the points made. Askya Muhammed had appointed his son Balla to the vacant post of Benga-Farma which was the cause of envy amongst his brothers:

“Balla was well-known among his brothers for his courage and valour, though he was one of the younger ones. When his elder brothers heard of the appointment, they were angry and swore that when he came to Gao they would split open his drum, for that post of Benga-farma was a major one, and its occupant was one of the drum-lords. [The drum is a sign of high authority.]”³⁶⁶

The office was always seen as being part of a person and by attacking the honour imbued by an office one could bring down its bearer, which is why the brothers wanted to “split open his drum.” The argument went something like this: the feeling of honour inspired a certain behaviour, which received recognition and established reputation. This reputation was finally appreciated by the bestowal of honours, like an office. In the words of Julian Pitt-Rivers: “Honour felt becomes honour claimed and honour claimed becomes honour paid.”³⁶⁷ Esteem of office and of holder were thus intertwined, but opinion about on whom to bestow honours was not uniform and different groups saw the worthiness of a person for an office or vice versa differently to for example political authorities as shown in the example just cited. That the honour of the office as an inde-

³⁶⁶ T/S-E, P.115-116.

³⁶⁷ Pitt-Rivers, J. ‘Honour and Social Status’. In *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society*, edited by J. G Peristiany and Julio Caro Baroja, 19–78. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1965, P.22.

pendent entity was not so much a concern to anyone involved can be seen by the reaction of Balla to these threats:

*“He came to Gao, his drum being beaten in front of him,(...). None of them [his brothers] dared harm him, and thus enmity arose between them, because of his haughtiness and the way in which he outshone them by his bravery in many engagements and combats.”*³⁶⁸

He used his office in order to prove his daring and the brothers could not harm him because of the qualities like “bravery” he brought to the office with him and not because the office made him so. Vertical honour provided by an office was a means of gaining horizontal honour, the recognition of his peers. Honour was the constant occupation of this strata of society whose members mostly knew each other, as it was small in size and most offices had been handed out to relatives of the Askya’s wider family. Peristiany points out that the social personality of an actor in that system determined his office.³⁶⁹ What is poignant in the example above is the insecurity and instability it displays which was inherent in such a system, the aforementioned intransparency showing through starkly. Even if honour was handed down as an inheritance, as was the case with Bella here, it had to be asserted and vindicated. He had to deal with this part of the Songhay system of honour and accept the pervasive power of public opinion, he was constantly subject to the scrutiny of his peers and had to prove his worth. Demonstration of honour was also important, because it was part of the social solidarity, not only of Songhay against outsiders, but also family against family, lineage against lineage. As much as honourable behaviour furthered the status of the individual, it also improved the status of the group itself. The reverse however, was also true. As was argued before, dishonourable conduct led to the disgrace of the whole group and was consequently punished, by losing even more honour or even one’s life. However, the victim of shaming was only dishonoured in his own eyes when he accepts this although this acceptance was not always down to a personal choice but was dependent on social factors. Whenever honour was under attack, the accused could try to vindicate it, the success depending on the

³⁶⁸ T/S-E, P.116.

³⁶⁹ Peristiany, John George. *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society*. Chicago [u.a.]: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1970, P.11.

severity of his perceived misconduct, the status difference between the accused and the accuser and by what is at stake.

Thus honour was important as it directly related to how much concrete power a noble (the only ones who could hold an office) could wield. The role of each office was thus fluid which makes it hard to define the exact extent of the responsibilities each post within the empire had. This being the case, the state was only in a very limited sense able to distribute vertical honour, meaning that different offices had only in a very general sense different “amounts” of honour attached to them. A “Koi” for example was in most cases below a “Farmi” or “Fari”³⁷⁰ or the Kurmina-Fari was above the Dendi-Fari, but because of the amorphous structure of the Songhay administrative system, a strong “Koi” could challenge a “Fari”, especially in troubled times. One example is the Hi-Koi, who was a vizier-like commander and who rebuked the then Kurmina-Fari Dawud when he tried to depose Askya Ishaq I.³⁷¹ This situation was aggravated by the fact that most high offices were handed out to relatives of the Askya. Thus a progression based on pure merit was not possible as there existed no internal, transparent and recognised system of advancement. A contender for a certain office had to outmanoeuvre his opponents by the use of political subtleties and/or brute force and by “outhonouring” the other.

The Askya was the sovereign and he alone, at least in theory, determined who was to hold which office and thus his reputation carried over to the positions he handed out. In Pitt-Rivers’ words:

*“The idea that the honour of the group resides in its head was fundamental to the conception of aristocracy and assured the fidelity through the oath of the liegeman to his lord; the inferior in such a relationship participated in the honour of his chief and was therefore interested in defending it.”*³⁷²

This also meant that if the ruler’s honour was seen as beyond repair, he had also dishonoured those who held those offices. This interdependency becomes especially important when gross violations by individuals happened that endangered the status of the

³⁷⁰ Cissoko (The Songhay from the 12th to the 16th century), P.198.

³⁷¹ Hunwick (Songhay), P. XIIV.

³⁷² Pitt-Rivers (Honour and Social Status), P.36.

whole group. When the Askya blundered he might have taken the whole nobility with him. This distinction makes clear that although superiors can deny an inferior honour, they cannot completely withhold it from an individual as they are always his inferiors and equals - he does not have to accept the denial, as Iliffe has pointed out as well.³⁷³ This was not a desirable state to be in, as it could seriously hamper social progress, but made it possible to look for other avenues of social advancement, which could ultimately weaken the position of those who denied honour to their inferiors. These lords thus had a pretext for rebellion if the Askya appeared weak, as they had no intention of going down with him; which is why he had to face down external enemies whatever the cost.

The Askya had to be very wary of commanders who had accrued vast amounts of honour, as they could become dangerous to his position. Through their actions it was possible that they prove to be the better head, the better example of the group. Askya Dawud, one of the two Askyas which are idolised by al-Sadi had such problems and also found a solution:

“Now this Hi-koi Musa was a man of extreme boldness, courage and strength, so Askiya Dawud began to hatch plans to have him assassinated. He told his nephew Muhammed, son of his sister Dalla, to watch over him closely, and to kill him the moment he had the advantage of surprise. So one day he killed him with a lance,(...).”³⁷⁴

A Songhay noble, a warrior, did not aim for the honour of an office as such but used it in order to further his status in society: it was currency like seniority, heroic behaviour in battle, sexual prowess and wealth. This created a highly unstable system as political offices were tied to the individual qualities of honour which were mainly derived via battle and also fostered the tendency to recourse to such “solutions” as described in the citation above. An additional problem was that an individual’s own honour was also dependent on the honour they were being associated with, as was already discussed above in case of the Askya and the nobility. This meant that that in order to be able to control influences over one’s own honour they had to “control” other individuals, in extreme cases via assassination. Furthermore, the state did not provide the authority to which

³⁷³ Iliffe (Honour in African History), P.4.

³⁷⁴ T/S-E, P.144.

one could turn to make a complaint and gain compensation if one felt his honour was at stake. In addition, as pointed out by Pitt-Rivers, seen from the individual's standpoint, to have to call on a higher authority in order to defend one's own honour meant to jeopardise the claim to settle one's debts of honour for oneself, thus appearing weak.³⁷⁵ Iliffe has observed that as personal honour was so valuable and no third controlling agency was intervening, responses to insult across time and geography were often extremely violent, producing hyper-competitive societies in West Africa.³⁷⁶ Songhay society had some mechanisms of softening this Darwinian social world, otherwise it would not have endured for long. For example, deference did not necessarily reduce one's standing but softened the relationships between different political actors. The Tarikh al-Sudan reports for example of 'Umar Koadiakha, Sunni Ali's brother, "(...) since he was a wise and prudent person he behaved with extreme deference towards Sunni Ali, so the tyrant never did him any harm."³⁷⁷ Another way of dealing with this issue was to let time come to one's aid. Sunni Ali was known to hand out death sentences very easily and regretting it later, so the victims went into hiding:

"Another habit of his was to order a man to be killed—even if he were among those dearest to him—for no reason or cause. Then in some cases he would regret his order. If the condemned man was someone whose death he was likely to later regret, his officials, who knew his ways of behaving, would keep him alive in hiding. When Sunni Ali repented his action, they would reveal that they had kept the man alive for him, and he would rejoice."³⁷⁸

As this description was written down by al-Sadi long after Sunni Ali's death it has to be treated with care. Especially if one keeps in mind that al-Sadi had no love for this ruler and this sign of mental instability fits in with the rest of how he is described in the Tarikh al-Sudan. That this episode has not happened exactly as described is supported by the fact that the motivation of the officials who made hiding those sentenced persons possible is not described or explained and it somehow hangs in between other stories

³⁷⁵ Pitt-Rivers (Honour and Social Status) P.30.

³⁷⁶ Iliffe (Honour in African History), P.100.

³⁷⁷ T/S-E, P.97.

³⁷⁸ T/S-E, P.96.

about Sunni Ali. What it highlights is that there must have existed a system of social debt, otherwise such a description would make no sense as it would be unintelligible to the contemporary reader. The person whose life was saved this way stood in the debt of his saviour and at the same time the latter rose in standing in the eyes of the Askya as he had prevented him from the fallout of a bad decision, creating another social obligation.

This episode leads to the paradox of grace, its implications penned down by Pitt-Rivers. At some stage every honourable man tries to convert his honour into grace, because through this he effectively legitimises his claim to honour and becomes unassailable. He does not demand what is considered rightfully his, he lets a transgressor live instead of passing the death sentence, he forges peace instead of making war. He does this not because he cannot enforce it, but exactly because he can, but chooses not to. He can choose not to defend his honour. He is beyond these claims. By proving that he does not rely on these honour-defending mechanisms anymore, the honourable man turns into a graceful man and does not need to constantly fight for honour anymore and can instead bestow something of his own honour upon others.³⁷⁹ This behaviour in turn increases his honour and status even more. Giving gifts, be they material or spiritual, become the mark of an honourable man. Every individual wanted to achieve such a status and thus there was some form of competition in order to reach a competition-free state. This state was again never absolute but embedded in the social system as an ideal and there was competition for reaching this status. An example of this is presented in the *Tarikh al-Fattash*. A slave named Missakoulallah had given more grain to the poor than the Askya, prompting the latter to react:

“Ensuite l’askya reprit: ce Missakoulallah n’a pas voulu autre chose qu’élèver son nom au dessus de notre nom, car moi, je ne donne jamais mille sounnou à la fois; comment un de nos esclaves pourrait-il nous surpasser en libéralité et en générosité?» L’assemblée s’écria alors: «Ce serait une honte, venant d’un homme comme lui, dont toute la personne ne vaut pas une goutte de ton océan de libéralité et de générosité! Si tu le voulais, tu pourrais te montrer plus généreux que lui et donner plus que tous les biens dont il dispose». Puis ils continuèrent à tenir des

³⁷⁹ Pitt-Rivers (Postscript: The place of grace in anthropology), P.243.

propos analogues, en variant leurs arguments, jusqu'à ce qu'ils eussent apaisé le prince, qui alors garda le silence."³⁸⁰

Individuals could achieve such a graceful status regarding a particular group of citizens but be seen as completely despicable by others. This was actually one of the points of contention between the Askya and the Qadi. The Qadi was seen by the scholars as being honourable and full of grace. Some Askyas however considered him a nuisance, thus disregarding his honour and graceful status. This in turn meant that he attacked everyone who had received grace from the Qadi, as they were basking in his honour, thus splitting the empire into two camps.

By establishing new standards of honour and introducing a different social and ideological system, Islam challenged and bypassed old norms of honour and created new ones, thus setting up a fundamental dichotomy in the Songhay empire between the Muslim ideology of the west and the traditional Songhay warrior ideology of the east. One example of this new Muslim influence is the education individuals received at a madrasa which ultimately led to them being part of the 'Ulema. This would put them into the same stratum as the Qadis or scholars. Since the most respected members of the 'Ulema were often able to put considerable pressure on the ruler himself, becoming a learned member of society had immense value attached, even if one was only a lowly Alfa (lesser scholar). Another benefit of being learned was to be able to cast spells and craft amulets through the use of the Arabic script, bestowing the scholar with great prestige. Saad points out that even if one did not gain access to these higher strata of learning, middle ranking scholars often became imams or kathibs which opened up the route to become the spiritual advisor to a local patron, thus gaining a high status role in a local community.³⁸¹ The prestige attached to a learned individual could then transfer to the whole family or in some cases, even the whole clan or ethnic group. This in turn meant for each group that there was an incentive in raising as many scholars as was feasible. Even if a famous scholar died, his social group still carried his status with it. This

³⁸⁰ T/F, P.183.

³⁸¹ Saad (Social History of Timbuktu), P.158-159.

instigated certain scholarly traditions within social groups and provided a new kind of identity, giving rise to the so-called scholarly lineages or clans like the Kunta.³⁸²

Hence honour was, like religion, transformed by Islamic thought. Under Sunni Ali the influence of Muslim piousness was negligible but through the wholehearted adoption by Askya Muhammed Islam gained momentum and began to change how honour was seen and used. Because of the link between religion and honour, Islam recalibrated the latter, as it put the Prophet Mohammed and God in the centre of devotion and demanded that all honour go to them. Honorific conduct was to follow the Sharia. The way Songhay society had employed honour traditionally was frowned upon because it detracted from honouring God and Mohammed. If one did not honour God, honour does not follow him and ruin will be the consequence. This view of things was made very clear in the Tarikh al-Fattash:

*“Ce qui causa la ruine de l’État du Songaï, ce qui poussa Dieu à y jeter la désorganisation, ce qui amena sur les citoyens le châtimeut dont ils se moquaient jusque là, ce fut l’insobsewance des lois de Dieu, l’iniquité des esclaves, l’orgueil et l’arrogance des grands. Au temps d’Ishàq, la ville de Gao avait atteint l’extrême limite de l’immoralité; les crimes les plus graves, les actes les plus désagréables à Dieu s’y commettaient ouvertement et les pires turpitudes s’étalaient au grand jour. C’était à un tel point qu’on avait désigné un préposé aux adultères pour lequel on avait confectionné un tambour spécial et devant lequel les intéressés se citaient réciproquement. Il y avait encore d’autres choses dont le récit déshonorerait celui qui aurait l’audace de le faire. Nous appartenons à Dieu: c’est vers lui que nous devons retourner.”*³⁸³

Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers argue that honour relied on the recognition of peers, controlling the standards by which the group judges honour brought control over it.³⁸⁴ The Muslim religious estate in Songhay thus tried to redefine the code of honour, claiming more power as they were the gateway to this form of religious esteem. An example is Ahmad Baba’s description of his master Muhammed Baghayogho:

³⁸² Saad (Social History of Timbuktu), P.164.

³⁸³ T/F, P.272.

³⁸⁴ Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers (Honor and Grace in Anthropology), P.4.

“Il était, encore, un homme plein d’intelligence de pénétration et de lucidité dans les idées, pouvant s’élever aux plus grandes choses, comme descendre aux plus petits détails; prompt à la repartie, discret à toute épreuve, aux manières pleines de dignité. Du reste, il était une vraie merveille de Dieu pour la vivacité de conception et de l’esprit (...). La modestie l’avait revêtu de son manteau précieux, il s’avançait environné de toutes les lumières de la vertu, plein de calme et d’affabilité et d’une pudeur que relevait la plus parfaite délicatesse.”³⁸⁵

Ahmad Baba’s description of his master juxtaposes with honour feelings of the Songhay nobility. It is also useful in showing that they wanted a theocracy in which they were only "advisors" and guardians of the Muslim faith, not theocratic rulers themselves. On the contrary they set themselves up as uncomfortable but necessary opposition and painted themselves as the consciousness of the realm. Ahmad Baba admired Muhammed Aqit’s intransigence towards the Askayas:

“Il y avait en lui, un mélange de fermeté et d’indépendance qui le mettait au dessus de tous les préjugés. Devant le roi, il émettait ses opinions avec la même franchise qu’il eût parlé devant le peuple.”³⁸⁶

Ahmad Baba wrote this under the Arma, where (perceived) intransigence had cost the ‘Ulema dearly and thus open confrontation was not an option anymore. So by epitomising Muhammed Aqit’s stance Ahmad Baba made a comment without openly declaring hostile intentions. This redefinition of honour gained a foothold, although the lack of non-Muslim sources makes it quite hard to judge exactly how far they managed to penetrate the ruling estate. According to al-Sadi they held quite significant influence, at least in the west of Songhay in general and Timbuktu especially:

“(...) l’Askya (...) vint rendre visite au câdi dans sa maison, le portier qui était préposé à la garde de cette maison repoussa le prince et refusa de le laisser entrer, en sorte que l’askia demeura longtemps debout sur ses pieds à attendre à la porte. Le câdi ne consentit à le laisser entrer que sur l’intervention de

³⁸⁵ Kifaya, Bibliothèque nationale de France: Fonds Arabe, folio 224a - 226a translated in: Zouber (Ahmad Baba de Tombouctou), P.46-47.

³⁸⁶ Kifaya, Bibliothèque nationale de France: Fonds Arabe, folio 114a translated in: Zouber (Ahmad Baba de Tombouctou), P.48.

*quelques-uns des ulémas de la ville et des principaux notables. (...) Le prince se présenta au câdi dans une attitude insinuante, humble et modeste et se pencha pour lui baiser la tête, tandis que le câdi l'accueillait en restant assis en face de lui, à la manière de quelqu'un qui se dispose à se lever pour partir, et en gardant un visage sévère.*³⁸⁷

On the other hand, the 'Ulema gave a crucial element back: legitimacy. This is demonstrated by the Qadi of Timbuktu when he called Askya Muhammed "Commander of the Faithful",³⁸⁸ another way of saying that he considered him as the Caliph, supreme ruler of all Muslims and those humans who lived in his domains. Although the concept of Caliph changed over time and sparked major disagreements between different Muslims sects, he was usually seen as the supreme leader of all Muslims and was in a position invested with considerable spiritual meaning.³⁸⁹ However, the latter he only received through his recognition by the religious estate, the 'Ulema. Hunwick points out that it was of no use if he only claimed it, the claim had to be granted by these religious authorities which he had to ask for guidance in religious and legal matters.³⁹⁰ The Qadi on the other hand increased his own prestige by attaching himself to caliphal authority. Although it is not spelled out in any of the sources it is highly probable that the Qadi knew full well that Askya Mohammed was not the ruler of the whole Muslim world but only of Songhay and thus the title of Caliph was not quite fitting here. But as Songhay was the local hegemon no one could seriously challenge it and so both Qadi and Askya raised their status by calling the ruler of Songhay Caliph without fear of a backlash. Even modern Griots give Askya Muhammed praise and honour, by retelling how he fought for Islam and made people convert through words and sword. But as Muslims also adapted their spiritual world to local pre-Islam models of the supernatural, their notions of honour also incorporated originally non-Muslim elements. The old ideas of

³⁸⁷ T/F, P.202.

³⁸⁸ T/S-E, P.122.

³⁸⁹ An excellent overview over the discussion on caliphal power in medieval Islam provides: Afsaruddin, Asma. *Excellence and Precedence: Medieval Islamic Discourse of Legitimate Leadership*. Vol. 36. Brill, 2002.

³⁹⁰ Maghīlī (Sharī'a in Songhay), P.97-99.

being a conquerer who subjects, a warrior who fights in single combat and wins the throne, was and is a blend of honour and magic, demonstrated in the songs of today's Griots about Askya Muhammed:

*"Now, Mamar [Askya Muhammed] came to sit down. / He ruled then, (...), he converted. / Any village that he hears is trying to resist, / (...) / He gets up and destroys the village. / If the village accepts, he makes them pray. / (...) / They told Daouda son of Mamar that a child cannot have the throne of Songhay. / (...) / He who has not killed these two lions will not have the throne of his father in Songhay. / Daouda son of Mamar told the people to get up and go out onto the road to Gombo. / It is the real men, he said, not any men, not any people, not any men, they should select the real men who should go out onto the Gombo road. / (...) / The one he pierced with a single thrust of a spear, they should make a prayer skin out of it, and have it spread out in the mosque. / And the one that he beheaded, they should make a water-skin out of it, to put water in it for the Songhay. / They went out to the place where the lions were, they killed the lions."*³⁹¹

The different regions of the empire were affected in different ways by the changes Islam brought. The west with its powerful Muslim cities, housing the majority of Songhay's Muslim estate, was much more influenced by Islam than the east where pagan beliefs changed much more slowly. In this area, though, was the power-base of the Songhay nobility, centred in Gao, the empire's capital. Although Askya Muhammed had envisioned Islam as a uniting element of Songhay, and relied heavily on the 'Ulema and the Muslim-religious estate, this change happened very slowly. Old notions of honour, like prowess in combat, still had a bigger influence on social rank. Hunwick argues that pagan convictions and social norms still ruled in terms of raw number of adherents and dominated rituals at court but Islam had already gained a foothold in the ruling class and Muslim ideas imported from North Africa began to live side by side with traditional notions of honour when Askya Muhammed took over in 1493.³⁹²

³⁹¹ Hale, Thomas A. *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*. Indiana University Press, 1996, P.24-35.

³⁹² Hunwick (Religion and State in the Songhay empire), P.131-132.

The problem with honour is that it is always imperative to one-up one another, there is no backing down. This logic played itself out when Morocco entered the arena of the Sudan. Morocco fought for dominance in the western Mediterranean against the Ottomans and European powers, increasing its demand for weapons and thus revenue in order to pay for its military adventures. These economic demands compelled al-Mansur, Morocco's ruler, to ask the following from the Askya:

*"The reason for writing to you (...) is to inform you that the salt mine at Taghaza, which is within our domain and under the rule of our imamate, (...) and in accordance with this, we have adopted, (...), the sound opinion, (...), that we should impose upon it a tax, which, God willing, shall redound to the benefit of the Muslims, and to the discomfort of the infidel enemies of God; (...)"*³⁹³

If the Askya were to grant this request, al-Mansur would have had an instant revenue stream without diverting any troops into this region. If not, he would have a pretence to attack Songhay as they would have disregarded the caliphal authority he claimed. Askya Ishaq II, who had just won the throne, had no inclination to abide to these requests:

*"On the contrary, he sent a reply couched in intemperate language, accompanied by a spear and two iron shoes, (...)"*³⁹⁴

In other words, he threw the gauntlet down in front of al-Mansur. Until now no army had successfully crossed the Sahara and so it was quite reasonable to think that the Moroccans had just sent an idle threat with no substance to back it up. It was inconceivable that a large enough host would be able to cross the desert and take on the Songhay empire. All Morocco had successfully done so far was to stage some small-scale raids, attacking outposts which lay several hundred kilometres into the desert, a safe distance away from the heartland of Songhay. The Askya would therefore appear weak to his own officials and generals if he bowed to such a demand. This stood in sharp contrast to Askya Dawud, who sat securely on the throne and for whom the payment of 10000 mithqal of gold³⁹⁵ did not carry a huge political cost, but had instead allowed him to run

³⁹³ al-Mansur (Letter from Mulay Ahmad al-Mansur to Askiya Ishaq II), P.295.

³⁹⁴ T/S-E, P.187.

³⁹⁵ T/S-E, P.155.

the mines with a profit and with the potential prospect of harbouring a good relationship with an important economic partner. If Askya Ishaq II had caved in to such an apparently insubstantial demand, as was now uttered by al-Mansur, his prestige would have had been negatively affected at a time of severe unrest within Songhay. He furthermore was in an economically much weaker position and was as such more dependent on every source of revenue he could lay his hands on. He thus not only sent a polite refusal but a calculated insult, which was not so much a message to al-Mansur but more to his own officials demonstrating that he was a strong ruler who did not yield to outside pressure and ruled supreme.

Much to Songhay's terror, the Moroccan armies managed to cross the desert and defeat the empire's armies. The Askya fled because he had listened to one of his advisors,³⁹⁶ and with the head, their leader, gone, the army collapsed. The chronicles however carefully point out that there were still many left who rather died than fled in shame:

*"At the moment of their defeat, the soldiers threw their shields on the ground and sat on them cross-legged until Jawdar's army came and killed them in cold blood where they were, for it was their custom not to flee when defeated."*³⁹⁷

The Tarikh al-Fattash also points out several individuals that stood out in fighting and dying valorously.³⁹⁸ It is instructive that the only individual who fled and is referred to by name is the Askya himself. Some faceless "companions", of whom "no one stayed" when their ruler escaped³⁹⁹ are also mentioned but there is much more room given to those who kept on fighting. What the sources thus do is shift the blame. The Askya was really the only one who had left the battle and he did so reluctantly under the influence of an advisor who was a spy of al-Mansur. Thus despite being defeated, Songhay went to ruin with honour because it had spat out everything that would blemish its glory before the very end. By shifting the blame it was subsequently possible to still invoke the glorious, honourable Songhay warrior who was even recognised as supe-

³⁹⁶ T/F, P.264.

³⁹⁷ T/S-E, P.130.

³⁹⁸ T/F, P.266.

³⁹⁹ T/F, P.265.

rior in these qualities by the very persons who invaded the Middle Niger Bend. This is exemplified in the following episode about the Kala-Sha Bukar who was a Songhay noble but after the fall of the empire fought for the Arma. In a battle:

“(...) Kala-sha Bukar's horse was killed by an arrow. Bukar was the most extraordinarily brave and courageous horseman, and continued to fight on foot without caring. One of the elite corps of the Arma, who knew of these qualities of his, saw him in the thick of battle, and dismounting, told him to take his horse. But Bukar refused for fear of disgrace. The Moroccan swore that if he did not take the horse he would kill it, so Bukar mounted. After the battle the man said to him, I saw you were achieving nothing [on foot], and I was afraid you would die in vain. Anything I could do mounted I could as well do on foot, so I thought it better to give you the horse.”⁴⁰⁰

The clear message here is that a Songhay noble, his home destroyed by the very same people whom he now fought alongside with, is still a paragon of honour, showing those who originally defeated him what it meant to be a man of honour and the Arma recognised this readily, by giving him his horse. This animal was the animal of nobles, of rulers, a sign of power, as we will see in the chapter on slaves. The unnamed Arma thus signalled who was the true higher-ranking individual and it was not him. Thus even though Songhay was conquered by the Moroccans, they were still morally superior. Here al-Sadi displayed a tried and true method of a defeated people to prop themselves up morally. The interesting point is that this interpretation clearly refers back to warrior-notions of honour. Thus despite trying to mimic the model Muslim, al-Sadi was apparently heavily invested in pre-Islamic notions of honour and he saw no contradiction between the two. Instead he used it in order to create a glorified Sudanic identity that could be upheld in times of utter defeat.

The defeat of Songhay by the Arma was not only seen as the usual downfall of an empire but as an extraordinary cultural event which shockwaves shook the whole of the Sudan. For the old empire of Mali which still lingered on in the south the defeat of Songhay had created new opportunities. The pressure from their northern borders taken away, their ruler dreamt of a resurgence to former glory and tried to recruit former vas-

⁴⁰⁰ T/S-E, P.231-232.

sals of his. This largely failed however and all but two, Kala and Binduku, did not respond. Nevertheless, he gathered his forces and attacked to the north, were former Songhay lay; a feat Mali had not accomplished in centuries. Mali's then ruler Sultan Mahmud supported the Fulani in trying to win Djenne back from the Moroccans who had recently conquered it and received reinforcements.⁴⁰¹ They failed in this and the king of Mali fled on his horse. He was pursued by local Moroccan allies, but when they caught up with him, they did not kill or bind him:

“The Sultan of Mali galloped off, and Kala-sha Bukar and Surya Muhammed pursued him until they got him to a safe place. Then they greeted him as one greets a sultan, removing their headgear in honour of him, as is their custom. They said to him, ‘Make haste lest people who do not recognize you overtake you and treat you inappropriately.’ Then they bade him farewell and returned. In the middle of Saturday night, the eve of the festival, commanders and men returned, having done with pursuing and fighting the Sultan of Mali.”⁴⁰²

If we are to believe the sources, the aforementioned Kala-Sha and another Songhay noble dismounted and greeted the ruler of Mali as is fit for a king, giving him the opportunity to escape, lest he would be caught by the Moroccans and disgraced. Former allies, now enemies, gave the descendant of a legendary empire their final goodbyes. It was the last great hurrah of a dying empire, Levtzion makes clear that the Arabic speaking records cease to mention it from now on.⁴⁰³ Although this episode, as well as the other tidbit mentioning the Kala-Sha is most certainly a legend, it speaks of the lasting effects of honour and grace which steered the conduct of the Sahelian societies. Many groups in this area remembered themselves as being part of Mali, tracing their lineages back to its glory days. By showing respect they held high their own cherished memories and values, linking themselves to a great past. The Moroccans however were not part of this shared history and were thus not expected to behave in such a manner. Although allied to Moroccans the people of the Sudan defied them with such conduct which also shows the very tenuous ideological hold the Moroccans had over the societies of the

⁴⁰¹ T/S-E, P.233-234.

⁴⁰² T/S-E, P.235.

⁴⁰³ Levtzion (Ancient Ghana and Mali), P.97.

Middle Niger and emphasises the point that Takrur had birthed a civilisation on its own, with its own values, legends and dreams and that their honour was the last thing they would give away. Songhay had been defeated but some individuals were still held to be gifted with the original spark of honour, even though they fought for the Arma or were former enemies of Songhay, because it harked back to a glorious time, when the empire still stood strong. These legendary episodes are not just about contemporary honorific conduct but about a time that quickly receded back into myth and the authors of these tales wanted to keep the memory alive as an example. It was about constructing an identity that the habitants of the Middle Niger Bend could use in order to stand tall - it put into words a desire, not a reality. In this sense, the Middle Niger Bend culture carried the day, by keeping its own values alive.

8. Slavery and horses

8.1 Slavery under Songhay

The slave trade on the Middle Niger Bend was strongly intertwined with the demand for horses. The imperial power of Sahelian polities like Songhay relied on this animal for its army as it was organised around an equestrian component. Cadamosto, a Spanish traveller to the kingdom of Cayor (south of the river Senegal) in the 15th century, said that:

“Horses are highly prized in this country of the Blacks, because they are to be had only with great difficulty, for they are brought from our Barbary by the Arabs and Azanaghi [Sanhaja and/or Tuaregs]⁴⁰⁴ and cannot withstand the great heat (...). A horse with its trappings is sold for from nine to fourteen negro slaves (...).”⁴⁰⁵

There was an interdependence between the slave export and the ability to wage war, as it allowed the large scale acquisition of horses as was shown by Robin Law in his landmark study “The horse in West African history”.⁴⁰⁶

Although horses had always been known in the Sudan, they came to prominence and political significance only in the early sixteenth century, when a neighbouring power to Songhay, the Wolof, acquired a large cavalry force which transformed warfare and the distribution of power in West Africa.⁴⁰⁷ In the 1450s, they had begun to import horses from the inhabitants of the desert to their north, although the numbers remained low. This changed when the Portuguese arrived, who sold horses to the Wolof, leading to a rapid increase of the size of their cavalry force to some 8000 to 10000 horses in the first

⁴⁰⁴ As mention before, the difference is hard to establish.

⁴⁰⁵ Smith, Robert Sidney. *Warfare and Diplomacy in Pre-Colonial West Africa*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1989, P.90.

⁴⁰⁶ Law (The Horse in West African History)

⁴⁰⁷ How the Jolof achieved this is discussed in Law (The Horse in West African History), P.52-53, also Elbl, Ivana. ‘The Horse in Fifteenth-Century Senegambia’. *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 24, no. 1 (1 January 1991): 85–110.

decades of the 16th century. Law shows that by setting up a number of trading stations along the coast, the Portuguese were able to sell horses to various other powers as well, like the remnants of Mali.⁴⁰⁸ Elbl however disputes this idea and states that the majority of horses in Wolof had to come through the desert.⁴⁰⁹ Both scenarios did not change the fact that in order to not be overrun by this new peril, the polities to the east of the coastal powers, like Songhay or the Mossi, were forced to follow suit and had to invest in horses, as they would be otherwise crushed by their neighbours. Built upon an equestrian administrative structure the horse provided Songhay with its means of doing politics and acquiring an economic advantage over the other polities in the region by carrying out predatory incursions. It was, what Morris calls a low-tech empire, generating its state revenue and *raison d'être* through raiding.⁴¹⁰ Although it is possible that Leo Africanus overestimates his case he offers such observations for the western Sudan in the first half of the 16th century:

*“(...) neither hath this king any revenues to maintaine his estate, but ouely such spoils as he getteth from his next enimes by often inuasions and assaults.”*⁴¹¹

The empire and its neighbours had effectively built a large part of their economic structure around this animal. Linked to its economic impact was its importance to noble and rich individuals who used it for the most ostentatious display of wealth and honour.

Law and Webb both analysed the reason for the introduction of horses whose works form the basis of the following paragraph. The main reason for the import of horses was that the indigenous Senegambian pony was too small to be of much use in war. There is no source which explicitly linked the import of larger European or Arab breeds to their greater utility in war, but it is instructive that many documents describe smaller horses as being used “by the merchants for their journey and by the courtiers to go around in the city”⁴¹² whereas Barbary horses were associated with imperial Sudanic authority.⁴¹³

⁴⁰⁸ Law (The Horse in West African History), P.11.

⁴⁰⁹ Elbl (The Horse in Fifteenth-Century Senegambia), 99-103

⁴¹⁰ Morris, Ian. *Why The West Rules - for Now: The Patterns of History and What They Reveal About the Future*. Trade Paperback. Profile Books, 2011, P.251-252.

⁴¹¹ Leo Africanus (The History and Description of Africa Vol.III), P. 833.

⁴¹² Law (The Horse in West African History), P.124.

Although no direct evidence is to be had, the most convincing argument for this line of thinking is that the Sudanic powers indeed imported a) a large number of horses over the centuries, and b) a simple comparison between the North African/European breeds and the Sudanic breeds shows that the latter are too small and too weak to carry a warrior with his gear and thus in order to build up a cavalry the bigger and stronger Barbary breeds had to be used.⁴¹⁴ This meant that the larger and more powerful Maghribian horses had to be imported from the north.⁴¹⁵ The downside to this policy was that these horses had no resistance to the diseases of the Sahel and suffered extremely high mortality rates, most of them dying within a year or two.⁴¹⁶ We know from Sudanic mule caravans, which suffered in similar numbers, that they had a death rate of 75% per trek.⁴¹⁷ This meant a high number of constant reimports into the Sudan. The main killer, although not the only one, was trypanosomiasis, the sleeping sickness. The disease vector is the Tse-Tse fly, an insect that thrives in the Savannah, especially in mildly humid areas, like river banks. As Songhay was situated along the Niger, the main deployment zone of their cavalry would be exactly the environment which was most deadly to the horses. As the indigenous ponies were much more resistant to the local environment, crossbreeding was attempted but did not yield satisfactory results and thus Maghribian horses remained the preferred mount for warfare.⁴¹⁸ However, moving only a few hundred kilometres north into the desert, into the Adrar, Hawd and Tagant region home of the Berbers, breeding of North African type horses was indeed possible. Linguistic evidence shows that places like Shinqit, literally “spring of horses”, were likely to have been used as breeding grounds.⁴¹⁹ Nevertheless, a main supplier of horses for Songhay were the North African coastal powers. First evidenced by Leo Africanus in 1512 they were brought through the desert by the caravans, who started from Fez in Morocco and

⁴¹³ Webb (Desert Frontier), P.70.

⁴¹⁴ Law (The Horse in West African History), P.125.

⁴¹⁵ Webb (Desert Frontier), P.70.

⁴¹⁶ Law (The Horse in West African History), P.81.

⁴¹⁷ Osswald (Die Handelsstädte der Westsahara), P.145.

⁴¹⁸ Webb (Desert Frontier), P.68.

⁴¹⁹ Webb (Desert Frontier), P.71 and P.73.

brought the horses to “the land of the blacks” in the south, specifically mentioning Timbuktu as a terminus.⁴²⁰ Other documents speak of Borno and the kingdom of Air, consolidating the argument, that there existed a flourishing trans-Saharan trade in horses beginning in the 15th and 16th centuries.⁴²¹ While the Sudan ramped up the size of its cavalry, the Arab World had an increasing demand for slaves, using them as labourers, soldiers and servants. The imported horses were in most cases traded for slaves, creating a direct link between the two. As the warrior elite depended on the horse, they had to constantly capture slaves, resulting in perpetual warfare and instability for the region. The continuous demand for slaves on the one side and horses on the other created a direct link between trade and warfare, and thus between state revenue and warriors and also between wealth and horse-owners, who were able to maintain their status through handing out gifts, financed through slave raids.⁴²²

Because of the long distances involved, the purchase price of a horse was high. Ibn Battuta, Leo Africanus and others complained about its price, the latter stating that a horse worth 10 ducats at the North African mediterranean coast was selling for 40 to 50 ducats in Gao.⁴²³ Leo Africanus noted that:

“Here are verie few horses bred, and the merchants and courtiers keepe certaine little nags which they vse to trauell vpon: but the best horses are brought out of Barbarie.’ (...) ‘Whereupon the king of Borno sent for the merchants of Barbary, and willed them to bring him great store of horses: for in this countrey they vse to exchange horses for slaues, and to giue fifteene, and sometime twentie slaues for one horse.”⁴²⁴

As horses succumbed quickly to disease, they had to be bought anew on a regular basis. This put a high strain on the Sudanic economies and restricted the ownership to a

⁴²⁰ Law (The Horse in West African History), P.48.

⁴²¹ Law (The Horse in West African History), P.49.

⁴²² Herbst, Jeffrey Ira. *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control*. Princeton Studies in International History and Politics. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2000, P.42-43.

⁴²³ Smith (Warfare and Diplomacy), P.89.

⁴²⁴ Leo Africanus (The History and Description of Africa Vol III), P.825 and 833.

small, wealthy section of society. From the fifteenth century onwards the prices of horses, while still high, began to drop. Diogo Gomes, a Portuguese explorer in the 15th century, complained that when he sold horses from his ship on the west coast of Africa, the excess supply in slaves meant that he was only offer six slaves per horse, half of what he had expected.⁴²⁵ Despite the scarcity of comparable data, the fact that that Gomes was actually thinking that six slaves were a bad deal for a horse speaks volumes about the value of a slave or horse.

Webb points out that the training and care of horses was extremely expensive and logistically difficult. Food had to be acquired from ever greater distances and skilled carers were difficult to come by.⁴²⁶ To release the strain of heavy maintenance expenses and logistical difficulties the Askyas of Songhay allowed each of his military commanders and officials in the various regions to sustain their own cavalry forces which they had to put under his command in times of war. Al-Sadi makes indirectly clear that the local governors must have had sizeable contingents of soldiers at their disposal. When an official of the Askya, Uthman, though of instigating a rebellion against the Askya, his partner in crime, the deposed Askya Muhammed Bonkana answered:

“We cannot do that. The increase I made in the manpower of the Songhay army during my reign means that your entire army could not match them.”⁴²⁷

That a local governor could espouse the idea to take on the Askya is telling. It is also clear that the Askyas were aware of this threat to their rule and thus tried to increase the number of soldiers under their direct command. The problem with this strategy was that one day they would hit a logistical maximum and thus not be able to solve the problem they had in the first place. Once this spiral got going however - Askyas handing out horses to local governors while increasing the number of horses of the cavalry contingent which was under their direct control in order to counter the increasing power of the local governors - there was no way out. The problem for the Askya was that his position

⁴²⁵ Diogo Gomes, *De prima inventione Guineae*, ed. in: Schmeller, *Valenti Fernandez Alemano*, in: *Abhandlungen der philosophisch-philologischen Classe der königlichen bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, Vol. 4, Munich: 1847, P. 32-33.

⁴²⁶ Law (The horse in West African History), P. 74.

⁴²⁷ T/S-E, P.134.

was the price everybody was after and he had no equal, he could thus not make alliances with someone else and pretend that they were on the same level of power, whereas his opponents could and did. This also meant that the moment rebellions succeeded, they began to fall into factions, each trying to gain the position of the Askya. This process led to constant internal turmoil between evenly matched opponents and bled the empire dry, as we will see in the chapter on “The dissolution of the Middle Niger Bend”. The *Tarikh al-Sudan* reports that the Askyas at least tried to maintain the largest single horse contingent and in addition to this often employed slaves or haratin, freed slaves who were often still dependent on a master, as cavalry soldiers.⁴²⁸

As the ownership of horses equated political and military power and as only the wealthy could afford to maintain one it was also a status symbol. Thornton points out that although infantry was far more numerous than cavalry, it was clearly the warrior on horseback who reigned over the battlefield.⁴²⁹ These warriors were part of a high status strata of Songhay society who nearly exclusively relied on their fighting prowess in order to sustain themselves economically and politically. Webb shows that they became associated with political and social authority and horsemanship became linked to the ruling elite, even to the exclusion of the “just” wealthy. In Songhay the ownership of a horse was an explicit claim to high status and the permission to enter towns on horseback was normally restricted to the princes and the Askyas.⁴³⁰ The link between horses and honour was so strong because, as was mentioned above, Songhay’s internal political coherence and its predatory economy was heavily dependent on the power of its cavalry. This picture gets blurry however as many cavalry soldiers were dependents of lords who handed the horses down that they had received from their lords. Among these clients were often men of non-noble status or slaves, as seen with the Askya.

Thus slaves not only fulfilled a crucial economic role but also a social one. Not only in terms of who was a slave and who was free but also in terms of what slaves could buy, i.e. horses. Slaves were also used as a form of positive control by handing them out

⁴²⁸ T/S-E, P.168.

⁴²⁹ Thornton, J. K. *Warfare in Atlantic Africa, 1500-1800*. London: UCL Press, 1999, P.25.

⁴³⁰ Law (The Horse in West African History), P.193-195.

as gifts, thus raising the status of the receiver. An example is Sunni Ali giving concubines as a gift to the scholars:

*“When he raided the Fulani tribe of Sonfontera, he sent many of their women as gifts to the elders of Timbuktu, and to some of the scholars and holymen, telling them to take them as concubines.”*⁴³¹

They were dependent on slaves not only for their horses and bread but also because they were *neither* warriors and *nor* nobles. By pointing at a slave a warrior reassured himself of who he was. This logic was used by rulers when they wanted to show their subjects their place:

*“One day when he was at the port of Kabara he [Sunni Ali] ordered that thirty virgin daughters of theirs [the Muslim scholars] be brought for him to take as concubines, and gave orders that they must come on foot. They set off never before having emerged from the seclusion of their homes.”*⁴³²

The issue here being that he took the daughters of the scholars, thus denigrating them and showing the literati who was the real ruler of the house, not that he took concubines or that they were Muslims as such. He actually never took them as concubines, slaughtering them instead,⁴³³ triggering one of the factors that lead to the scholar’s flight to Walata under Sunni Ali. This shows that slavery was a powerful tool of social control. Lovejoy sums the consequences up excellently:

*“Slavery emphasized the dependency that characterized all relationships, and as the ultimate punishment for those who refused to submit to a state, it held the whole range of possibilities that existed in the social order, from death to hard physical labour, to high position, to sale abroad. Slavery was the great equalizer, but it revealed the essential inequality of African society.”*⁴³⁴

Jack Goody argued that control over the “means of destruction” was much more important than over the “means of production”.⁴³⁵ Roberts takes this line of thinking fur-

⁴³¹ T/S-E, P.95-96.

⁴³² T/S-E, P.94.

⁴³³ T/S-E, P.94.

⁴³⁴ Lovejoy (Transformations in Slavery), P.36.

⁴³⁵ Goody (Technology, Tradition and the State in Africa)

ther and argues that warfare was the main expression of Songhay's power, showing the internal cohesion of the polity and acted as an engine of economic and territorial growth.⁴³⁶ In a sense what was important was not the protection of the means of production, of those Songhay had only a few, but the exploitation of the means of destruction. The ability to take away, to plunder and to abduct was what counted, thus mainly economic reasons, which had obvious political consequences. As horses were of prime importance to the political and economic cohesion of the empire, the Askayas were very aware of their dependence on the horse trade and the routes it used. Webb points out that the polities of the Sahel tried to deny horses to their enemies, due to this.⁴³⁷ The preoccupation with these animals becomes clear by looking at the following citation taken from the Tarikh al-Fattash:

*“Quand l’Askia Mohammed fut devenu le maître de ces tribus, il fixa ainsi la prestation: chaque année, au moment de la moisson, il envoyait un homme de son entourage percevoir les produits de la récolte; (...) L’Askia Mohammed prenait aussi à ces gens quelques-uns de leurs enfants et s’en servait pour acheter des chevaux.”*⁴³⁸

The Askayas had modelled a part of their tax system around the need for horses in order to have a guaranteed supply of revenue for buying them and not be reliant on the vagaries of war.

A further hint at how much horses and slavery formed the Middle Niger Bend comes from Goody.⁴³⁹ He argues, citing Aristotle, that the setup of armies forces a certain political model. Horses gave rise to a more feudal model, in which warrior lords held the reigns of power and were able to challenge their own rulers whereas firearms allowed a much more centralised control over the armies. Robert Smith knocked down many of these arguments, especially ones regarding the general impact of firearms.⁴⁴⁰

⁴³⁶ Djata, Sundiata A. *The Bamana Empire by the Niger: Kingdom, Jihad and Colonization, 1712-1920*. Markus Wiener, 1997, P.17.

⁴³⁷ Law (The Horse in West African History), P.62.

⁴³⁸ T/F, P.139.

⁴³⁹ Goody (Technology, Tradition and the State in Africa), P43-54.

⁴⁴⁰ Smith (Warfare and Diplomacy), P.64-80.

Nevertheless, Goody's suggestions are not without merit, especially in the case of Songhay, which was de facto an equestrian warrior society and had strong local rulers who demonstrably challenged the Askya's multiple times leading to numerous civil wars. The empire's dependence upon cavalry inhibited a strong centralisation of power on the Askya's court in Gao as it allowed a large degree of independence to the various other power centres within Songhay's domains and so entrenched the position of the warrior aristocracy against the general populace and the Askya himself.

In this exact context, the Tarikhs also mention horses as the primary weapons used in conflict. In contrast to cavalry, infantry is hardly ever mentioned in the sources. It is also clear that Songhay acquired many of the products it exported via war, and that the main export article were slaves. Furthermore, the large elements of the internal economy, like plantations, were based on slave labour who were also acquired through battle. The horse was not only used by Songhay, but by all its neighbours as well, whose only chance of purchasing more horses was through slaves and to a lesser extent, gold. In this circular process, the horses were used in interstate warfare which generated large numbers of prisoners of war, or in small-scale raiding to abduct people who were then sold to the various Saharan or North African slave markets. Although warriors of the Sudanic polities did not normally prey on their own populace, things were often not clear-cut. Different ethnic groups within Songhay like the Tuareg or Fulani had stratified societies which were the stage of internally fought hierarchical battles. Webb shows that these internal fights for power and status could lead to enslavement.⁴⁴¹ The continuous demand for slaves on the one side and horses on the other created a direct link between trade and warfare, and thus between state revenue and warriors and also between wealth and horse-owners, who were able to maintain their status through handing out gifts, financed through slave raids.⁴⁴² This hunger for slaves is well attested by the Tarikhs. Askya Dawud fought against Mali in order to secure slaves and so did Askya al-Hadj with the Mossi and Askya Muhammed in Kusata, just to name a few.⁴⁴³ Slaves were such an ingrained part of Songhay society, that it is not too far fetched to speak of a

⁴⁴¹ Webb (Desert Frontier), P.20.

⁴⁴² Herbst (States and Power in Africa), P.42-43.

⁴⁴³ T/S-F, P.104-105 and T/F, 135, 145 and 214.

slave society. They were an integral part in the economic and also social system of the empire which consequently meant that the maintenance of their numbers had to be guaranteed.

Slave raiding had its limits though as it created structural problems. As a result of recurring slave raids, target populations fled further afield, which meant that the raiders had to cover greater distances in order to reach their prey. This reduced the chances of a successful raid as they had to operate further afield from friendly territory. In addition, defensive strategies like walled towns or living in difficult terrain, like the Dogon, who exercised this to perfection, made slave raiding even more precarious. There is some irony in the fact that those societies who were able to field horses and were thus best equipped to attack other groups were also those that were most likely the victim of slave raids as they usually lived on the open plains of the savanna (which gave them direct access to the horse breeding grounds as well) where horses could be used best but which also was very sparse regarding natural defensive structures like hills or forests. Additionally, Songhay had to protect its territory which was difficult with armies which were mainly drilled towards attacking and looting instead of holding territory.

This meant that Songhay had no choice but to come up with a more developed system of generating income: taxes. In order to raise taxes, the economy and the structure of the state itself had to be remodelled. It had to develop into, what Morris calls, a high-end empire.⁴⁴⁴ This meant introducing taxes and also a shift in attitude. The old, low-end, way of military and political organisation, raiding an enemy and distributing the booty among the participants and the accrued honour, was not sustainable anymore which meant that new ways of gaining status within society had to be invented, like piety through adherence to Muslim laws, which did not require valour in combat in order to climb up the social ladder. Furthermore a new source of revenue had to be introduced. With Askya Dawud at the latest, Songhay made extensive use of a system of plantation throughout the empire. One example is given here:

“Quelqu'un en qui j'ai confiance m'a raconté que ce prince possédait, dans la province du Dendi, une propriété rurale appelée Abdâ et que cette plantation occupait 200 esclaves avec quatre fanfa, ceux-ci étant placés sous les ordres d'un

⁴⁴⁴ Morris (Why the West Rules), P.251-252.

chef nommé Missakoulallah; (...) Le produit qu'il retirait de cette plantation s'élevait à mille sounnou [about 800 tons] de riz; c'était un produit fixe, qui ne pouvait être augmenté ni diminué."⁴⁴⁵

This practice was not unusual in the region - the Kano Chronicles report of similar setups⁴⁴⁶ - and indicated that a purely raid-based economy had come to an end and alternatives were actively sought. But because these polities lacked the technology to extract higher yields from the soil, such as an advanced plough, the only possibility of increasing grain production was by expanding the use of fallow land. Consequently, in order to procure workers, slaves and by extension slave-raiding, was still the order of the day. The difference was that now productive power remained localised and the drain of labour and thus sustainable revenue was beginning to slow down proportionally to the local development of plantations and the artisanal economy.

These plantations could grow quite large, the example given in the Tarikh al-Fattash had "(...) occupait 200 esclaves avec quatre fanfa, [overseer-slaves] (...)"⁴⁴⁷ and the slaves on them could grow quite wealthy. A social stratification existed within the slave population of Songhay, something which the Askya recognised:

*"La coutume était que, seul, l'askia fournit les semences destinées à cette plantation, ainsi que les peaux servant à faire les sounnou. Les embarcations sur lesquelles on transportait les produits à la résidence de l'askia étaient au nombre de dix. Par l'envoyé chargé de lui amener de la plantation les sounnou renfermant la récolte, l'askia expédiait au chef des fanfa mille noix de gouïro, une barre de sel entière et un boubou noir; (...)"*⁴⁴⁸

For the Askya such an arrangement had quite a few advantages. This principle of "divide and rule" made the organisation of a large slave population without constant uprisings feasible. At the same time every slave employed by the ruler himself, no matter how wealthy, was his property. This meant that in case of death, all the material belong-

⁴⁴⁵ T/F, P.179.

⁴⁴⁶ Salau, Mohammed Bashir. *The West African Slave Plantation: A Case Study*. 1st ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, P.26.

⁴⁴⁷ T/F, P.163.

⁴⁴⁸ T/F, P.164.

ings went back to the ruler, returning him a considerable part of the expenses which he had spent on the slave. Levtzion shows that apart from these slaves, who held high positions, there were also those who worked the land or were employed in other menial occupations and they were individuals of the lowest social rung.⁴⁴⁹

Although the plantations were a beginning and cities like Timbuktu and Djenne showed a burgeoning artisanal industry it was not enough to truly transform the Middle Niger Bend's economic and ruling system. The problem was that most artisans were Muslims and part of the religious-mercantile estate which, as we will see, pitted itself against the ruling estate. This is especially true as the warriors had no interest in the transformation of the economic system as they would lose their income and status if this were to come to pass. A transformation could only have happened through either slow transformation which would have marginalised the warrior class, as had happened in Europe or through a mutual understanding between the two estates that would have transformed the self-understanding of the warriors. The Moroccans made sure that Songhay did not have enough time for that. The crux was that the warriors still depended on the horse for their livelihood and status which in turn were still bought with slaves that were exported in huge numbers. The slave raids withdrew huge amounts of productive power from the economy and made it disappear into the Saharan desert while the different polities invaded each other for human booty. The change in policy towards plantations and artisanship was too late and halfhearted. Malowist shows that gold mining and farming were dependent on a political stable situation and access to enough manpower in order to flourish.⁴⁵⁰ Slave raids thrived on exactly the opposite situation and prospered due to this insecurity which reduced the possibility of retaliation and made their business more productive, as they had easier access to their prey, giving the slave raiding warrior more power in society. On the other hand, the slave raiders were dependent on the trade networks created and maintained by the Muslim merchants who would buy and pass on the captured slaves. Thus what would have helped the Middle Niger Bend transformation into a high-end region was actively obstructed by the warriors and their associated values. As the rulers themselves were warriors the Middle Niger

⁴⁴⁹ Levtzion (Ancient Ghana and Mali), P.118.

⁴⁵⁰ Malowist (The Social and Economic Stability of the Western Sudan), P.14.

Bend never managed this shift. This “military-economic complex” allowed warrior aristocracies to exercise large degrees of power, especially as every other economic sector suffered under their activities.⁴⁵¹ As slaves were a product of violence, and labour was scarce, warriors sat on the top of the political and economic chain in a prime position, able to deflect any change to the Middle Niger Bend society. At the same time the warriors protected their own population from being enslaved from foreign powers. This meant that the military class began to balloon which gave them an ever increasing political and economic weight within Songhay, as more warriors increased available labour and more wealth and more power. The warriors captured booty and with it prestige from the enemy, increasing their status and autonomy. The warrior aristocracy claimed supreme rule over the empire’s domain embodied by the fact that the whole administration of Songhay was built around military considerations and its ranks was filled by warriors. The downside to such a policy was that it led to an inherently unstable internal situation, as the power of the warriors rested on the horse which brought all the problems of power decentralisation described above. Songhay was ruled by an oligarchy consisting of a warrior aristocracy as the cavalry was the main power of the military force upon which Songhay’s strength rested. At the same time this set-up was highly unstable and blocked the empire’s transformation into a more viable system.

The “state” in the case of Songhay (or other Middle Niger Bend empires like Mali) was not a strongly centralised unit but structures with multiple powerful centres. This meant that slavery was one of the main institutions that kept the Middle Niger Bend socially fractured as it encouraged decentralisation by giving every local noble a means of controlling its populace while at the same time undermining the central ruler’s power. The local noble had to defend the local population and the ruler had to give him a certain amount of horses in order to defuse the aforementioned logistical conundrum and provide the local noble with the means of defending the part of the polity he was responsible for. By doing this, though, the ruler was undermining himself, because he gave him the means for a rebellion and strengthened the link between the local population and the noble in question. If the local population did not want to become slaves their local noble was the first port of call in order to seek protection, not the ruler him-

⁴⁵¹ Law (The Horse in West African History), P.63.

self. This gave the local Songhay nobility enough power to stage multiple uprisings as will be shown in the next chapter. Furthermore, as every polity was acting this way needed a constant resupply of horses, large scale slave raiding was a constant feature which, due to its disruptive force, meant that only slave raiding was economically viable in order to generate significant revenue.

8.2 Slavery under the Arma

Slavery under Songhay had been one of the pillars of the Middle Niger Bend's economic and social system and that was not about to change under the rule of the invaders. The Arma continued to capture slaves and sent them to the north. Although exact numbers are impossible to come by, an increase of the amount of slaves around 1600, the era under scrutiny, on the desert routes towards the north can be deduced from the prices. Abitbol shows that whereas at the start of the 16th century the price per slave was around six mithqal, at its very end, after the Moroccan conquest, it had dropped to one tenth of that.⁴⁵² Djoudar had ferried a "considerable number" of slaves towards Marra-kech, among them the children of Askya Ishaq II.⁴⁵³ This extension of the slave trade under the Arma administration sent the price per individual sold spiralling down to 200 to 400 cauries, triggering a price-crash.⁴⁵⁴ This contrasts with the beginning of the sixteenth century when a buyer had to pay six mithqal and which even rose to ten mithqal around 1550.⁴⁵⁵

The old problems of slave raiding which had already plagued Songhay did not go away under the Arma. With the economic decline and the general insecurity on the Middle Niger Bend slave trade became one of the few possibilities that actually generated money as slave raiding thrived on a situation of constant warfare. As most of these slaves were sourced as close by as possible, local ethnic, political and economic structures were ground down ever further. Although the Arma usually raided those they considered enemies and vice versa, this mode of production destabilised the whole region.

⁴⁵² Abitbol (Tombouctou et les Arma), P.80.

⁴⁵³ Abitbol (Tombouctou et les Arma), P.80.

⁴⁵⁴ T/S-F, P.243.

⁴⁵⁵ Abitbol (Tombouctou et les arma), P.80.

According to Lovejoy, at the end of the 17th century Sudanic West Africa experienced a huge surge in slave exports, especially towards the coast, where the European factories siphoned slaves off to America. Between 1500 and 1800 11 million slaves were exported (annual median around 37000), 3 million across the Sahara but after 1650 mainly across the Atlantic.⁴⁵⁶ This increase would not have been possible without internal changes in West Africa itself. Lovejoy argues that this was the result of two factors; the “institutionalisation of enslavement” and the “consolidation of a commercial infrastructure.”⁴⁵⁷ Political disintegration can be added as a third factor. Lovejoy’s argument finds an almost exact reflection on the Middle Niger Bend where we find slavery and enslavement deeply embedded into the social fabric. The commercial infrastructure has already been mentioned, although not explicitly in connection with the slave trade: the merchant diasporas which have been discussed before under Songhay did not cease to exist, on the contrary, they thrived, as they provided safe havens in a politically fractured landscape. They were able to adapt to the precarious circumstances and were crucial in bringing the slaves to market. That does not mean that trade on the whole developed positively. In fact, as Curtin has shown, trade in West Africa was slow, expensive and extremely hard due to difficult terrain, political insecurity and social factors that hindered exchange between different groups.⁴⁵⁸ In comparison to other commerce the slave trade was the best suited for such conditions. The unstable political situation gave birth to raids and thus slaves and, additionally, slaves were able to move themselves. As such it was a good fit for the situation current at that time in this region. However, compared to other regions of the world, trade volume was meagre. Not all the traders were Muslims, they also included Jews, Venetians, Ragusians and other Christians who had crossed the Sahara and erected trade outposts in the interior of the Sudan.⁴⁵⁹ The political situation was marked by the small-state warfare aggravated by the shift in climate. Polities accrued slaves in good times and settled them on small plantations close to their

⁴⁵⁶ Lovejoy (Transformations in Slavery), P.70.

⁴⁵⁷ Lovejoy (Transformations in Slavery), P.68.

⁴⁵⁸ Curtin (Economic Change in Precolonial Africa), P.278-286.

⁴⁵⁹ Lovejoy (Transformations in Slavery), P.92-93.

centres of military and political power. However, through the increasing arid climate with serious droughts starting to hit the region and everyone, be it slave or free, had to move on to more fertile pastures in order not to die. When the drought subsided the process started again.

During the period from 1591 to 1660 it appears that black Africans became increasingly subject to Bidan raids, because the shield of Songhay's armies had been shattered by the invading Moroccans. The inhabitants of the desert were able warriors who roamed the countryside unchecked as there was no organised and consistent resistance or retaliatory raids which would confine them to the desert. With ecologic pressure mounting through desertification, the Bidan had an even stronger incentive to loot the Sudan of its valuables in order to sustain their own way of life.⁴⁶⁰ Salau adds that this movement from the desert into the more fertile areas of the south was not only a feature of draughts but also happened during climatically more beneficial times although the numbers were much lower. In such cases those who had been successful in the desert-side economy used their wealth in order to invest in the Savannah. These entrepreneurs settled down in the big cities of the Sudan but were still tied to the desert.⁴⁶¹

In raids against the blacks new wealth was appropriated, either through the acquisition of goods or slaves. As Brett and Fentress have shown, these slaves were then sold further into North Africa or used on plantations, for the maintenance of herds or in the household.⁴⁶² Due to living in the more fertile part of West Africa, blacks had a much higher percentage of their population working as agriculturalists. The white warriors often raided these black communities for their produce and for the humans themselves which they could then sell as slaves. Their main hunting ground was the immediate desert-sahel frontier region - the line Walata, Timbuktu, Gao marking their southern boundary. Surprise and speed gave them an advantage which meant they were able to carry out these attacks without having to worry about too much resistance. The blacks could not defend themselves very well against these incursions as they did not have the

⁴⁶⁰ Webb (Desert Frontier), P.22.

⁴⁶¹ Salau (The West African Slave Plantation), P.29.

⁴⁶² Brett, Michael, and Elizabeth Fentress. *The Berbers: The Peoples of Africa*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997, P.217.

means to carry out retaliatory strikes into the Sahara, consequently the Bidan were able to raid with near impunity. They lacked the political cohesion to establish border posts or to create a standing force which would pose a serious threat to the Bidan. These raids increased in the course of time for two main reasons. First of all, the attacks seriously undermined the ability of the blacks to produce desirable goods, making them more scarce, forcing the attackers to raid more often as their haul began to decrease. Secondly as Webb has demonstrated, the climate turned ever more arid, reducing the yield of the black farmers and making Bidan plantations and pastoral activity more and more difficult.⁴⁶³

This predatory relationship between the Bidan and the blacks became an increasingly important feature of the Sahelian/Saharan society. This does not mean that peaceful trading stopped. Brett and Fentress make clear that gold and salt were still bought and sold and also cloth and grain exchanged hands peacefully. Caravans still left the Sudan for North Africa and the Djoula extended their Sudanic trading network further.⁴⁶⁴ Cleaveland emphasises the effect of emigration from the Sahara into the Sahel that affected all these aspects of life as emigration was mainly a function of wealth which had a profound impact on trade but also on predatory activities.⁴⁶⁵ Apart from slaves and trade, Lovejoy points out that inhabitants of the Sahara also controlled agricultural production further south on more fertile ground. Tuareg controlled the southern Adar, the Air Massif and other areas. Some even controlled villages as far as 80 kilometres north of the Sokoto river valley.⁴⁶⁶ Who controlled what was subject to fluctuations, but the overarching picture is that the people of the Sahara pushed south. They were in a position to do that the moment Songhay broke down as the Arma never had the same sway over the region and there were no armies protecting the Middle Niger Bend anymore. This pressure on fertile land increased with desertification creeping south. This did not always led to war. Here the scholarly clans of the desert, who held most of the agricultural power in desert politics, came into their own again. They were the ones who had

⁴⁶³ Webb (Desert Frontier), P.22.

⁴⁶⁴ Brett and Fentress (The Berbers), P.219.

⁴⁶⁵ Cleaveland (Becoming Walata), P.38.

⁴⁶⁶ Lovejoy (Ecology and Ethnography of Muslim Trade in West Africa), P.12-20.

initially moved into the cities of the sahel which had already given them a foot on the ground, stragglers, who later wanted to move into more agriculturally viable areas had easier access to these regions as they already had links in the towns and villages of the sahel and savanna. The link between the religious estate and the desert could be fully exploited. This also means that there was a degree of interdependency which reaches back far longer than the 17th century. Bidan were dependent on the agriculturalists, who were mainly “black”. This interdependency and also co-operation was not only limited to agriculture but can be observed in other areas as well. Traders depended on safe conduct of their caravans, guides and also transport camels, all of which Tuareg could and did provide against a fee.⁴⁶⁷ This in turn led to Tuareg settling down as they saw an advantage in having a direct representative in a given town which could take care of administrative issues, sort out new contracts and canvas for different services which the nomadic part would then provide.⁴⁶⁸ These and other economic pressures lead to sedentarisation which in turn lead to intermarriage between Bidan and blacks.⁴⁶⁹

In the Hawd the Tuareg gobbled up large numbers of Bambara and Soninke slaves. With the Bidan raids into the territories of the black, a large number of humans were enslaved. Many of these individuals were either sold off across the desert, many of them dying on their way north, or they were put to work in the world of the Bidan itself.⁴⁷⁰ As a consequence of the large scale slave raiding huge number of blacks became part of the white world. Many Moroccans and other North Africans equated blackness of skin with slavery well into modern times as is evidenced by the Timbuktan Ibrahim al-Djanmi who went to Morocco in the 1880 and published a book about his experiences writing that some Moroccans held the idea that all blacks were slaves and were not worthy to be free.⁴⁷¹

⁴⁶⁷ Cleaveland (Becoming Walata), P.16.

⁴⁶⁸ Cleaveland (Becoming Walata), P.16.

⁴⁶⁹ Cleaveland (Becoming Walata), P.17.

⁴⁷⁰ Webb (Desert Frontier), P.25.

⁴⁷¹ Hunwick (West Africa, Islam and the Arab World), P.64.

“(...) all blacks without exception were slaves, and not free people, for how should they deserve that being black of skin?”⁴⁷²

The captives transported into the north served their masters first as slaves. Later, many of them were freed but having a low status still and became known as the Haratin⁴⁷³ (Arabic for “the freed one’s”). Although still seen as a separate ethnic group, their identity became deeply intertwined with those of the Bidan as the freed-slave population of modern day Mauritania still bears witness to.⁴⁷⁴ This ethnic variable that divided the blacks from the whites is evident in several contemporary texts. Al-Talib Ahmad b. Mustafa ibn Tuwayr al-Djannah, a scholar from Walata, wrote in his “Rihlat al-mund wa al-minnah”:

“They had always heard it said, handed down from father to son that ‘learning is Wadani, the date is Fazzani, and the slave is Sudani’”⁴⁷⁵

With the increasing pressure that the Bidan world was putting on the Sudan in terms of raiding and ideas about race made the inhabitants of the Sudan change their argumentative tack. Earlier, under Songhay rule, no Muslim ever discussed the finer points of the legality of slavery. Slavery had been justified mainly in terms of ethnicity or status. Enemies, who were by definition not part of one’s own social group, could be enslaved. It was never regulated by religion. Even the famous *djihad* of Askya Mohammed against the Mossi is a case in point:

“So he [Askya Mohammed] fought them [the Mossi], killing their men, laying waste their land and their dwellings, and taking their offspring captive. All the men and women captured at that time became blessed by God.”⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷² Quoted in: Hunwick (West Africa, Islam and the Arab World), S. 66.

⁴⁷³ It is not entirely clear what the term “Haratin” exactly means. It can either be derived from the word “hurr” (حُرّ) “free” and mean in this context “freed slave” or it actually describes blacks that lived in the area of southern Morocco and Mauritania before the arrival of Bidan.

⁴⁷⁴ Webb (Desert Frontier), P.26.

⁴⁷⁵ Norris, H. T. ‘Sanhajah Scholars of Timbuctoo’. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 30 (1967): 634–640, P.639.

⁴⁷⁶ T/S-E, P.107.

Thus the only religiously motivated war, fought against the Mossi, led them to being enslaved and “blessed by God”, which is to mean that they became Muslim. Despite them being the bounty of a djihad and being subsequently converted, there was never any question that they were and *remained* slaves. Slavery only became an issue when it somehow was seen as destructive to the reigning social order. Faran ‘Ali, once Kurmina-Fari, was accused of capturing and selling free men:

*“Complaints about him [Faran ‘Ali] reached Qadi Mahmud, who visited him one day and said to him, ‘Why do you sell free men? Are you not afraid that [one day] they will sell you?’ Faran ‘Ali almost exploded with anger at the words of Qadi Abu ‘l-Barakat [Mahmud]. He was astonished at what was said, and rejected the possibility that he could be sold. As a result, God caused what that sayyid said about him to come true.”*⁴⁷⁷

This example shows that religion was not used as an argument against slavery. What was an issue was that he sold “free” men, men of honour. The members of the Songhay nobility saw themselves as free men. Hence by selling free men, Faran ‘Ali attacked the nobility itself which could not be allowed.

The Arma had quite obviously taken over the North African attitude regarding enslavement of blacks as becomes clear by the already mentioned numbers of slaves procured and how they treated the scholars of Timbuktu. They, like other local Savannah polities, took part in terrorising raids, not only to gather slaves but also to show and consolidate power and get rid of rivals. Al-Sadi describes such an attack on Chininkou undertaken by two Qa’ids of the Arma:

*“En somme, on fit un grand carnage des habitants de la localité; on prit de nombreux prisonniers, hommes et femmes, jurisconsultes et gens dévots. Dès que la nuit vint, à la suite de cette affaire, le caïd ‘Ali-ben-Abdallah fit relâcher tous ceux qui étaient tombés prisonniers entre ses mains et entre celles de ses compagnons et leur rendit leur liberté. Il n’en fut pas de même du caïd EI-Mostafa et de ses compagnons; ils emmenèrent à Tombouctou tous leurs prisonniers, les vendirent au prix qu’ils on trouvèrent et réalisèrent ainsi un certain profit.”*⁴⁷⁸

⁴⁷⁷ T/S-E, P.140.

⁴⁷⁸ T/S-F, P.275-276.

This text touches on several points. It shows that slaves were taken indiscriminately. Al-Sadi specifically mentions “jurisconsultes et gens dévots”, thus they also took Muslims as slaves who were, according to Islamic law, explicitly exempt from being made slaves. Qa’id Abdallah is thus the good man in this episode as he set all the slaves free and showed that he is a good Muslim by keeping to the Muslim standards. This is contrasted with Qa’id al-Mostafā who sold everyone he seized. Al-Sadi does not comment on this any further, but the message could not be clearer. The reason for this raid is also of interest:

“Selon le dire de quelques personnes, la cause du châtement infligé aux habitants de Chininkou serait la suivante: Le Ghâ a-Makaï, à la tête d'une troupe de païens du Bambara, s'était porté sur Djenné, ravageant le pays, chassant devant lui les habitants et semant partout le plus grand désordre. Or c'étaient les gens de Chininkou seuls qui leur avaient fait traverser le fleuve et c'est à cause de cela que les Marocains leur avaient infligé un châtement. Plus tard Ba-Redouau, qui était alors caïd de la ville de Djenné, dirigea en personne une seconde expédition contre eux, mais ils le mirent en fuite lui et son armée et les chassèrent du pays où, par la suite, les Marocains ne s'aventurèrent plus jamais.”⁴⁷⁹

The aforementioned raid was carried out in retaliation to an attack by the inhabitants of Chininkou. The Arma thus wanted to prove their strength. Their raid was carried out due to political motives and not because they were primarily hunting for slaves. This is probably also one of the reasons Qa’id Abdallah let his prisoners go whereas his companion indulged in the economic opportunity that had presented himself.

Confronted with now being the victims themselves, the Muslim estate of the Middle Niger Bend began to change their tone on slavery. Ahmad Baba, the most well-known and illustrious scholar of this place at that time wrote a whole book about it, the “Mi’raj al-Su’ud (1614)”.⁴⁸⁰ Born in 1556 in Timbuktu he had been abducted as a slave himself

⁴⁷⁹ T/S-F, P.276.

⁴⁸⁰ Bābā, Aḥmad ibn Aḥmad. *Aḥmad Baba's Replies on Slavery - Mi`rāj al-Šu`ūd: Aḥwibat Aḥmad Bābā Ḥawla al-Istīrḡāq: Nušūs wa-Wathā`iq*. Edited by John O Hunwick and Fatima Harrak. Silsilat Nušūš Wa-wathā`iq. al-Rabāṭ: Ma`had al-Dirāsāt al-Ifīrḡīyah, 2000.

by the conquering Moroccans and had to spend many years in Marrakech, where he stuck out with his dark skin. He met a comparatively lucky lot, as he was allowed to continue to pursue his studies and became famous for his erudition. Ahmad Baba was later set free and returned to his home, Timbuktu, where he died. His writings on slavery were a clear reaction to contemporary politics but he buttressed his argument by referring to a host of earlier scholarly opinion. His main argument was that the justification for slavery is “kufr,” unbelief: “The only thing that distinguishes them [those who enslave each other] is that some are born Muslims and others are born unbelievers.”⁴⁸¹ This is striking, as it would have been very easy to justify slavery on other grounds, as countless other examples from the Muslim world show. This held true even for Dhimmis (those of faith who have special status under Muslim law: Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians). In contrast, a Muslim must not ever be enslaved, no matter where he came from or who he was. This mirrored the rules of waging jihad and tied together several wants. It put slavery itself on a safe legal footing, as every Muslim power owned and traded in slaves. The polities of the Middle Niger Bend themselves were reliant on slaves and thus there was a need to justify slavery. At the same time Ahmad Baba indirectly pushed Islam forward as a penetrative force in the Sudan as this faith protected against a fate no one wanted to share. With one sweep then he solved two problems, at least in theory. In practice however it did not matter much, especially as it did not reflect the conceptions of morality from the buyers. The raiders themselves in many instances did not put much weight on who a slave was and what he believed in, especially as they probably knew that everyone would declare himself Muslim instead of being captured and sold away, which made Ahmad Baba’s distinction pointless. Ahmad Baba himself acknowledges as much:

“Sometimes the sultans of these lands are in a state of discord the one with the other, and the sultan of one land attacks the other and takes whatever captives he can, they being Muslims. These captives, free Muslims, are then sold - to God we belong and to Him shall we return! This is commonplace among them in their

⁴⁸¹ Baba (Ahmad Baba’s Replies on Slavery), P.23.

*lands. The people of Katsina attack Kano, and others do likewise, though they speak one tongue and their languages are united and their way of life similar.”*⁴⁸²

According to Lovejoy, many buyers were only interested in the faith of the slave when he or she was supposed to work in the household. In this case it was often insisted on buying Muslims and not Dhimmis, pagans, as they were considered “unclean”, primitive and suspect.⁴⁸³ The blacks had the problem that their Islamisation was to their detriment. Despite them not being allowed enslaved due to their religion in actual fact it was a sign of quality. Slavers did not think in religious terms when considering whom to enslave but in ethnical categories. Sudani were primarily enslaveable for no other reason than them being blacks. That they were Muslim was all the better as most of them were employed in the household where it was seen as advantageous if the slaves were Muslims as well. Pagans were seen as morally questionable. They were also often charged with raising the children of their masters and in such a case it was imperative that the slave was a women. The end result was that a majority of slaves became Muslim along the way to the market as pagans were seen as dangerous to the family and thus less valuable for the slaver. The economics of the slave market worked against Ahmad Baba’s intent. Consequently, Ahmad Baba, like other scholars, made the injunction that slaves had to be Muslims *before* they became enslaved, which was, according to Lovejoy, hard to prove however.⁴⁸⁴ A prime example of this is given by Lovejoy who cites the example of Medicon. A slave who had been captured in Bornu and sold to North Africa. He was set free some decades after Ahmad Baba wrote his treatise. His uncle managed to get him released. Despite him obviously being a Muslim he was thus only freed through pressure from royal authority, using kingly intervention.⁴⁸⁵

The slave-raids Ahmad Baba spoke about were often extensive and a result of war or war-like situations, shown by the following episode:

⁴⁸² Baba (Ahmad Baba’s Replies on Slavery), P.23.

⁴⁸³ Hunwick, John. ‘The Religious Practices of Black Slaves in the Mediterranean Islamic World’. In *Slavery on the Frontiers of Islam*, edited by Paul E Lovejoy, 149–171. Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2004, P.149.

⁴⁸⁴ Lovejoy (Transformations in Slavery), P.31.

⁴⁸⁵ Lovejoy (Transformations in Slavery), P.89.

*“Let all who read this document know that ‘Abd Allah b. Muhammed b. Ali b. Talib purchased from the hand of Bana b. Siddiq khadim al-shaykh four slaves from among the Zanj, in the presence of the one who appends his name below, for 300,000 kafiriyya. They are: Jafir and Babir and his wife Fatima and their son Ahmad, together with their boat known as Tafala Bana, in a valid and binding sale. And the aforementioned purchaser paid him the full price, and the sale became lawful after examination [of the slaves] and agreement [of the two parties]. Recorded by the servant of his Lord al-Mukhtar b. Ismail b. Wadi’at Allah, two nights remaining of the month of God Muharram, which opens the year that completes one thousand two hundred and ninety of the Prophetic hijra, (...).”*⁴⁸⁶

Whole families were scooped up in large-scale raids taking complete villages as booty and sold off. Beyond its pure content, this document, although penned on March the 27th 1873, also shows that a highly legalistic framework had been developed around the system of slavery which is needed if large volumes of goods are to be moved around over large distances. This heavily documented trade⁴⁸⁷ shows a tradition of a system of law and mercantile activity, which was geared towards the needs of the Sudanic world. In this context the argument Ahmad Baba makes about the validity of enslavement, becomes much broader, as it puts him into a specific tradition of thought and culture. He was no island of learning but was a product of a tradition of scholarship. It demonstrates how traditional thought and Islam were merged into each other and made to agree with each other and how metaphysical concerns had direct bearing on society. The Sudanic form of slavery, was adapted into a Muslim framework. It penetrated a cultural boundary and became part and parcel of the culture of the Sudanic civilisation. Prisoners of war could now be sold, not just because they had lost the fight, but because they came from the Dar al-Harb, the house of war, and not from the Dar al-Islam, the house of Islam.⁴⁸⁸ This scholarly opinion was more of a political tool than juristically viable. It drew a clear distinction between the two houses and also legalised war against non-Muslim

⁴⁸⁶ Hunwick (Back to West African Zanj Again), P.58-59.

⁴⁸⁷ see also: Ghislaine (On trans-Saharan Trails).

⁴⁸⁸ Zeys, E. ‘Esclavage et Guerre Sainte’. *Bulletin de La Réunion D’études Algériennes* (1900): 4–53, P.21.

polities.⁴⁸⁹ Rulers could then in theory use this argument in order to raid for slaves which they needed not only for trade but also for productive purposes on the plantations which had been established on the Niger. They were also used in Taghaza for mining salt and probably also in other locations for other tasks.⁴⁹⁰ Curiously enough, the only instance we know of a *djihad* was against the Mossi, conducted by Askya Mohammed shortly after he had ascended to the throne. Songhay's rulers had in general no moral trouble invading other Muslim areas like Katsina, Kano, Air, etc. This *djihad* against the Mossi had thus probably been more a nod to the Muslim community and otherwise the Askyas did what they saw fit in order to keep the slaves flowing into the empire.

The Muslim community also depended on the slaves as they provided the income they needed in order to run their businesses, mosques and madrassas. At the end of the day, the rulers and the Muslims were on the same page regarding slaves and how they were acquired as both needed them for their own purposes but it was nevertheless important who could be enslaved as the slavery system had to fit into the model of how they rationalised the social world they lived in. A Muslim principle was now used to justify slavery south of the Sahara. With the penetration of Islam ever deeper into the seats of formal and informal power, the culture of slavery changed, and new concepts, like that of the two houses, were introduced. Ahmad Baba's argument only makes sense in a world steeped in Muslim thought. The fact that his treatise was widely copied and studied on the Middle Niger Bend speaks volumes about the change in attitude which had taken place, despite them not being necessarily implemented by the slavers and rulers themselves.

Furthermore, it is striking that the slave trade expanded in conjunction with the extension of Islamic influence in states like Ghana, Mali, Songhay, Kanem and others.⁴⁹¹ This had nothing to do with Islam as a belief but more with the fact that the Muslim world was a comparatively integrated realm and with the introduction and spread of Islam into the Sudan, the local polities could latch onto the markets there, developing into a well of slaves. Under Askya Mohammed only one war was explicitly labeled as *dji-*

⁴⁸⁹ Lovejoy (Transformations in Slavery), P.32.

⁴⁹⁰ Lovejoy (Transformations in Slavery), P.33.

⁴⁹¹ Lovejoy (Transformations in Slavery), P.30.

had, consequently aiming by definition against the Dar al-Harb, which yielding legally acquired slaves. Songhay hunted for slaves however until the very end without ever having an argument about it as far as the sources are concerned. The Askayas never had an ethical or religious problem with slavery and enslaved every enemy they could lay their hands on. The comments by North Africans, but cited by black Africans, that all blacks were considered slaves show that it was more of an ethnical issue and the blacks had drawn the short straw. Sudani scholars now proposed the argument that slavery was a function of unbelief and thus black Muslims were not to be enslaved. The only recourse, the only argumentative tool, was religion because although it was an ethnic issue, they could not argue on ethnic grounds as blacks happily enslaved other blacks. With the fall of Songhay slavery the blacks had no defence against the whites anymore, the empire's armies were gone. At the same time the Sudan world, especially the part that lived close to the desert, rewrote its lineages and Arabised them,⁴⁹² so as to remove themselves ethnically from the Sudanic world. While the mechanisms of enslavement stayed the same, the frontiers of enslavement had been redrawn as new players entered the area. The Tuareg, Arma, Mossi, etc. all raided for slaves more or less indiscriminately. In total, though, those who came from the desert gained the upper hand as was shown above. This meant that a Bidan had no incentive to integrate himself into the black world, as the flow of slaves was from south to north. Bidan enslaved blacks, not the other way around, introducing a major division between the two groups. Even today there are no joking relationships between Bidan and black or other forms of providing a sense of being "in it together". The issue of slavery was not the only demarkation line that began to separate these two social groups but one of the most obvious.

⁴⁹² Willis, John Ralph. 'Introduction: The Ideology of Enslavement in Islam'. In *Slaves and Slavery in Muslim Africa*, edited by John Ralph Willis, 1:1–15. London: Frank Cass, 1985, P.8.

9. The social dissolution of the Middle Niger Bend

9.1 Clash of ideologies

Songhay was not officially but effectively divided up into three discernible administrative units that interacted with each other. The first of these were the big cities like Timbuktu or Gao. The second was can be described as the “core”, consisting of the areas most important to Songhay. It mainly encompassed the banks of the river Niger starting in Djenne and stretching downstream all the way to Gao. In addition, it also included areas like Dendi, the ancient homeland of Songhay. The third area were the ruled territories. They had been either directly incorporated into Songhay but were not yet fully integrated into the core or were areas that were not under nominal control of the empire but highly depended on it like Air, a polity east of Songhay. These ruled territories acted as buffer-zones against foreign powers and as such Songhay's influence over these increased or waned depending on its own fortunes and the strength of its neighbours. The northern territories inhabited by the Tuaregs were, as it would turn out, the most crucial.

All three of these administrative constructs interacted with each other. Cities like Walata and Timbuktu were the meeting place for the peoples of the south, the different Berber factions of the north, between merchants, clerics and officials. The armies of the local governors or chiefs produced local power hot-spots which gave rise to constant negotiations in the political realm of the Songhay empire and changed the balance between cities, core and the ruled territories. For example, the Kurmina-Fari, lord of the west, (i.e. the western core, including Timbuktu and the western and north-western ruled territories) was able to protect the cities of the west, because he had a large army at his disposal and through his intercession with the Askya as second of state he was a potentially powerful ally for these trading towns in securing their status as somewhat independent entities. On the other hand he could also be a devastating enemy and foil any hope of self-rule by military or political intervention. He furthermore protected the trade routes from bandits and external powers, providing the security and stability which is so vital to successful trade. At the same time the towns were generating relatively large amounts of wealth, some of which found its way into the Kurmina-Fari's

pockets and to whom he could sell slaves and gold. He also profited from the prestige and support of the local Muslim scholars whose fatwas (judgements) were recognised within the whole empire. A fatwa which furthered a political aim of the Kurmina-Fari was a strong lever in the fight for influence within the Songhay empire. Similar avenues were open to other Faris or Kois. At the same time the Askya could employ corresponding tactics and rein in the local governor by siding with or threatening the 'Ulema.

Running across all these administrative units were social units that were recognised everywhere in the Sudan. Society on the Middle Niger was highly stratified along several different social demarkations like Muslim scholars, Songhay nobility, Moroccans, slaves and different castes. They were established and maintained to create inequalities and were used to justify authority. Different boundaries of exclusion were erected and succeeded in establishing an "us" and a "them" thus creating and maintaining different social units. Honour, debt and gifts were all employed to this end and parcelled out the society on the Middle Niger Bend along several lines. At the same time they provided protection not only in times of war but different tasks were claimed by distinct groups who could establish a monopoly over certain required services and thus ensure their economic and ethnic survival. However this does not mean that the boundaries were always fixed. On the contrary, tasks reserved for one group were often enough taken up by another when they deemed it necessary or beneficiary as the conflict between the ruling and the religious estate shows. This in turn created the potential for conflict as each group was keen on preserving its economic and ethnic monopoly. On the other hand groups could blend into one another, especially when they had common goals, like defeating a mutual enemy. Such horizontal systems of ethnic relations were only one possibility of erecting a boundary. Vertical systems were another and as the history of West Africa has shown us they are usually much more stable.

The main line of conflict ran straight through the core of Songhay and split the empire into a western and an eastern half. This division was partly due to the big cities of the west having a long standing non-Songhay tradition as centres of Muslim learning and trade. They came only into Gao's orbit after the conquests of Sunni Ali and especially Timbuktu kept a strong Sanhaja/Tuareg social element, tying the town to the desert dwellers and North Africa. For the Berbers, Timbuktu was a kind of "capital" which

they sought out for trade and where they sent their children to be taught in the madrasas. There, every generation of the Muslim estate forged the disparate backgrounds of the scholars together and gave them a common identity as they had received a very similar education in Muslim jurisprudence, Arabic, etc. and thus shared a similar outlook on life. The sense of belonging together was reinforced through the fact that they lived as Muslims in an area that largely adhered to non-Muslim religions. Their relationship with other social groups was often formalised. According to Hunwick even those who were Islamised or who had taken up certain aspects of its teachings, were often not considered “real” Muslims as they did not share the North African connection and thus were excluded from the wider world of Islam and living a different form of Islam.⁴⁹³ Gao did not have such an independent background and also was not home to a strong scholarly tradition, although it was populated by a large number of Muslims.⁴⁹⁴ Thus although the Berbers, the local Songhay nobility and the Muslim clerics and merchants and the pastoral population were forming bonds with each other and worked towards common goals, as Levtzion and Fisher have shown,⁴⁹⁵ there was still a divide between the Muslim estate which looked towards the north, across the desert and the nobility that was mainly fixed on their local surroundings. Thus there was a split between warriors and scholars and the east and the west as the influence of the Muslim estate was much weaker in the east as was already shown in the chapters before.

Thus the ‘Ulema of Timbuktu could create their legitimacy not with respect to the rulers in Gao but drew from a much wider Saharan and Sahelian world of ideas as there is a direct line from the Qadis and holymen of Songhay to the groups of the desert in general and the Zwaya in particular. The Aqit family for example, whose members often filled the role of Qadi in Timbuktu, had strong links to the berbers of the desert. The scholars in Timbuktu, Gao, Walata and other cities all had close ties with the Zwaya

⁴⁹³ Hunwick (Secular Power and Religious Authority in Muslim Society), P.181.

⁴⁹⁴ Maghīlī (Shari’a in Songhay), P.13.

⁴⁹⁵ Levtzion and Fisher (Rural and Urban Islam in West Africa), P.43.

(scholarly clans) lineages⁴⁹⁶ and were thus tying in the desert world into the sub-Saharan regions and vice versa. Al-Sadi says that:

*“Timbuktu was founded by the Maghsharan Tuareg towards the end of the fifth century of the hijra. They would come there in summer to graze their herds on the banks of the river at the village of Amadia where they encamped. Then in the rainy season they would return northward by stages to Arawan, their farthest point in the upper lands, and encamp there.”*⁴⁹⁷

We know from the Aqits in particular that they acted as proteges for the Ghadamsi and Tuwati merchants, traders with links to North Africa. Later on a similar role is played by the Kunta in the nineteenth century who provided protection to the Saharan and North African merchants as well as for some Tuareg groups like the Kel Inkundar. It is likely that other groups who were famed for their scholarship provided similar services. The scholarly families and Zwaya lineages not only acted as protectors for the large merchants but also for the lesser merchant families. The different Zwaya families covered different territories, the Aqits were mainly active in and around Timbuktu, whereas the Baghayughus, who provided, according to Abitbol, the Imams of the Qasaba- and the market-mosque.⁴⁹⁸ Saad adds that they also controlled the southern commerce and acted as spokesmen for the traders who were located further down the Niger.⁴⁹⁹ The emphasis these scholarly groups put on their distinctiveness from the political and military hierarchies in conjunction with their ideas about how a Muslim polity should be run put enormous pressure on the rulers. The Askayas were aware of this and

⁴⁹⁶ Desert society is often described as divided up into scholarly (zwaya) and warrior (hassani) clans. The first were responsible for learning and trade. Whereas the latter were responsible for warfare. As is often the case, it is not as clear cut as that and laced with layers of legend. However this study is not the place to dig further into this very interesting subject. Many words have already been written on this topic. For example:

Cleaveland (Becoming Walata), Ghislaine (On Trans-Saharan Trails), Norris (Saharan Myth and Saga).

⁴⁹⁷ T/S-E, P.29.

⁴⁹⁸ Abitbol (Tombouctou et les arma), P.161.

⁴⁹⁹ Saad (Social History of Timbuktu), P.146.

either tried to rule with the religious estate or tried to neutralise them but no one could ignore their presence. The hierarchy implied here, with different families at the top, was never formalised as it was useful to keep the idea of Muslim equality alive as it lent itself to political and social control. This appearance of similarity could be used to maintain and stabilise the asymmetrical powerstructure which existed in practice. The religious estate in any given group maintained and stabilised this structure as they tried their utmost to provide an overarching ideology countering the dissolution of a social group, trying to freeze the current model of living, trying to remain in a diasporic situation as was argued in the chapters before. The Muslim idea of having no clerical hierarchy exactly slotted into this world of thinking about human relationships (although here as well, in the real world, a hierarchy clearly existed). They were able to do so by their control of the supernatural which could smite the whole society if an individual member transgressed. This is one of the reasons why clerical units gained their status as arbiters, those who agreed to their judgements had to keep it, else there would be retribution. Steward points out that the other source of their power was that they were seen as not being part of the political and military element of a given society which made them neutrals.⁵⁰⁰ This image was also maintained because they were perceived as being outsiders, as coming from beyond or from the fringes of the empire. That being said, in reality they were very active participants in the local politics as can be seen in the rows between the Askayas and the Qadis of Songhay. Nevertheless, this supposed neutrality and their economic independence from the rest of society through their active engagement in trade made them a stable and powerful element of the societies of the Middle Niger Bend. The Djoula and later also the Kunta gained their power exactly because they fitted that model.

The Zwaya-Berber coloured religious estate in Timbuktu saw itself much more in this form of the desert society tradition where they played the part of the Zwaya. Lulat points out that Timbuktu was one of the hubs of scholarly traffic within the Sudanic Muslim world as it had a reputation in learning and many of its inhabitants had per-

⁵⁰⁰ Stewart, C. C. *Islam and Social Order in Mauritania: A Case Study from the Nineteenth Century*. Oxford Studies in African Affairs. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973, P.65-66.

formed the hadj and thus seen cities like Cairo, Mecca and Medina.⁵⁰¹ That this link to the Maghrib was seen with pride is shown by al-Sadi when he said that Timbuktu's civilisation: "(...) for its [Timbuktu's] development, as regards both religion and commerce, came entirely from the west. [i.e.: the Maghrib, that is north-west Africa]"⁵⁰² Hunwick⁵⁰³ and Levtzion⁵⁰⁴ however made clear this was no longer true by the 16th century, when the focus had shifted to Egypt and Mecca, especially the Egyptian al-Suyuti became the paragon of Takrur's Islam. Although scholars like al-Maghili were from the Maghrib, they were singular events whereas the constant flow of pilgrims towards Mecca via Cairo made for a constant link to these centres. Additionally, the people of the Sudan made Islam their own long before the 16th century, moulding Islam into a form which would much better suit their own needs than any imported religion could. Although they felt connected to North Africa, and the prestige implied within, native scholars of Sudanic Africa had already made suitable amendments to Islam in order to fit it into their own social and geographic context. This divergence is exemplified in the scorn of al-Maghili, as was pointed out in the chapter on "Muslims on the Middle Niger Bend".

In addition however, this setup makes clear that a breakdown of relations between the inhabitants of the desert and Gao would also have repercussions on the relationship between the Askya and Timbuktu. The cooperation of the Qadi not only kept Timbuktu in Songhay's bosom but also the Berbers in line as they were integrated into the desert world. The religious estate increased the political pressure over time and was clamouring for more more influence and a theocratic political and social system modelled on the example provided by Islam and codified in the Koran. Although the ruling elite of Songhay had converted to Islam, changes in actual religious behaviour happened only slowly, and often remained rooted in non-Muslim traditions. They did this because Is-

⁵⁰¹ Lulat, Y. G. M. *A History of African Higher Education from Antiquity to the Present: A Critical Synthesis*. Greenwood Publishing Group, 2005, P.73.

⁵⁰² T/S-E, P.30.

⁵⁰³ Hunwick, John O. 'Further Light on Ahmad Baba al-Timbukti'. *Research Bulletin—Centre of Arabic Documentation, University of Ibadan* no. 2 (1966): 19–31.

⁵⁰⁴ Levtzion (Ancient Ghana and Mali), P.196-199.

lam did not immediately replace the old social dynamics of political advancement to which the Muslim scholars themselves had no access to but which was of overarching importance in the minds of the members of the ruling elite of Songhay, leading to a clash of mentalities. This dichotomy was the burning fuse of Songhay which the Askayas had to put out by bridging the apparent gap of convictions to ensure internal cohesion and the stability of their reign.

The west of the Songhay empire had been influenced by Islam much more strongly than the east although the nobility of the whole empire became Muslim by the time of Askya Dawud. This put a new spin on the social life of the empire, merging the old traditional religious pre-Islamic beliefs and systems of honour with Islam, channelling them into a different direction. However, the political, social and economic trajectories were different for the two halves. The west was home to a rich and powerful group of merchants, it was the golden era for this region, giving Timbuktu a strong position in economic matters. It enabled a fusion of the prestige of learning, the authority of religion and the power of wealth which left the religious establishment of Timbuktu in a very powerful position. He could even stipulate arrest, indicating not only spiritual but also political power.⁵⁰⁵ There is cause for interpretative caution as the majority of the reports come down to us in the Tarikhs which, as they were written by Muslim scholars in Timbuktu, had a tendency to show their home and Muslims in a favourable light. However other sources support their claims and show that Timbuktu was a major entrepôt of the Middle Niger region. Hunwick points out that a map crafted for Charles V of France in 1375 marks out “Tenbuch”⁵⁰⁶ and Leo Africanus, the author of an otherwise fairly accurate description of the Sudan in the early sixteenth century, mistook the city for the capital of a separate empire.⁵⁰⁷

The ‘Ulema - the religious estate - became ever stronger in the political sphere, especially Timbuktu spearheaded this increase in power. This issue manifests itself in the contemporary discussion about the status of Timbuktu. Many modern scholars like

⁵⁰⁵ T/F, P.314-315.

⁵⁰⁶ Hunwick (The Middle Niger before 1500), P.16.

⁵⁰⁷ Africanus, Leo. *The History and Description of Africa and of the Notable Things therein Contained*. Vol. 1. London: Hakluyt Society, 1896, P.124-125.

Hunwick⁵⁰⁸ or Saad⁵⁰⁹ maintain that Timbuktu was a largely independent or even dominating city because of its central position within the Songhay political, economical and social system and the resulting power its leading figures had. This view is not shared by Gomez who stipulates that Timbuktu was quite clearly under the aegis of Gao as it was far too important regarding tax revenues and had very little say in political matters.⁵¹⁰ Taking into account the different background of al-Sadi and the *Tarikh al-Fattash*, the view held here is that it depends on when and where one looks. On the one hand Timbuktu was clearly under Gao's domination as was proven by the raids on the city whenever Sunni Ali thought it prudent to do so. As the 'Ulema of Timbuktu and with it its leader, the Qadi, had no military power of its own they were constantly threatened by the equestrian nobility, the largest political force of Songhay who were themselves keen on influence. As long as the internal system of power within Songhay was dependent on the old notions of honour, Timbuktu was not able to press its case, as was proven by the actions of Sunni Ali. However social developments within Songhay eased that pressure and allowed Timbuktu to reassert itself, as the introduction of Islam incorporated pious Muslim behaviour into the honour codex, thus increasing the importance of the Muslim scholars as was argued in the chapter on 'Muslims'. Sunni Ali, as a magician-king, had combined in himself secular and religious power, but after the shift in official ideology to Islam his successors could not employ this system anymore. The secular power still lay with the Askya but the religious power had shifted to a learned class of clerics. There always had been men who were part of the religious estate, even under pagan rulers, like soothsayers or shamans, but until Askya Mohammed, the ruler of Songhay was the highest spiritual as well as worldly authority. Sunni Ali's power rested on this construction, despite him having initiated the shift to Islam as he had established his power base long before that move.⁵¹¹ His successors however gradually lost this magical pow-

⁵⁰⁸ Hunwick (Secular power and religious authority in Muslim society).

⁵⁰⁹ Saad (Social history of Timbuktu).

⁵¹⁰ Gomez, M. A. 'Timbuktu Under Imperial Songhay: A Reconsideration of Autonomy'. *The Journal of African History* 31, no. 1 (1990): 5–24.

⁵¹¹ The reason for Sunni Ali to become Muslim are elaborated upon elsewhere e.g. Hunwick (Secular power and religious authority in Muslim society), P.127-132.

er as the strength of the 'Ulema rose and the learned men claimed spiritual authority to which the Askya had to bow. Askya Muhammed allowed this to happen as he depended on the support of the west. Religious power is grounded in the perceived ability to access divine energy which could be used to bless or curse the rest of society. This authority was always bound up in moral authority, in the ability to impose a certain way of life deemed virtuous in the eyes of God. As long as the ruler was seen to tread this path of righteousness and ruled successfully in the eyes of the 'Ulema, they were happy to leave him to rule the empire as was argued in the chapter on Islam. But if he appeared to be failing, acting unjustly or his actions seemed cursed, he could be interpreted as having apostatised which justified revolt or the support of a contender for the throne. The need to uphold the support of the Muslim religious authorities by the Askya was thus of highest importance. The importance of this issue is demonstrated by the Askya deciding not to enter Timbuktu but camping outside the city, until the Qadi invited him into the town.⁵¹² Later Askyas did not recognise the political power of the 'Ulema, like Musa. In such a case Timbuktu's influence decreased. The 'Ulema tried to counteract such developments as is evidenced in the case of Askya al-Hajj, who ignored the power of the Qadi. In reaction they did not recognise his appointments of officials, an episode which will be analysed in greater detail in the next section. A direct cooperation with an Askya who did not explicitly acknowledge the authority of the 'Ulema in questions pertaining Islam, including political one's, lead to an abdication of that power, as cooperation was only possible in such a case if they were in a subservient role to the ruler of Songhay. As no ruler was completely willing to conform to the 'Ulema's wishes, the latter always tried to distance itself from the Askya to such an extent that they were still seen as an independent factor. For the Muslim scholars it was thus beneficial to withdraw from active Songhay political politics, lest they become "corrupted" by their dealings with the power in Gao and put emphasis on indirect involvement like commenting on the ruler's actions. Directly entering the political game would mean losing their supposed independence because a closer alignment with the political and religious demands of Gao would have been inevitable. This withdrawal however was itself a political act and by

⁵¹² T/F, P.203.

doing so they established themselves as another player on the field of powerpolitics, as they could only retain their independence if they defended it.

Whereas the traditional political system in Songhay was based on religious pluralism, as every social group had their own local belief systems, the member of the religious estate envisioned a theocratic political system, as it was (idealised) practice in the rest of the Muslim world. The ‘Ulema saw itself as the spiritual guardians of the realm in which the warriors of Songhay roamed.⁵¹³ This however was at odds with the self-image of the rulers of the Middle Niger Bend whose ruling tradition had grown out of a magician-king concept that stipulated that rulers themselves were empowered with magic and wielded their rule through religious symbolism. The link to the Zwaya of the desert allowed the scholars of the cities to build up indirect pressure on the warriors of the Songhay or Arma. Already Sunni Ali saw the scholars in Timbuktu as something of a fifth column and purged the city in order to destroy any resistance. Later, the actions of the Arma also have this element to it, ending in the destruction of the Muslim estate. The problem in this strategy however was that because of their supertribal outlook these scholars and traders were quite flexible in what they would call their home. If the local rulers put too much pressure on them, they could retreat into the desert or other towns, as happened in the case of Sunni Ali, where many scholars moved to Walata, only to return when Askya Mohammed improved their standing in Songhay. The problem for the Arma and for Songhay was that the moment these people moved away, the trade and their Muslim based legitimacy for ruling the region moved with them. The members of the religious estate on the other hand could not simply move into the ruling estate of Songhay, which was dominated by warriors. The Songhay and later the Arma considered themselves of a different stock than the Muslim scholars who lived in the towns of the Middle Niger Bend. This in turn had consequences in how they saw themselves, how they acted and what their political options were. It was thus not just a jockeying for power within the Songhay empire but a division on a much more fundamental level. It was not even about as to what the society should believe in or what its ideals should be but how society on its most fundamental level was understood. In the Muslim estate’s theocratic world view, the central authority is the god of Islam and the ‘Ulema sits be-

⁵¹³ This example shows this quite starkly: T/F, P.116-117.

tween god and the ruler. They are the interpreters of god's will which they pass on to the ruler and they judge if the ruler acts according to god's wishes.⁵¹⁴ The main responsibility of the ruler is to respect the Sharia and to ensure the communities' welfare with the cooperation of the 'Ulema. If the ruler strays from this path he would face rebellion from these religious leaders. This judgement depended on how the Muslim scholars interpreted the ruler's behaviour and what their opinions were regarding accommodation. Furthermore, as Songhay was a political structure with several centres, the local 'Ulema often clad organisational, political and military important positions as advisors to the local Fari or Koi. Apart from the already mentioned al-Maghili, who held such a function at the Askya's court, Ahmad Baba al-Tinbukti was such a person for the then installed Kurmina-Fari.⁵¹⁵ If this thought was followed through however it became clear that no Askya was a clear theocratic ruler. Even the idealised Askya Muhammed largely followed his own policies without taking the 'Ulema into account, which did not matter too much as the scholars in his time gained influence and wealth in great measure in any case, especially compared to the time of Sunni Ali's reign. However many of Askya Muhammed's successors did away with such things completely⁵¹⁶ and in addition the memory of Sunni Ali began to fade and demands increased. This opened the door for rebellion as an usurper could exploit such a state of affairs and draw the religious estate with promises of theocracy on his side. Askya Muhammed himself had used a similar argument and he, as the better Muslim, had gained the support of the west and toppled Sunni Barou, the pagan magician-king.

From the viewpoint of a ruler, the acceptance of Islam was a double edged sword. On the one hand it provided him with an ideology which could be used to effectively extend his realm. But on the other hand such a move automatically strengthened the Muslim religious estate which could in times it saw itself in mortal danger denounce the ruler and rally troops against him, because their legitimacy was not tied to the ruler but

⁵¹⁴ Kaba (The Pen, the Sword, and the Crown), P.249-250.

⁵¹⁵ Hunwick, J. O. 'A New Source for the Biography of Ahmad Bābā al-Tinbukī (1556-1627)'. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 27, no. 3 (1964): 568–593.

⁵¹⁶ Kaba (Islam, Politics and Revolution in Songhay), P.194.

to the wider Muslim world. Especially in the west of Songhay religious fervour rose as a medium of proving to be a man of God and by this proxy showing that one was a man worthy of attention and power. Religious devotion brought honour. However, the east of the empire remained much more pagan and rooted in the old pre-Islamic ways of gaining honour through military might and personal prowess compared to the west, where the emphasis was much more on Muslim piety as the local governors were more dependent on the support of the local 'Ulemas for their rule. The 'Ulemas of the west pushed for the legitimisation of power by Islamic standards which is illustrated by an incident following the ascension of Askya Musa to the throne, after having deposed his father Askya Muhammed. The Qadi of Timbuktu with whom the new Askya met first on his initial trip into the west, thus recognising him as one of the most important persons in this region of the empire, showed his disdain for the new ruler:

*"(...) [The Qadi] turned his back on him and refused to look at him. The askiya asked why he did so, and the qadi replied, 'I will not look on the face of someone who has deposed the Commander of the Faithful'."*⁵¹⁷

It is unlikely that al-Sadi was present when this scene took place and his motivation for depicting it the way he did was probably because Musa had deposed Askya Muhammed who was for al-Sadi an almost mythical, ideal ruler. Askya Musa treated Islam more as a tool and the scholars in a much more dismissive fashion than his father had done. He for example challenged the Qadi of Timbuktu openly when the latter asked him to forgive his brothers as they had rebelled against the Askya. Musa ignored him however and the Qadi realised that "Musa was bent on trouble."⁵¹⁸ A further example of the precarious relationship and constant powerstruggle between Gao and Timbuktu is provided by the following episode regarding the renovation and enlargement of the main mosque of Timbuktu, which was handed down in slightly different variations. The *Tarikh al-Sudan* reports that Askya Dawud was returning from a campaign in Mali in 1570-1 when the construction was already in full progress:

"On his way back the askiya passed by Timbuktu and made camp in the courtyard at the end of the Great Mosque and waited for Qadi al-'Aqib, the ju-

⁵¹⁷ T/S-E, P.119.

⁵¹⁸ T/S-E, P.120.

*rists, and notables of the town, to come and greet him and offer a prayer for him. The rebuilding of the mosque was still in progress, so he said to the qadi 'What remains constitutes my share of "collaboration in acts of piety", and he donated from his own funds an amount which God Most High ordained. On returning to his palace, he sent 4,000 pieces of fan-palm wood, and the rebuilding was completed in that same year.'*⁵¹⁹

The Tarikh al-Fattash on the other hand implicates that a major row between the Askya and the Qadi arose. In this version Dawud came to Timbuktu on his return from Mali and steered straight towards the house of the Qadi after: "(...) le câdi en prêtant à celui-ci des propos qu'il n'avait pas tenus; alors l'askia lui avait envoyé un message conçu eu des termes fâcheux pour tous les deux (...)"⁵²⁰ The Qadi refused him entry, a major rebuke, until the other jurists and notables interceded on the behalf of the Askya.⁵²¹ Abou-Zeid writes that hospitality was always accorded supreme value in Songhay society and even more so in Berber society, of which Timbuktu was a part.⁵²² The Tarikh al-Fattash says that this argument was sown by "slanderers" and that the Askya "mollified"⁵²³ the Qadi. In both versions it becomes clear that the Qadi of Timbuktu had a powerful position within the empire and the Askya had to be wary in how he reacted to his actions and the image he projected in reference to that of the Qadi. Which version is closer to the truth is an open question but what both authors emphasise is that the Askya, the worldly ruler, first of all recognised the importance of this building project and then financed it. The authors of the Tarikhs unquestionably framed this passage in such a manner that the supremacy of religion is emphasised, which we can disregard as source bias but nevertheless it shows that Islam and its official representatives had influence and power to such an extend that the Askya thought about getting in on the game. By donating towards the construction of the mosque, establishing a waqf, a religious endowment, they also gained influence in religious affairs while at the same time

⁵¹⁹ T/S-E, P.154.

⁵²⁰ T/F, P.201.

⁵²¹ T/F, P.202.

⁵²² Abou-Zeid (Honour and Shame among the Bedouins of Egypt), P.250.

⁵²³ T/F, P.201.

underscoring their piousness. These religious endowments are supposed to be given by the nobility to the Qadis and other Muslim scholars. This funding gave them some form economic and thus political independence,⁵²⁴ as they were in control of these material assets after the rulers had passed them over. On the other hand it created obligations as no lord handed over gifts without strings attached. This system of giving and taking the waqf, granting legitimacy and consolation ultimately was a gift-exchange system. The politico-military side and the merchant-scholar side of Songhay society employed this mechanism of creating social debt by handing out gifts. Although both wanted goods or rather the wealth associated with them as it translated, as Mauss pointed out, into political currency, they followed different aims.⁵²⁵ Mahmoud Ka'ti, the alleged author of the Tarik al-Fattash, said that he approached the Askya through the intercession of his personal holyman Alfa Bukar, asking quite brusquely for gifts for himself and for his children:

“(…) la plantation et les esclaves ainsi que leur fanfa; il lui donne en outre quarante sounnou de graines pour ensemer le terrain. Enfin il acheta pour lui cette copie [du Qamoûs] ⁵²⁶ au prix de 80 mithqâls.”⁵²⁷

Also, forged passages of one version of the Tarikh al-Fattash, written in the 19th century mention grants of land.⁵²⁸ Although extremely exaggerated and their validity heavily in doubt, they are supporting evidence that such a gift exchange system was in operation. A sham is only convincing if it is modelled along genuine ideas and known practices. Consequently, although the specific claims in these passages are most likely false, they speak of a well established gift exchange system. Furthermore, the Askya gave his

⁵²⁴ Christelow, Allan. ‘Islamic Law in Africa’. In *The History of Islam in Africa*, edited by Nehemia Levtzion and Randall L Pouwels, 373–396. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2000, P.379.

⁵²⁵ Mauss (The Gift), P.5.

⁵²⁶ A set of books on Islamic law.

⁵²⁷ T/F, P.185.

⁵²⁸ The forgery was most likely ordered by Shaykh Ahmad Lobbo (Seku Ahmadu) of Masina in order to underscore claims over certain areas and “castes”, see Levtzion (A seventeenth-century chronicle by Ibn al-Mukhtar).

chief slaves gifts at harvest time, like slabs of rock salt, cola nuts and clothes. The gifts were not given out of economic reasons but out of political considerations.⁵²⁹ Other reports of such donations are sprinkled throughout the Tarikhs and make it clear that it was a common occurrence.⁵³⁰

Merchants and clerics however could not directly tap into such a system, where wealth yielded more power as they lived from teaching or trade. They instead reinvested surplus wealth in order to produce more wealth. On the other hand, Curtin showed that they could demonstrate them having acquired God's favour by living sumptuously, advertising themselves as councillors, teachers or judges who lived a pious life.⁵³¹ It was thus possible for an aristocrat to give a gift to a judge which elevated the latter's position in society and by being linked to this man, who was seen as being blessed by god with wealth, the former lifted his own position in the circles he moved in. An example of such a dynamic is given here:

"(...) le prince avait un cheval de race dont le genou était noir et un riche boubou vert provenant du Soûs; il fit amener le cheval au lieu où il se tenait alors et dit: "Je ne possède pas de chevaux que je chérisse plus que ce cheval, il appartient à la race de chevaux que je préfère à toutes les autres races; de même, ce riche boubou vert du Soûs est le vêtement que j'aime le mieux". Et il donna ces deux objets à celui qui avait récité et commenté le verset."⁵³²

The verse in question was given to the Askya by a member of the 'Ulema who claimed of having received it from God himself. In order to ensure the validity and respectability of the interpretation of God's message it had to be done by pious Muslims of high standing. In other words, the mentioned gifts went straight to the 'Ulema as it was the only body in Songhay with members of such quality. The Askya thus acknowledged the supernatural powers of the Muslim scholars and tried to ensure their loyalty by giving them lavish gifts like expensive horses and clothes.

⁵²⁹ Hunwick (Songhay), P.LIII-LIV.

⁵³⁰ For example slaves and foodstuffs: T/F, P. 191.

⁵³¹ Curtin (Economic Change in Precolonial Africa), P.287.

⁵³² T/F, P.211.

The scholars had a somewhat schizophrenic attitude to wealth though. On the one hand it was valued to such a degree that even very eminent scholars had to supplement their income with trade and other business ventures. On the other hand it was seen as somewhat tainted as was given in the example of Shaik Yahya earlier on, who lost his visionary ability after he engaged in mercantile activity and regained it when he stopped with it. A partial solution to this problem was that in Timbuktu an economic system was established that made it possible for the scholars to engage in commerce without having any publicity while doing so. Saad points out that many of the wholesale agreements and exchanges did not take place in the open but in some form of “hotel”, in the scholar’s home or through brokers. Furthermore, there is a high likelihood that most of the scholars primarily invested in storage facilities for the goods traded. This system not only took away the publicity of the trade from the scholars but also allowed the introduction of relatives into the world of traders by ceding them control over e.g. the stores or letting them lead the negotiations leading to a deal.⁵³³

These gifts of the nobility were not given for free. The Askya wanted to tie the Muslim community to his ruling estate and be acknowledged as ruler over Songhay, counting on its ideological support. The receiver of the gifts on the other hand could use them to show that he had the support of the Askya and was rewarded by God for his piety with wealth and in the case of Muslim clerics, further the cause of Islam as it improved the influence and standing of this religion. The Askya could also show that he did not have to prove his honour anymore, that he had become full of grace. He held absolute power anyway and thus could appear considerate, generous, kind and pious to his subjects thus enhancing his status without appearing to fight for it. It also helped to keep his officials and the ‘Ulema on a tight rope, as although in theory he held absolute power, in practice he could be vulnerable and he thus created a defensive perimeter by tying other to him through social debt. His chiefs held great military power in their stables and the ‘Ulema held ideologic sway over a large part of the western population and gifts were one mechanism of keeping them loyal to the throne in Gao. Not only the Askya but also other noblemen had an interest in being linked to a highly regarded scholar or Qadi, as this would raise their prestige, giving them more cloud in their cir-

⁵³³ Saad (Social History of Timbuktu), P.143.

cles. The Qadis of Timbuktu or Djenne were not entirely dependent on the waqf however as they had close links to the Muslim traders of their city or were engaged in mercantile activities themselves. Although often independent, it was not always the Qadi who had its way. Some Askyas had no trouble ignoring the Muslim scholars and act in direct opposition to their council as was the case with Askya Musa.

Mutual gift-giving thus created social alliances between the military/ruling and merchant/religious estate. Mauss points out that to refuse a gift was impossible as such behaviour was seen as the gravest insult, rejecting the bond of alliance and commonality.⁵³⁴ Material culture, expressed through gifts, and political culture, represented through status, were intimately tied together. It was a competition for being the the richest and most “gifted.” Mauss describes it aptly as a “war of property,” in which considerable wealth rapidly changed hands in order to visibly enhance one’s own status and power through creating alliances with other groups and individuals.⁵³⁵ The reverse was also true. Status determined what gifts one received and what one was supposed to give. The Askya, his officials and the Muslim merchants and scholars thus created bonds and feuds within Songhay through such a system of mutual gift giving. Material wealth was linked to status and therefore the power one could wield within the empire. This mechanism also makes clear that Songhay society did not simply consists of nobles, scholars and the rest but had a finely stratified system with a multitude of categories within these groups.⁵³⁶ In order to appreciate the intricacies of power relations between the different actors it is better to think of its configuration in Foucault’s terms of a “web of power” instead of a simple pyramid structure. This arrangement only worked, though, when both sides acted in tune with one another and after Askya Dawud this system disintegrated. The problem for both sides was that when one of them pushed too far, the other stood in danger of losing its position within Songhay and fought back, widening the rift between the ruling and the religious estate and thus the east and the west which the local governors could and did exploit, using their cavalry in order to further their own aims, filling the gap between the two estates. Even the legendary Askya Mohammed had these

⁵³⁴ Mauss (The Gift), P.5.

⁵³⁵ Mauss (The Gift), P.37.

⁵³⁶ Curtin (Economic Change in Precolonial Africa), P.287.

difficulties, which comes out quite starkly when the Qadi refuses to follow the instructions he had received from the Askya. The Askya then discusses with the Qadi why he, in fact has the authority to demand the Qadi's unquestioning obedience, invoking the history of rule on the Middle Niger Bend.⁵³⁷ The Qadi, after agreeing to all the points the Askya had made then answers that he is the only one who stands between him and the fires of hell. In response, according to the *Tarikh al-Fattash*, the Askya immediately agrees with the Qadi and is at pains to apologise for his rash behaviour, asking the Qadi to pardon him.⁵³⁸ It has to be kept in mind here that the defiance and the retort shown by the Qadi is in line with the idealised conduct of a holy man, a theme which can be found all over the Muslim world. In addition this episode was recorded by a Muslim scholar who had a very personal interest in depicting the virtues of the leaders of his group. Nevertheless as there is no other information available and as it fits what comes after it appears as the Qadi could at least get some of his points across. It becomes clear that the Askya was heavily dependent on the ideological support of the Qadi of Timbuktu, and combined with the economic importance the city had, which in itself was heavily reliant on Muslim traders the ruler of Songhay was in a bind. On the other hand the Askya communicated quite drastically that he is the ruler and that if push came to shove, he had the weapons. It thus dependent on the concrete circumstances who could get his way. This system of creating a system of allegiance by handing out gifts was also problematic as it does not scale well with the number of players in the system. As all the Askyas had dozens of children through polygamous marriages there were a dozen contestants for the throne in each generation of rule. The constant jockeying for power created a strained political situation which was also felt among the Muslim scholars and merchants who had an increasing role as arbiters of conflicts between the different factions of the empire, especially between different brothers. The end of the sixteenth century saw not only an increasingly heated political atmosphere through an increase of contestants for the different administrative posts but also a reduction in the available gold supply which hurt the economical prowess of exactly this elite. With less money to go around, competition began to grow fiercer. This was also felt by the Askyas who im-

⁵³⁷ T/F, P.115.

⁵³⁸ T/F, P.116-117.

posed quite heavy taxes on the merchants for two reasons: Firstly it increased their available monetary resources and secondly it made them more independent of the spoils of war which were usually used as payment for his lords as compensation for their assistance in battle. This however brought the ‘Ulema and the merchants in opposition to the Askya. In Djenne things came to a head under Askya Ishaq who was reprimanded by the Qadi after he had asked for tribute:

*“(…) nous ne connaissons ici personne qui soit un plus grand oppresseur que toi, car tu es le père de tous les oppresseurs et ceux-ci n'existent que par toi (…)”*⁵³⁹

Askya al-Hadj and Askya Dawud fought with similar problems.⁵⁴⁰ It is possible that the rebellion of 1588, which is highlighted in the next section and devastated Songhay, also had economic motives, or at least played a part in the dissatisfaction the traders of Timbuktu must have felt towards Askya Bani in order to raise the standard of rebellion against him.

Another major point of disagreement between the ‘Ulema in Timbuktu and the Askyas in Gao was the concept of hurma. Hunwick points out that the hurma of a holy man allowed him to provide sanctuary for an offender of the law and enabled the wrongdoer to seek pardon through the intercession of his protector.⁵⁴¹ In practise this attribute of a holy man was not always taken into consideration by the ruler in power. For example, Askya Musa very often disregarded such subtleties. While he was on a killing spree, trying to subdue any form of rebellious attitude within his empire by executing those he did not trust, he met with a Qadi called Mori Magha Kankoi who tried to talk him out of executing his latest potential victims. Askya Musa turned him down to which Kankoi replied “Do not do that. Do not reject my intercession.”⁵⁴² He was flat out ignored, so the Qadi said in exasperation:

“I have been living in the town of Jinjo since the days of Sunni Ali, but we had no rest, nor peace and quiet except during the reign of your father; the most

⁵³⁹ T/F, P.167.

⁵⁴⁰ e.g. T/F, P. 201, 203. T/F, P. 211.

⁵⁴¹ Hunwick (Secular power and religious authority in Muslim society), P.190.

⁵⁴² T/S-E, P.122.

felicitous and divinely-favoured Commander of the Faithful Askya al-hajj Muhammed used to pray for victory for him and for his long life. We asked whether he had a divinely-favoured son in whom the Muslims might place their hope. He said he had, and mentioned your name. So when we prayed for him, we prayed for you to succeed him, and God heard our prayers. Now, if you bring our efforts to nought and reject our hurma, then those hands which are still raised to God in prayer for you will be raised to Him to curse you.”⁵⁴³

This is a clear demand for theocratic rule. The Qadi gave the Askya “advice” and the Askya had to follow, otherwise he would pay the price for such impiety. By not heeding the Qadi’s call he had doomed himself. Hunwick points out that his assassination after just three years on the throne was attributed by the chroniclers to a curse put on him by a holy man.⁵⁴⁴ In the cases of taxes and hurma it becomes clear that Islam not only provided metaphysical content and its rituals but was also the drive behind social and political action, regulating individual and collective behaviour through changing what counted as honorific conduct. Instead of destroying one’s opponent, godly behaviour, in this case respecting the hurma, was seen as more important. It thus could serve as a powerful catalyst for the ambitions of dominant groups or individuals and on the other hand hamper their wishes or even give their enemies a platform from which they could launch attacks against the ruling regime, allowing sectarian rivalries to appear. By combining the system of honour described in the preceding chapter with Islam, a new way of attaining status was opened up. So instead of subduing rivalry and fragmentation, Islam put fuel to these flames. The administrative system of Songhay was not able to accommodate the tension internal rivalry and hunger for power produced. With the incorporation of the Muslim cities of the west, at first glance a solution seemed to have presented itself. Askya Muhammed and Dawud were successful in employing the possibilities Islam offered but they never reformed Songhay’s administration from the ground up, converting it into a system which was able to provide the services and ideology needed to incorporate the recently conquered provinces of the west with the old eastern part of the empire. They could only do so however, because they were rulers with huge

⁵⁴³ T/S-E, P.122.

⁵⁴⁴ Hunwick (Secular power and religious authority in Muslim society), P.190.

prestige anyway. Authority in the east though, among the warrior aristocracy and thus of paramount importance, was only gained through proving one's honour. This would then allow an Askya to secure his reign over the governors who controlled the other areas of the empire. The problem was that by playing this game of honour in the east, Muslim sentiments were often cast aside, as was demonstrated in the case of Hurma. The Askyas only dealt with Islam after they had gained control over Gao. If they were not able to do that quickly and conclusively, the rift between the ruler and the cities of the west and the dependent territories became ever wider. The Askya was in such cases trapped in a vicious circle because in trying to demonstrate his status and absolute rule he disregarded other claims to certain aspects of power, intentionally disregarding the wishes of the 'Ulemas. This in turn was exploited by contenders who were able to pander to these sentiments of estrangement and could challenge the reigning Askya with support from the west. Because of the lack of profound political reform, which encompassed and integrated the whole empire, Islam did not manage to break the hold of honour. Instead, a new Islamic layer was introduced into Songhay society which made the social system more complex, gave another group political power and thus created new breaking points. Instead of just having an equestrian nobility which fought for dominance within the empire, the Muslim scholars could and did enter the fray. The moment an Askya did not command absolute power, Islam became a liability. Hurma became an affront to the ruler's power and his enemies could use Islam in order to unite opposition to his rule, turning the tables. Islam became thus another tool in the fight for honour and influence within Songhay, instead of being the avenue through which complete reform was able to take place, as had happened for example on the Arabic peninsula. All these issues came to a head in 1588, tearing the empire apart.

It is important to recognise that in the end the two groups had different aims. The Muslim estate was mainly concerned with the situation of his flock and not with the empire itself. It invested itself in it as it was the main power in the region and they needed military support and stable political structures in order to live their own lives but they gave no specific advice on who to attack when or how to the plantations or who gets which post in Gao. The influence of Timbuktu however was mainly concentrated on certain internal matters and not on general imperial policies. There is a long tradition

of Muslim scholars seeing governing as a necessary evil that they want to have no part in as it was seen as representing earthly power and only Allah could properly rule. On the other hand every government was installed by God and thus acting against it was seen by some as acting against Allah's will. Later on, Ahmad Baba weighed in on the debate and made a clear distinction between oppressive rulers and just rulers and that the scholars should oppose the former and serve or rather benevolently let the latter do his job.⁵⁴⁵ The supremacy of the scholars was for Ahmad Baba a sine qua non which meant that they were the judges of who was a just ruler, which runs counter to the self image of the Askya.

In the end none of the Askyas managed to create a new social identity from the multiple ideological strands they held in their hands. The rulers of Songhay were mainly occupied with running their war machinery, leading their military campaigns. This meant that despite a progressing economic unity, the political and ideological landscape was heavily splintered and the different factions of the empire's elite remained separate from each other. This weakness had already felled the Sunnis and the Askyas were next in line. The final unravelling of the empire under the watch of Askya Mohammed Bani, whose rule began in 1586 also fits into this political setup. The Tarikh al-Fattash makes clear that the 'Ulema of Timbuktu was not pleased with how this ruler behaved:

*"Les musulmans avaient eu beaucoup à souffrir de lui en raison de l'amitié qu'ils portaient à son frère, le Balma'a Sâdiq, mais Dieu débarrassa de lui les musulmans."*⁵⁴⁶

As those officials who ruled the west of the empire had to get on with the religious estate, contenders for the throne who had been overseeing provinces in the west of Songhay could count on the support of Timbuktu, as was the case with Askya Mohammed and the Kurmina-Fari Uthman Sidi. Thus the east posed a similar problem it was much simpler to keep in check. The only important city of the east was Gao and its 'Ulema was physically closer to the ruler's court. It was thus easier for the Askya to know where the loyalty of the local Qadi and 'Ulema lay and to react appropriately and

⁵⁴⁵ Ahmad Baba's "Jalb al -Ni'ma wa-Daf" al-Naqma bi-Mujdnabat al-Wulat al-Zalama." and its discussion in: Saad (Social History of Timbuktu), P.151-153.

⁵⁴⁶ T/F, P.230.

in time. Although with Askya Muhammed's introduction of Islam on a bigger scale, a start was made towards political and ideological unification, his successors were not able to follow through. They were either only able to keep the system from disintegrating, like Askya Dawud or let it crumble. This lack of unity meant that the Songhay Empire was divided along multiple fault lines. On the one hand the divide between the Muslim west, with cities like Djenne and Timbuktu which became famous for their Muslim scholars and whose influence was on the ascent and the pagan east where most of the political power was located, was never closed. As the rulers of Songhay were unable to implement a complete reform, others around them did sweep them away.

9.2 1588 - The last revolt and the ruin of Songhay

When Askya Dawud died, his eldest and favoured son, Muhammed Bankanu, was away from Gao and thus could not enforce his claim to the throne. He was subsequently outmanoeuvred by Askya al-Hadj, his brother, who seized the throne himself. In order to allay fears that he might rebel against his now reigning brother, Muhammed Bankanu fled to Timbuktu into the house of the Qadi al-'Aqib, seeking hurma. He pleaded he would commit himself to scholarship and with the intercession of the Qadi the Askya accepted this request. This arrangement worked for a short while but then the differences between the east and the west of the empire showed themselves in the actions of some of the army commanders who:

"(...) came to the conclusion that such a state of affairs would bring them no good in the end. So they agreed among themselves to approach the askiya. They told him, 'You must choose between us and your brother. We cannot accept that he remain in Timbuktu. Our emissaries are continually going there on our business. Whenever gossipers see one of our emissaries going there, they say, "There is the emissary of so-and-so going to see Muhammed Bonkana". The askiya heard what they had to say, and appreciated its implication."⁵⁴⁷

The implication was that the Askya might easily suspect the army commanders of plotting with his brother against him if they themselves or their emissaries were to go to Timbuktu. Whereas in the east it would have been easier to make such a situation work

⁵⁴⁷ T/S-E, P.161-162.

the west was much too powerful and too far away in order to leave a potential threat in its belly. Muhammed Bankanu would be a danger to the cohesion of the empire as contact with him would sow distrust at the Askya's court, possibly provide the pretext for a split between the east and the west of Songhay. The officials knew that every rebellion had started in the west and they also knew that the Askya was aware of this. If they were to send their emissaries there, which they had to from time to time because of political or trading reasons, they would immediately fall under suspicion of inciting the west against the east. The Askya was thus in a quandary. If he removed his brother from Timbuktu he would disregard the hurma and damage his reputation with the scholars, if he were to leave the situation as it was he would summon trouble from the side of his officials. The Askya decided to act, had his brother arrested and exiled him to Kanatu. Al-Sadi describes the storming of the Qadi's house in vivid terms:

*"The [storming] party was clad in black caftans and black turbans, and from their horses they could see over the courtyard wall. Amar hurled a lance at the horse to kill it, lest Muhammed Bonkana should mount it and put up a fight. (...) The horse expired, and the arresting party seized Muhammed Bonkana, in accordance with the askiya's command."*⁵⁴⁸

The Askya thus intentionally violated the principle of hurma and went in direct confrontation to the whole 'Ulema in Timbuktu. As a reaction to this outrage al-'Aqib withdrew from his post as judge. The Askya had seriously undermined the authority of the 'Ulema in general and of the Qadi in particular. With this complete disregard of the claim that the hurma was inviolable Askya al-Hadj made clear that he did not respect the worldly power, like providing protection to potential enemies, the Muslim scholars thought they would wield through their spiritual clout. The Askya had no inclination of handing them political authority which in turn was unacceptable for the theocratic worldview of the 'Ulema. As they were responsible for transmitting and implementing the wishes of an all-powerful, infallible God, any disregard for them was seen as disregard for God. By denying the authority of God and his institutions, like the hurma, the Muslim scholars would have been left without any influence. Apart from these religious implications the Askya also insulted the Qadi's honour. Although the herald of Muslim

⁵⁴⁸ T/S-E, P.162.

ideals, his authority nevertheless was also in part dictated by his personal honour, especially in the eyes of the empire's officials and aristocrats, as he was part of Songhay society. The Qadi had to reassert himself in order to defend the authority of his person and that of his office, although the office of the Qadi had more clout independently of the person who filled it than government positions. This position was not only dependent on one's personal honour which had to be respected by others, like the offices the Askya handed out, but was supported by the scholarly community whose main criteria were erudition and piety. This gave the Qadi a longer time frame in which he had to act, if he was able to keep the reputation of his person and that of the office separate. Nevertheless the 'Ulema and the Qadi had to take measures in due time, otherwise all that would remain would be an empty title.

It was clear that every subsequent judge would be seen as the Askya's puppet. Thus, according to al-Sadi, when al-'Aqib died shortly after, his brother Abu Hafis 'Umar declined to succeed him although he was offered the post.⁵⁴⁹ The *Tarikh al-Fattash* on the other hand, claims that the Askya refused to recognise the appointment of 'Umar.⁵⁵⁰ The discrepancy in the sources seemed to be stemming from the tendency of the author(s) of the *Tarikh al-Fattash* to be more inclined to side with the Askya. The author describes several times how he was asked for council by the Askya himself and it thus lay in his interest to show the ruler in a better light.⁵⁵¹ Despite the dichotomy it becomes nevertheless clear that the Askya could not simply nominate a candidate for the Qadi of Timbuktu as he had enraged the 'Ulema. The Askya went so far as to threaten to assign a non-learned person as Qadi until 'Umar and with him the 'Ulema complied with his demands. This would have been the final blow to the office of the Qadi, as all independence would have been lost. One of the pillars of the Qadi's authority was his standing within the community of Muslim scholars, whose clout extended into the circle of merchants and political figures. Without this support to fall back on when challenged by the Askya or others the Qadi would have to bow to each and every ruler's demand. According to the *Tarikh al-Fattash*, the crisis was resolved when Muhammed Baghayogho, who

⁵⁴⁹ T/S-E, P.164.

⁵⁵⁰ T/F, P.110.

⁵⁵¹ T/F, P.199-200.

took over most of the judicial functions in the meantime, successfully interceded between the two parties. After the argument had been lingering for over a year, the Askya finally grudgingly appointed ‘Umar to the position of Qadi.⁵⁵²

The long period of vacancy had serious consequences not only for the relationship between the Qadi and the Askya but also for the merchants of Timbuktu. Saad points out that the absence of a judge gave rise to numerous cases of fraud and undermined the prosperity of the city and therefore the ‘Ulema living in its bounds and the Askya by loss of trade revenue.⁵⁵³ It also eroded the authority of the Muslim scholars as they did not seem to be able to impose their will on the Askya although they were the mouth-pieces of God. On the other hand, the reputation of the Askya suffered as well, as he had to leave the most important spiritual post of the empire intentionally empty, or was not able to fill it (depending on the Tarikh). As his rule was supposed to be justified by Muslim teaching this was a serious issue. The Askya was not able to separate his person from his office as easily as the Qadi because although he needed the ideological support of the Muslim community, his main powerbase with regards to his army commanders and other officials lay in his personal honour and manly prowess, which the Askya had to bring to the office. By facing off the Askya and not appointing a Qadi and/or denying the Askya the right to do so and thus leaving the office empty, the ‘Ulema had tied the reputation of the office to their community. As the ‘Ulema was deeply entrenched in Timbuktu and stood in highest regard they had a much better starting position than the Askya who had just risen to power and had not yet solidified his authority. It is thus not surprising that the Askya blinked first and caved in, although Timbuktu also had to pay for its stubbornness by chaos within its walls.

The apparent weakness of the Askya was immediately exploited by the recently appointed Kurmina-Fari al-Hadi who:

“(...) set out from Tindirma for Gao to raise rebellion and seize power. It is said that his brothers, who were in Gao with the askiya, sent word to him secretly

⁵⁵² T/F, P.228.

⁵⁵³ Saad (Social history of Timbuktu), P.53.

telling him that Askiya al-Hadj no longer had the energy to take decisive action, and that he should come and seize power.”⁵⁵⁴

But his brothers betrayed him and although the Askya is described as “sick and powerless (...) terrified, and unable to do anything”, he had the wits to promote a competent Koi to new Dendi-Fari and thus as the Kurmina-Fari reached Gao he faced a much stronger enemy than he had anticipated.⁵⁵⁵ Al-Hadi decided that he had lost his bid for the throne and sought protection going “to the house of the preacher, so that he could effect a reconciliation between himself and the askiya, and this he did.”⁵⁵⁶ Whether this “preacher” was the Qadi of Gao, Timbuktu or some other city is not known; the Askya ignored the hurma in any case. He arrested his brother and also exiled him, like his brother Muhammed Bankanu, to Kanatu. The sources available do not elucidate if and how exactly these two arrests were linked together, or if Kanatu was simply seen as a convenient prison, but what becomes clear is that the scholars in Timbuktu now seriously feared that their authority was at stake.⁵⁵⁷ The Askya seemed intent on ignoring the influence of the ‘Ulema and trying to break their control over political affairs. It is likely that the Askya was left with no other choice as his performance regarding the rebellion had not been impressive. His weakness had elevated others, like the aforementioned Koi, into positions of power and as they, not the Askya, had resolved the crisis, they became a serious threat to al-Hadj. His honour had been seriously damaged and by contrast, some of his officials had distinguished themselves. If he had left his rebellious brother within the belly of the empire, he would not only have left a potential source of opposition near him, but also shown a soft hand, something which ran counter to the ideal of a powerful ruler. With exiling him the Askya had removed one possible threat, demonstrated to his officials what would happen if they were to rebel and shown a hard stance. In his mind the threat of insulting the ‘Ulema was subordinate to these very immediate concerns.

⁵⁵⁴ T/S-E, P.164.

⁵⁵⁵ T/S-E, P.165.

⁵⁵⁶ T/S-E, P.165.

⁵⁵⁷ Saad (Social History of Timbuktu), P.55.

The fears of the Askya were proven true when his brother Muhammed Ban deposed him. Under the new Askya the political situation became even worse. The opening move of his career as Askya was to order the execution of the two Kanatu exiles and to install a new Kurmina-Fari.⁵⁵⁸ For this, he immediately earned the dislike of the scholarly community both at Gao and Timbuktu. Writing with the wisdom of hindsight al-Sadi even went so far as to exonerate Askya al-Hadj by mentioning that he, after all, had not killed his close kin.⁵⁵⁹ These actions of the Askya show that Islam had lost its power as a unifying force for Songhay. The rulers after Askya Dawud acted in total and open disregard to the sentiments of the 'Ulemas of the west, completely alienating them. In their desperate attempts to consolidate power they fell back on the more traditional notions of honour which would support their power in the east of the empire. They were more concerned about Gao than about the west, creating a hyper-competitive atmosphere where the mechanisms which subdued such reckless infighting for honour and power were stripped away. Deference and Islam did not stand a chance against the intense violent and fratricidal mood that the rulers had created. In their ambition and fear, the surviving brothers of Askya Ban added fuel to this fire and hatched a plan to get rid of the Askya and install Bantal-Farma Nuh instead.⁵⁶⁰ The plot was discovered by the Askya and he arrested and exiled his conspiring brothers to Dendi. After having eliminated this danger to his rule another brother challenged his power and this time the threat was even greater as this brother, the Balma'a of Timbuktu, who was in control over a garrison there, rose against him. He had quarrelled against the Kabara-Farmi, who was in charge of the imposts. The Kabara-Farmi accused one of the Balma'a's slaves to have stolen a piece of clothing. After the latter had interrogated his slave regarding this matter he decided that the Kabara-Farmi was in the wrong which the latter did not accept. A row ensued between the two, leaving the Kabara-Farmi dead.⁵⁶¹ After killing his adversary, the Balma'a seized all his property. According to al-Sadi this action was greeted with approval by the inhabitants of Timbuktu as the Kabara-Farmi was

⁵⁵⁸ T/S-E, P.168.

⁵⁵⁹ T/S-E, P.168.

⁵⁶⁰ T/S-E, P.168.

⁵⁶¹ T/F, P.232.

supposed to be “wicked [and] tyrannical (...) and thus did God spare the Muslims his wickedness.”⁵⁶² By not respecting the Balma'a's judgement about the sincerity of his slave the Kabara-Farmi had insulted the Balma'a, as he implied that the Balma'a had been bested by one of his slaves. In addition, and far worse, he interfered with family matters. Slaves were seen as part of a household and by abducting the slave the Kabara attacked the Balma'a's family and especially him as its head. The Balma'a thus had to react to this insult in order not to be shamed in front of the whole community. His honour was at stake and he went to the utmost in order to preserve it. This is emphasised by how he dealt with the dead body of the Kabara:

*“(...) fit prendre son cadavre, le fit traîner par les pieds en dehors de sa chambre et le fit jeter là. Il prit possession de la maison du défunt et de toutes les richesses qu'elle contenait.”*⁵⁶³

He disgraced his deceased opponent by not giving him a proper burial, elevating his own status even more in relation to that of the Kabara. In addition, he took ownership of all his opponent's possessions, denying him the right to pass on some form of legacy. With both actions, the discarding of the body and the annexation of his property, the Balma'a essentially deleted the memory of the Kabara-Farmi. His body and all that he had owned was gone.

In the prevailing mood the Balma'a thought in prudent to raise the standard of rebellion against the Askya. Instead of seeking reconciliation for his deeds, he sent word to his other brother, the Kurmina-Fari Salih, to stand by his side, and promised him the title of Askya if they were to succeed in deposing Askya Ban.⁵⁶⁴ The Kurmina-Fari, who is described by the Tarikh al-Fattash as “(un) eunuque méchant, grossier et menteur, fonctionnaire ignorant, orgueilleux et entête”, responded to this call by arriving with his army at the gates of Timbuktu.⁵⁶⁵ Regarding the current relations between the brothers he was advised by his councillors to take a cautious stance. They were proven right as they engaged in fighting quickly after they had met. In the end the “Balma'a Mu-

⁵⁶² T/S-E, P.169.

⁵⁶³ T/F, P.232.

⁵⁶⁴ T/S-E, P.169.

⁵⁶⁵ T/F, P.231.

hammered al-Sadiq killed Kurmina-Fari Salih on the evening of Wednesday 24 Rabi II 996/23 March 1588, there being but seventeen days between his death and the death of Kabara-Farmi Aiu.”⁵⁶⁶

By killing the Kabara-Farmi and the Kurmina-Fari, the Balma'a had thus succeeded in dismantling the separation of powers in the west which had secured the Askya against a concentrated attack from this part of the Songhay Empire and had united all available military from the west of the empire in his hands.⁵⁶⁷ How exactly he managed to convince the army of the deceased Kurmina-Fari to submit to his command is not known. It is only handed down to us, that he somehow was successful in convincing the commanders of the deceased to follow him who in turn were able to keep their men in line.⁵⁶⁸ He thus united his army with the deceased Kurmina-Fari's one and in order to secure his position the Balma'a cum Kurmina-Fari invited the Benga-Farmi to join him. The latter did exactly the opposite probably because he had come to know what happened to the more powerful former Kurmina-Fari Salih and he “fled to Gao in fear.”⁵⁶⁹ In a very short amount of time the Balma'a had seized all military assets of the west and by killing the unpopular Kurmina-Fari and Kabara-Farmi he also brought the population on his side. It is furthermore very hard to resist someone who commands the biggest military force nearby. If the 'Ulema or the merchants had not complied, the Balma'a would have been able to squash them easily. The Tarikh al-Fattash says that the:

“(…) soldats se joignirent tous à lui, lui firent leur soumission et se mirent d'accord avec lui. Ils frappèrent le tambour en son honneur et le proclamèrent roi en lui donnant le titre d'askia. Cette décision fut ratifiée par tout le menu peuple de Tombouctou, ainsi que par les commerçants de cette ville, une partie de ses ulémas, les fonctionnaires de l'askia qui résidaient à Tombouctou, le moundio et

⁵⁶⁶ T/S-E, P.169.

⁵⁶⁷ According to the Tarikh al-Fattash, there was a duel between the two near the Balma'a's house. In the duel the Balma'a struck the Kurmina-Fari first. The latter rode off and died near Kabara because of his wounds, T/F, P.235-236.

⁵⁶⁸ T/F, P.236-237.

⁵⁶⁹ T/S-E, P. 169.

le tassara-moundio. Les commerçants lui fournirent des subsides et, du haut de leurs chaires, les imams des mosquées firent en son nom le prône du vendredi."⁵⁷⁰

It has to be added though that both sources for these events, the Tarikh al-Fattash and the Tarikh al-Sudan, were written after the events described here and thus the disparaging remarks by the authors regarding the persons involved have to be taken with a grain of salt. They get supported though by the fact that the Balma'a would have been unable to act so swiftly and decisively without at least the tacit approval of the merchants and scholarly class, who were disgruntled by the behaviour of the Kurmina and Kabara-Farmi. In fact, as merchants were reliant on political stability in order to successfully pursue their trade, dissatisfaction must have run very high indeed. As the Kabara-Farmi, who was responsible for the harbour and all goods and taxes which ran through it, was seen as corrupt, a removal and promise for better circumstances in the future had some currency in merchant circles. An army was furthermore reliant on food, weapons, intelligence, administrative services and other resources which got provided by the merchants and scholars. The sources say that:

"Les commerçants lui fournirent des subsides (...) Les tailleurs de Tombouctou l'accompagnèrent, cousant pour lui des étoffes afin d'en confectionner des boubous et des caftans."⁵⁷¹

As the Kurmina-Fari was in command over a larger contingent of troops it is also quite likely that the Balma'a needed the ideological support of the Muslim community in order to merge his troops with those of the Kurmina-Fari. Otherwise it would have been possible that a second in command to the Kurmina-Fari had challenged the Balma'a. Furthermore it was clear that a large battle or even longer war against the Askya was inevitable and without support of the western provinces and cities during his absence the Balma'a would not be able to wage a successful conflict. This would only work if he had the support of the 'Ulema, who controlled the cities of the west (Djenne, Timbuktu, Walata) as was demonstrated by the chaos when they were absent as had been the case in Timbuktu described above. The Muslim clerics were not of one mind,

⁵⁷⁰ T/F, P.238-239.

⁵⁷¹ T/F, P.239.

however, the *Tarikh al-Fattash* says that only “une partie de ses ulémas”⁵⁷² stood on his side. Rebellion against a Muslim ruler was a serious issue and needed clear justification. The sources do not tell us more than was already cited, so it is not possible to exactly reconstruct the argument which led to the Balma'a's support. It is likely though that the Muslim scholars were enraged by the actions of the Askya who had so openly defied the 'Ulema and had acted in complete indifference to Islam. Finally the Magsharen Tuareg also sided with Muhammed al-Sadiq, but their reasons for doing so are also unknown and we can only speculate on their motivation.⁵⁷³ But it is possible that they saw themselves as more in league with the west of the empire through Timbuktu which was their main gate into the Sudan, than with Gao which lay several hundred kilometres to the east of their influence zone and with whom they thus only directly dealt with on a very limited scale. In addition to the forces already mentioned the Balma'a gained allies in form of the Baghana-Fari Bukar and several Kois. Because events had moved so fast, between the assassination of the Kabara-Farmi and the Kurmina-Fari lay just seventeen days, the Askya had hardly time to counteract in order to reign in this rebellion while it was still in its infancy. Thus in a short time, the forces of virtually the entire western provinces aligned themselves behind the Balma'a in a march upon Gao, embroiling the empire in a final civil war.

The Askya did not sit idle “(...) and set out from Gao with his army on Saturday 9th April (...)”⁵⁷⁴ He had assembled a huge force in order to intercept the rebels but “(...) died from a fit of rage” before the confrontation.⁵⁷⁵ The army fell back to Gao to regroup. Instantly the infighting about the successor to Askya Ban began. Ishaq, as the eldest, had the strongest claim to the throne, but all his brothers met to conspire against him. Ishaq however gathered his men and “[i]ls enveloppèrent la tente de l'askia, dans laquelle se tenait cette assemblée, [Ishaq's assembled brothers](...)”.⁵⁷⁶ He then appeared in front of all his brothers and gave them the choice of either submission or

⁵⁷² T/F, P.238.

⁵⁷³ Saad (*Social History of Timbuktu*), P.55.

⁵⁷⁴ T/S-E, P.171.

⁵⁷⁵ T/S-E, P.171.

⁵⁷⁶ T/F, P.243.

death. As Ishaq's soldiers had surrounded the tent they had no choice but to bow to his will.⁵⁷⁷ Thus after one year and four months a new Askya was proclaimed in Gao and on the 10th April 1588 Askya Ishaq II took power.⁵⁷⁸ He mingled with his soldiers and

*"(...) leur avait distribué des cadeaux et les avait comblés de présents, cherchant à les contenter; et, en effet, ils se montrèrent satisfaits; l'askia Ishaq était un homme généreux et libéral."*⁵⁷⁹

This is a further example of the gift-honour dynamic mentioned above. These presents were not given because Ishaq had a generous nature but because he wanted to secure his claim to the throne. With handing out gifts he created social obligations the receiver had to fulfil and depending on whom he gave which gift he made the ranking order within his administration clear as well. The new Askya knew that his rule would be very short if he was not able to bind the troops and governors which had served his predecessor immediately to him. The sources do not tell us exactly who received what and thus the picture remains to a very large part blurred but this image of a generous man stands in stark contrast to what he becomes after the battle which was to take place. Askya Ishaq buried his predecessor with all honours and marched against the Balma'a Sadiq.

The two armies met and after the exchange of some insults the Askya attacked. The battle continued "all day long"⁵⁸⁰ which indicates two evenly matched armies. After "terrible losses" on both sides the Balma'a was "(...) vanquished and fled to Timbuktu."⁵⁸¹ What happened to Balma'a Sadiq after the defeat is somewhat sketchy. It is clear though that after the battle the Askya returned to Gao and dispatched men in order to pursue his enemy and arrest him. The Balma'a fled with some of his entourage and although the sources differ on the exact places they agree on the fact that all of them were put to death either by their pursuers or by local peoples of the regions they escaped to and in any case had no further influence on what came next.

⁵⁷⁷ T/F, P.244.

⁵⁷⁸ T/S-E, P.172.

⁵⁷⁹ T/F, P.245.

⁵⁸⁰ T/S-E, P.175.

⁵⁸¹ T/S-E, P.175.

After having dealt with the Balma'a, Ishaq sent envoys to Timbuktu in order to arrest and execute the Magsharen-Koi Tibirt, and the Timbuktu-Koi Abkar. Succeeding the measures he took regarding the top ranks of the rebellion he went through its rank and file, putting many of them to death. Others, like the Bara-Koi were tortured or imprisoned.⁵⁸² The Askya thus essentially killed or imprisoned a large part of the political elite of Songhay, bleeding the west in particular. Those he did not kill or imprison he ridiculed, thus destroying their honour and removing their influence.⁵⁸³ With these actions he had disposed of any potential rivals and made the point that he would not tolerate disobedience, independent of experience or skill. This send a message to those he installed as governors. The Askya would not flinch and kill them if they were to disobey, they were not indispensable. On the other hand he granted a smattering of those who had sought hurma with local mosques or religious figures forgiveness. Some of the senior army commanders and officials who had opposed the succession of Askya Ishaq II, but had not been part of the rebellion claimed such protection and received it.⁵⁸⁴ Others were also successful in this and thus managed to stay alive and free. This was a nod to the 'Ulemas of the west which he needed in order to ensure the cooperation of that region. Despite this concession the scholars were not impressed by the Askya's actions. One scholar is cited commenting on the execution of the Magsharen-Koi and the Timbuktu-Koi and the imprisonment of a merchant from Timbuktu:

*"He should have pardoned all three of them. Even the two [who were killed] were insignificant, [and no threat] to his power"*⁵⁸⁵

Ishaq thus ruled over an empire which was only at peace because it was exhausted. The rift between east and west was wider then ever, the Askya occupied with trying to consolidate his power in the east, and like his predecessors he only put a thin veneer of Islamic conviction on his actions, which was not lost on the Muslim scholars, alienating them. Songhay was drifting apart and no longer had much cohesion. The army had suffered massive losses and many members of its political class were either dead or im-

⁵⁸² T/S-E, P.176.

⁵⁸³ T/S-E, P.177-178.

⁵⁸⁴ T/F, P.258-259.

⁵⁸⁵ T/S-E, P.176.

prisoned and the the east and the west were divided by a gulf of animosity. The actions of the Askya for a large part mobilised the west even more against him as vassal regions like the Azawad which was inhabited by the Magsharen-Tuareg and provided a defence against invasion from the north, were instigated against him through the execution of their leader. The Askya ruled supreme after the victory over the rebel forces, but he did not inherit a strong empire but one which had spent itself and was close to ruin. This analysis was first put forth by the author of the Tarikh al-Fattash who said that:

*“Cette guerre fut la cause de la ruine du Songai, car elle ouvrit la porte aux luttes intestines, occasionna l’abaissement du pouvoir royal.”*⁵⁸⁶

All it thus needed was an external aggressor to bring the Songhay empire to its knees. The writing had been on the wall for quite some time, but because of the civil war, the empire was unprepared for the strike from the north. The Moroccan attack, lead by Djoudar, was thus able to penetrate the Sahara unhindered as the defences of the north had been either wiped out or alienated. By killing the Magsharen-Koi the Tuaregs were much less likely to want and to be able to support Songhay against an invader coming this way. The hastily organisation of the defence of the empire was a complete shambles as the organisational structures had unravelled nearly completely and the army had been bled a huge amount of soldiers. The defeat at Tondibi was much less surprising than a victory would have been.

In Morocco, al-Mansur realised that Songhay was internally divided and its military power severely reduced and obsolete, while at the same time being devastated by a civil war. In contrast he had modern, well trained and equipped forces who could build on experiences made in other parts of the desert in order to cross the Sahara. As Songhay, in control of the gold and salt trade, a source of great potential revenue, was in such a desolate state, it seemed ripe for the plucking. Al-Mansur thus:

*“(…) sent off a large expedition to attack Songhay, consisting of 3000 musketeers, both mounted and on foot, accompanied by twice that number of support personnel, consisting of all kinds of artificers, medical personnel, etc.”*⁵⁸⁷

⁵⁸⁶ T/F, P.231.

⁵⁸⁷ T/S-E, P.186.

That after the civil war and the purge that the Askya had commanded in its wake, all was not well in the administration of Songhay is attested to in the Tarikh al-Fattash. It reported that on the eve of the Moroccan attack, Askya Ishaq II leadership was in a state of total confusion:

*“When news of this expedition reached them, the amir Askiya Ishaq [II] assembled his commanders and the leading men of his kingdom to confer with them and plan strategy. Every time they offered him sound advice, they then went back on it.”*⁵⁸⁸

Not only did the Askya's own advisers not know what to do, his governors were also reluctant to supply him with troops as they did not believe that there was an incoming threat until the Moroccans arrived on the banks of the Niger.⁵⁸⁹ Askya Ishaq II apparently did not have enough clout to demand unquestioning obedience in order to immediately summon all his forces. It is furthermore likely that at least one of his high ranking advisors, Alfa Bubakar ben Lanbar, was a secret agent of Morocco and was successful in stalling the Songhay defensive and did his best in order to break the empire's resistance.⁵⁹⁰ Furthermore, as an aftereffect of the civil war and the purge the Askya had commanded in its wake his military command structure was in tatters. In addition, the internal battles had killed a huge number of Songhay soldiers which were now missing. When he had finally assembled his forces he took a stand near Tondibi, roughly 50 kilometres from Gao. According to the anonymous Spaniard, the leader of the Moroccan forces, Djoudar, sent him a message:

“(...) asking him not to cause the death of so many men, but to do of his own free will what he would be obliged to do by force, that is to submit to the king Mulay Ahamad, (...) The Black did not wish to do so, since all his people told him

⁵⁸⁸ T/S-E, P.188.

⁵⁸⁹ Bovill, E. W. *The Golden Trade of the Moors*. 2nd ed. London: O.U.P, 1968, P.174.

⁵⁹⁰ Kaba (Archers, Musketeers, and Mosquitoes), P.463.

that the qa'id was acting out of fear, and thought himself lost, having come so far with so few troops."⁵⁹¹

Honour was used as an argument to answer a threat. That the Askya refused to surrender was not so much a message to Djoudar or the Moroccans as such but primarily to the other Songhay nobles. Even if he had surrendered and al-Mansur had largely left him be, not interfering with his rule, he would have had to face a rebellion by his own aristocracy who would have considered him weak and without honour. It was known to the nobles that Songhay could muster many more troops than the Moroccans had with them and they had the advantage of not being exhausted by a long desert march. If the Askya were to give in, it would be tantamount to declaring himself a coward, a very important theme which will be picked up in a later chapter. Consequently the Askya dismissed this offer and rallied his troops:

*"The amir Askiya Ishaq encountered them at a place called Tankondibogho, which is near Tondibi, at the head of 12500 cavalry and 30000 infantry."*⁵⁹²

The different sources provide wildly different numbers regarding the troops which the Askya led into the field (between 27700⁵⁹³ and 88000)⁵⁹⁴ but it is clear that with the Askya's army facing about 3,000 Moroccan soldiers, Songhay had an enormous numerical superiority.

Although Songhay forces did field more soldiers, the Moroccan army, equipped with firearms, carried the day. Guns, this invisible, long range enemy and the enormous impact of cannons were unknown to the Askya's soldiers who had thus no idea what hit them and how to react. Their horses, terrified by the noise of guns and cannons, became uncontrollable.⁵⁹⁵ The result was chaos and confusion on the part of the Songhay army.

⁵⁹¹ Anonymous (An account of the Sa'dian conquest of Songhay by an Anonymous Spaniard) P.322.

⁵⁹² T/S-E, P.189.

⁵⁹³ T/F, P.264.

⁵⁹⁴ Anonymous (An account of the Sa'dian conquest of Songhay by an Anonymous Spaniard) P.322.

⁵⁹⁵ Abitbol (Tombouctou et les Arma), P.62.

However, according to the Tarikh al-Fattash, Songhay's soldiers' notions of honour let the Askya's commanders rally their troops:

“Les plus braves des Songaï en ce jour-là, ceux d'entre eux qui montrèrent le plus de hardiesse et de force de caractère, furent le balama Mohammed-Gâo fils de l'askia Dâoùd, Omar fils de l'askia Ishâq fils lui-même de l'askia Mohammed, le goreï-farma Alou fils du Dendi-fari Boukar ben Sili et le bareï-koï Tabakali l'eunuque. Ils ne cessèrent, après la fuite du gros de l'armée, de s'exposer délibérément aux situations les plus périlleuses, allant et venant partout, pressant les derrières de l'armée de l'askia et repoussant les ennemis qui cherchaient à la rejoindre; les balles volaient au-dessus de leurs têtes, allant frapper les gens qui se trouvaient devant ou derrière eux, à leur droite ou à leur gauche, mais eux s'en tirèrent sains et saufs.”⁵⁹⁶

This was all in vain when the Askya himself, after much coaxing from Alfa ben Lanbar, fled in the middle of battle, signalling to everyone that he thought the battle lost.⁵⁹⁷ This action let his soldiers lose all confidence in victory, resulting in their complete rout and the destruction of an empire:

“Les deux partis se rencontrèrent; Gudar [Djoudar] rangea ses troupes en bataille et engagea le combat. Les troupes du Sudan l'environnaient de tous côtés. (...) A la fin le vent de la victoire se mit à souffler et les Sudanis prirent la fuite, poursuivis par les troupes (marocaines) qui tuaient et pillaient sans frein; (...)”⁵⁹⁸

The demise of Songhay is an example of a powerful empire which did not succeed in developing its social and administrative systems towards accommodating a new order which it itself had helped to create. As the world around it changed it did not move on and was swallowed by the incoming tide. What would have been possible was shown by other powers, like the Sokoto caliphate. Through the policy of *ribat*, Sokoto was able to establish and hold a much more centralised state structure and reassert Islamic beliefs. Muhammed Bello, Sokoto's leader, was in contrast to the later Askyas able to use Islam

⁵⁹⁶ T/F, P.266.

⁵⁹⁷ T/F, P.265.

⁵⁹⁸ al-Zaiyānī (Histoire de la dynastie Sa'dide: Extrait de al-Turguman), P.44.

as a unifying force in order to reign in local governors.⁵⁹⁹ It is impossible to know if a switch to a theocratic Muslim system would have solved Songhay's administrative and social problems but what becomes clear is that the empire's brand of adapted Islam, of piety and honour, did not. Askya Muhammed and Askya Dawud were able to rule supreme and thus could lever Islam as a clamp which held their domains together, subduing the fight for recognition and status, largely by channelling these energies against external enemies. The other Askyas were much less successful in doing this as they constantly fought for recognition of their peers, trapped in the vicious circle just described. The disunity of Songhay, its internal skirmishes and civil wars fatally sapped strength from the empire. The social system of Songhay was unable to control the different elements within Songhay society. It became the final chapter of a downwards spiral which had the empire disintegrating before the Moroccans even appeared on the scene. What al-Mansur did was to seize an opportunity. He knew that Songhay was internally shattered and that its survival hung by a thread which he intended to cut. The honour-based political system was not only one of the reasons for the internal turmoil but was also the cause of technological backwardness. The main disadvantage of the Songhay forces at the battle of Tondibi was their lack of firearms and cannons combined with the ignorance of tactics to counter such a threat. Songhay warriors despised them to such an extent that they threw captured arms into the Niger.⁶⁰⁰ A Moroccan source tells us that:

*“Les Tombuctiens n'avaient pour armes que des sabres et de petites piques; ils ne connaissaient pas l'usage de la poudre et ce fut la raison qui fit gagner la bataille au petit nombre sur le grand. Les Marocains poursuivaient à coups de sabre les Tombuctiens (...)”*⁶⁰¹

The battle between Songhay and Morocco was therefore a fight between a “mediaeval” pre-modern power and one which was on the verge of entering modernity. Morocco

⁵⁹⁹ Last, Murray. *The Sokoto Caliphate*. Ibadan History Series. London: Longmans, 1967, P.74-80, 229-231.

⁶⁰⁰ Iliffe (Honour in African History), P.21.

⁶⁰¹ Monod, Th. ‘A Propos d’un Document Concernant la Conquête du Soudan par le Pasha Djouder (1591)’. *Académie Royale des Sciences d’Outre-Mer, Bulletin des Séances*. Iv (1964): 770–91, P.773.

had better arms, a better bureaucracy and access to men trained in the use of modern tactics. Although many of these advantages were bought in or had been captured from Europeans or the Ottoman empire, which made for its own share of problems, it gave Morocco the edge regarding its southern neighbour. The idea, put forward by Goody, that guns essentially put an end to cavalry warfare in Africa, as it did in Europe⁶⁰² is contested by Thornton who remarks that the progress of fireweapons into the Sahel was slow and cavalry reigned supreme for a long time after their introduction.⁶⁰³ He points out that it is easy to overemphasise the importance of fireweapons in the case of Sudanic Africa as their adaption was slow and in some recorded cases cavalry easily beat infantry equipped with guns.⁶⁰⁴ Although Tondibi is often seen as a turning point, it has to be reevaluated and the Moroccans did not gain a firm foothold on the Middle Niger Bend despite using firearms. In addition they were still relying heavily on cavalry forces. He is certainly right that fireweapons did not immediately displace horses as the main means of conducting warfare. One reason was the notion of how to fight “properly” i.e. honourably, which meant no ranged weapons and a simple lack of availability and also maintenance. The smiths had to learn how to deal with this novel kind of engineering. However the case of Songhay is not simply explained by ignorance but because of the different requirements firearms demand. An arm does not simply exist on its own but in the context of rest of the army and the structure of the society it is used in. For example West African and thus Songhay cavalry was never as heavily armoured than their European counterparts and could become easy targets for bow and arrow. Consequently there was no pressing incentive to equip the army with fireweapons. It would have also meant to change the whole structure of the army from shock-troops supported by archers and supplemented by large numbers of infantry equipped for melee combat to one trained in firearms. In order to use guns effectively one needed highly drilled soldiers which in turn required different management skills and a different political setup than Songhay provided. An army marching in tight formation did not allow single acts of courage or honour, so paramount in the empire’s warrior culture, but on keeping

⁶⁰² Goody (Technology, Tradition and the State in Africa).

⁶⁰³ Thornton (Warfare in Atlantic Africa), P.39.

⁶⁰⁴ Thornton (Warfare in Atlantic Africa), P.31-32.

ranks and the upholding of discipline. The difficulties of introducing firearms and accompanying military concepts can also be seen in the Ottoman empire or even further afield in countries like Japan. Further, an able leader was able to negate the gun-advantage of the Moroccans as can be seen later in the tactics of Askya Nuh, a post 1591 “rebel” leader of the remains of independent Songhay, who is described as a skilful tactician in the sources, who managed to neutralise the Moroccan gun-advantage but this was only true in certain conditions. In others guns reigned supreme as was shown in Tondibi itself. Another point is that local polities were at pains to acquire guns quickly. Bornu wanted to acquire guns under great pains can be seen as a clear sign that those kinds of weapons were appreciated. It just has to be appreciated that guns are no wonderwaffe, they can not suddenly turn an army, which was designed for a brute force attack into an occupation force. For this, the kind of weapon becomes less important than raw numbers. The problem of the Moroccans on the Middle Niger Bend was to become that they were too few, and no weapon could have changed that. What finally did happen, was that both weapon types were blended into one, the gun-carrying cavalry, in addition to footsoldiers armed with fireweapons. The advantage of a horse is not only in melee combat but also in being able to quickly get from point A to B, and although the first advantage was compensated by guns, the second was not. So a paradigm shift did indeed happen, it was just not a binary happening from horses: 1, to horses: 0. Songhay was caught entirely by surprise and had no time to change its tactics in order to deal with the threat of fireweapons and did not act on this shift in technology and administration in any other way.

These political and administrative problems can also be seen elsewhere. Songhay expanded under Sunni Ali and Askya Mohammed according to the low tech model. The ruling estate also did not completely give up on their usual revenue stream. Instead of conquering, looting and occupying territories they resorted to plunder only. The easiest target were slaves as they were aplenty and could carry themselves back to Songhay on foot and provided the warriors with something they very much treasured: horses. This revenue stream however did not bring the riches a full blown conquest of yore would bring and thus the economic situation for the empire became worse. An additional problem with creating revenue through forceful expansion is that the more diverse people

one incorporates into one's own realm and the bigger the area becomes one holds sway over the more unstable the whole setup becomes. This means that the rate of expansion slows down and then stops and new ways of ruling have to be invented. Songhay thus had to transform itself into a high tech empire by introducing taxes, laws and other tools needed for such an administrative revolution. This was the opening for Muslim scholars who had the appropriate skills and knowledge for that: reading, writing, maths, sharia law, etc. Askya Muhammed recognised this and invited al-Maghili in order to answer him questions about law and other matters of rule, because he needed all the knowledge he could get while at the same time infusing it with legitimacy, which a famous scholar provided. The Askya however did not recognise that al-Maghili was at odds with the 'Ulemas in Songhay, who, as Fisher points out, saw each other with disdain or even hatred. So instead of providing his rule with legitimacy, al-Maghili actually made the situation even more complicated. In addition, the value system of the Muslim scholars ran counter to that of the ruling estate whose focus lay on prowess in battle and they were unwilling to give up their positions of power. As they decided in the end who filled their ranks, they could effectively block the entrance of Muslim scholars and traders into the ruling estate, not lest of all, because despite the prestige Muslims might have enjoyed, weapons carried the day in a power struggle. Muslims thus had to indirectly insert themselves into the power structure via such means like hurma. The religious estate never had direct access to the centres of power and its institutions and could only act indirectly by supporting the noblemen they thought most compatible with their own interests. It is unlikely however, as the sources simply do not support this viewpoint, that they actually wanted to run the empire themselves. They wanted to shape it according to their ideals, but in essence they were quite happy with their position as mediators and guides. To run the empire by themselves would have meant that their ideals would have been tested by reality and they knew that this was not a good situation to be in. Triaud's viewpoint, that Islam was somehow weak and that at the end of the fifteenth century Islam had already been "asphyxiated", because the religious estate had itself cut off from North Africa,⁶⁰⁵ is quite false. His idea that Islam and its proponents were defeated because they could not erect a theocracy because of the realities on the ground, is plainly

⁶⁰⁵ Triaud (*Islam et sociétés soudanaise au moyen age*), P.164.

wrong. Islam did make further progress even after Songhay fell. After Songhay, empires or other larger entities who did not see themselves as Muslim were scarce, although some still rose to power, like the Bambara, who became Muslim at a later date. Islam grew slowly, but grow it did and it did so on Sudanese terms. The religious estate had understood that and was busy implementing this policy which is one of the reasons Timbuktu and Djenne produced so many indigenous scholars who pushed Islam forward, anchoring it in the realities of their world, changing the politics and the power structures of the Middle Niger Bend with it.

Thus Songhay is an example of an empire that fell because it could not keep up the momentum that had been responsible for its rise. It grew too big, too socially diverse and proved too costly to run in order to be administered by the same system that brought it into existence. It was unable to reform its economic, administrative, ideological and social systems because each system blocked the other, ultimately bringing it to its knees.

9.2 The Arma and the Others

9.2.1 From the Arma to the Armas - Attempts of rule

After they had conquered Timbuktu, Gao and Djenne the Arma were now trying to establish themselves in the region. This required dealing with local powers as well as setting up their own administrative infrastructure, called the Makhzan. Every city ruled by the Moroccans had such a Makhzan, but the one in Timbuktu was considered to be leading the operation, as this was the place of residence of the Pasha. The Pasha was the military leader and accountable to Morocco only. He was a rather weak *primus inter pares* and much of the power remained with the military leaders of the different military divisions called the *Qa'ids*, leading to the establishment of different factions and powerplay for personal gain, destabilising the Arma government. One step down on the administrative ladder, the *Amin* reigned over fiscal and economic matters and was the head of the civil administration. The division between the civil authority in form of the treasurer and the military administration had been set up by the Sultan in Morocco who wanted to ensure that the money was not fed into private pockets. This administrative

construction created problems though as the distribution of money was a constant problem. The Amin frequently clashed with the Pasha as reported by the Tarikh al-Sudan:

*“He [the Pasha] scrutinized the doings of Treasurer Qa’id al-Hasan b. Zubayr, and it became clear to him that he was a miscreant who was looting the sultan’s treasury, since he had appropriated some three hundred slave girls, despite their being too weak to work. So he wrested the sultan’s property from him and placed it in a room in the sultan’s palace in the fortress.”*⁶⁰⁶

These “slave girls” were spoils of war. In other words the Amin was not only responsible for the money sent down from Marrakech to the Middle Niger Bend but also had control over the resources acquired on the spot by the Arma themselves. However the Arma were subject to the same dynamic Songhay and all the other low-tech polities were bound to. The soldiers were mainly paid through booty and not through money sent from the north (although initially some was sent down). After all the explicit purpose of the whole endeavour had been to extract money from the Middle Niger Bend in order to feed the treasury of Marrakech. In other words, the Pasha had to pay his soldiers if he wanted them to stay loyal to him. We see this most clearly when Djouder essentially bribed his soldiers to stay on his side, even though he was to be deposed.⁶⁰⁷ Al-Sadi reports another incident where Pasha Sulayman (ruled from 1600 to 1604) and Qa’id al-Hasan faced each other in a standoff over the distribution and ownership of money and thus also soldiers wages they had to send a messenger to Morocco in order to sort it out:

*“In reply, the sultan told Pasha Sulayman to leave Qa’id al-Hasan alone, and let him do what he saw fit with the treasure since ‘the treasure belongs to us, and he is our treasurer. There should be no dealings between you and him concerning the treasure, except, for example, if you want 3,000 mq., he can lend it to you, and you can pay it back later’.”*⁶⁰⁸

To ask for a ruling and get it delivered took months while keeping the Arma administration paralysed. Sulayman was the last Pasha sent from Morocco to take over the

⁶⁰⁶ T/S-E, P.244.

⁶⁰⁷ T/S-E, P.195.

⁶⁰⁸ T/S-E, P.245.

affairs on the Middle Niger Bend. As the clashes between the Pasha and the treasurer did not cease, it became increasingly clear that such a system was untenable. With the metropole's support for the Pashalik drying up quickly after the initial conquest the funds flowing from Marrakech through the desert to Timbuktu which paid the soldiers dried up as well and loot was the only option left. With this, the treasurer did lose a majority of his influence as the Arma had to earn their money in other ways and that was primarily by predatory behaviour and protecting their trade routes which shifted the power completely to the Pasha, as he was in control of the military. Although the Amin was in theory responsible for such valuables as well, in practice he had no real access to it, as he was not the one who had procured it. Consequently, under Pasha Abdelqader in 1632, the office of the treasurer was finally abolished.⁶⁰⁹

The Makhzan was mainly composed of fighting men. They had some traders and their personal 'Ulema with them, the sharifs, but their influence was fickle and always unpredictable and thus could not inject a stable element into the Moroccan leadership. The civilian structure needed for a stable political system was missing as everything was subject to military needs and wants. This led to some serious gaps in administrative personal and gave other local groups like the remaining Songhay officials or the Muslim scholars and traders an opening where they could make themselves indispensable. The Moroccans kept nearly the whole traditional political structure: Kurmina-Fari, Balma'a, Bangu-farma and the different Kois were all retained but had to bow to the whims of the invaders. The posts which were deemed of strategic importance like the Kabara-Farma, a toll collector at the harbour that linked Timbuktu to the Niger, was kept but always filled with a Moroccan. Conversely, some of the Songhay nobility began to swear loyalty to the Arma and fought alongside them.⁶¹⁰

Apart from trying to integrate the remains of the Songhay nobility into their own ranks, they took over another feature of the Songhay administration: In order to protect their northern border, they integrated the Magsharen Tuareg into their sphere of influence, but, according to the Tarikh al-Sudan, nominated the leader, Aonsenba ben Mo-

⁶⁰⁹ T/S-E, P.248.

⁶¹⁰ T/S-E, P.230.

hammered 'Alim ben Aklenq̄i, themselves.⁶¹¹ His children "avaient été élevés à Tombouctou et étaient considérés comme des citoyens de cette ville."⁶¹² In other words, they were hostages in the town the Arma had elected their capital. They had every reason to be suspicious, because the loyalty of the Magsharen was not guaranteed. Other Tuareg leaders, like Akmadol, refused to submit to the Arma's rule,⁶¹³ which led to several attacks on Arma strongholds. For example Timbuktu was attacked while the main host was on expedition against the rebels of Djenne by a Tuareg host and was only saved by the timely intervention of a 1500 men strong reinforcement column which was sent from Marrakech at the request of Pasha Mahmud Zarqun.⁶¹⁴ Shortly after, the Arma outpost Ras al-Ma' was overrun by the Tuareg who killed everyone they found.⁶¹⁵ The Bidan world, of which the Tuareg were a part, was in major upheaval at that time, some groups aligning with the Arma, others being openly hostile whereas further groups even thought to submit to the Arma wholesale like those from al-Hadjjar, who fled 1655 into the Arma's arms, fleeing other Tuareg groups.⁶¹⁶ This shows the whole region became unstable. The Arma were under massive pressure not only from Tuareg groups to the north which they tried to reign in with these truces, but they were also faced with the Mossi in the south-east, the Fulani of Masina to the south-west and west.

Thus the Arma's style of rule was very similar to that what the Europeans tried to do later, that is, introduce a new top layer onto the existing system, not touching the rest, in fact, trying to freeze the old systems into place in order to guarantee one's own position. This strategy was implemented out of the realisation of their tenuous position, especially when Morocco disintegrated and the reinforcement dried up. The conquerors understood that their small force could not hope to hold the conquered areas without the at least tacit cooperation of the local population. The Moroccans kept the local Songhay administration and lifted Sulayman b. Dawud, one of the sons of Askya Dawud, on the

⁶¹¹ T/S-F, P.473.

⁶¹² T/S-F, P.473.

⁶¹³ T/S-F, P.473.

⁶¹⁴ T/S-E, P.214.

⁶¹⁵ T/S-E, P.215.

⁶¹⁶ T/S-F, P.473.

throne without giving him much power at first, making him a front for their actions.⁶¹⁷ He was only allowed to lord over the Songhay of Bara and Kissou, but had no power over any other ethnicities or regions where the Moroccans implemented direct rule. They put him in power after they had lured Askya Muhammed Gao, who had opposed them with a remnant of the Songhay army, into a trap and killed him with a large number of his officials.⁶¹⁸ By removing the last Askya that had been ascended to power independently and imposing an Askya on their own choice as a puppet ruler they wanted to realign loyalty to Morocco in general and to the Pasha especially. It was intended as a display of power for the local population, who for the moment had no other Askya to chose from. From an ideological standpoint it was a good effort. The new Askya had the divine right to rule because of his being part of the kin of a famous Askya, known for his baraka (holy power). With this move they claimed rule over Songhay not only because of their military power, but also through their control of a legitimate heir. Their control over the administrative system was not complete though, as the population was still able to counter appointments to officialdom. When the Moroccans wanted to install a new Askya, they could not, as they hit against too much resistance from the citizens as this excerpt from the Tarikh al-Sudan shows:

*“Le pacha nomma askia Mohammed-ben-Anasa fils de Askia-Daoud, mais, à peine le pacha était-il rentré que l'askia Mohammed fut déposé par les gens du Songhaï qui mirent à sa place l'askia Daoud, fils de Mohammed-Sorko-Idji, fils de Askia-Daoud”*⁶¹⁹

The Arma instated Askyas remained much longer on their post as the rulers of the Moroccan invaders. They could rest their power on the citizenry, which was nearly impossible for the Moroccans who were dependent first on their ruler and later on the fickle mood of their local soldiers. The Askyas thus gave the society on the Middle Niger bend some stability and continuity. Saad points out that he became a more independent actor and dealt with the Askya of the “free” Songhay, his opponent, on his own.⁶²⁰

⁶¹⁷ T/S-E, P.202.

⁶¹⁸ T/S-E, P.201.

⁶¹⁹ T/S-F, P.472.

⁶²⁰ Saad (Social History of Timbuktu), P.172.

Ultimately however, this attempt to establish an Arma controlled Askyate that emulated the Songhay structures of old did not work as intended. Another son of Askya Dawud, Nuh, was able to escape the Arma's clutches and took over the reigns of independent Songhay as Askya Nuh.⁶²¹ He was able to offer stiff resistance to the invaders by uniting an independent Songhay behind him, but was unable to defeat them. This undermined the authority of the Moroccans and their Askyate. In fact, Askya Sulayman is hardly ever mentioned in the sources, most likely because he was a weak figure. Askya Nuh on the other hand is portrayed as a decent, modest and brave man. According to the *Tarikh al-Sudan*, he initially refused to take on the mantle of Askya,⁶²² fought bravely and honourably. This is right in line with the expectations of honourable conduct described in the chapter on "Honour" and we can consider them here as tropes that are used in order to give the image of an idealised ruler that carried on the Sudanic identity that had been attacked by Morocco in a similar fashion to Kala-Sha Bukar. Nuh managed to resist the Moroccans for seven years, from 1592 to 1599, from his base in Dendi. He is portrayed in obvious contrast to the Moroccans who are displayed as greedy and capricious people:

*"Many terrible battles took place in that land, and Askiya Nuh and his small band was more successful against them than Askiya Ishaq had been with a force a hundred times larger. At the battle of Burni eighty of Pasha Mahmud's best foot-soldiers died. I was told by someone I trust that Mahmud came to look over the dead after the two sides had disengaged, and ordered that the belts around their midribs be loosened, upon which minted [gold] dinars fell out of them all, and Pasha Mahmud took them all for himself."*⁶²³

The direct opposition set up by al-Sadi in these two sentences between a glorious Nuh that defeated the best of what the Moroccans had to offer and a greedy Mahmud Zarqun who was only after the gold and even stole from his own dead followers are all too clear. The *Tarikh*s try to draw a direct line from Askya Muhammed via Askya Dawud to Askya Nuh in an attempt to establish the Middle Niger Bend as home to a dis-

⁶²¹ T/S-E, P.203.

⁶²² T/S-E, P.203.

⁶²³ T/S-E, P.204.

tinct social group. For that the authors relied on qualities that they ascribed to each of these men in the form of tropes. Especially in the case of Askya Nuh this becomes obvious as he fought from Dendi, an area which had been completely unimportant during the height of Songhay and fought a losing battle. He never once managed to win a decisive engagement and only managed to hold an enemy at bay who fought far from home in unfamiliar terrain. But he was the last that managed to achieve even that much, which made him the best al-Sadi had to brush up as an idol and sign for an opposition in identity to the invading forces. Askya Nuh did not last however. When he was defeated by Qa'id Mansur in battle, his credit with his followers had been spent and he was deposed. After Nuh's departure Dendi-Songhay brakes down completely and slowly fades into oblivion.

That there was some kind of culture war of the Sudan against the invading Moroccans also becomes clear when Pasha Mahmud Zarqun was killed. His enemies "cut off his head and sent it to Askiya Nuh who sent it to Kanta, sultan of Kebbi".⁶²⁴ It is unlikely that al-Sadi actually witnessed this happening but heard about this incident through the grapevine. This story, regardless it being true or not, makes only sense however if such an alliance existed in the first place. Al-Mansur certainly thought so. Writing an angry letter to the court in Kebbi, accusing it of providing the Dendi-Askya with:

*"(...) protection, aiding them and reinforcing them with cavalry, seeking to oppose what God has predestined for those whom He has despoiled and for whom He has decreed; perdition and woe."*⁶²⁵

This letter, that the Moroccan ruler wrote to Kebbi was, as far as we know, not honoured with a reply. As this letter is independent of the Tarikhs or any other writings it is most likely true that some Middle Niger Bend societies worked in concert against the invaders. Unfortunately we do not know anything about Kebbi and its motivations.

Apart from having to deal with enemies from outside, like the remnants of independent Songhay, the Arma also produced a whole lot set of internal problems; the major one growing out of the social internal divisions within the Arma themselves. The sources are not clear on the percentages but Haidara estimates that in the initial force of

⁶²⁴ T/S-E, 227.

⁶²⁵ Hunwick (A little-known diplomatic episode in the history of Kebbi), P.580.

Djoudar in 1591 the Andalusian element had a slight numerical advantage over the Berber element which however shifted over time in favour of the latter.⁶²⁶ In that sense there was thus a split in familiarity of the arriving forces on the Middle Niger Bend. The Berber element found a world not all that different from where they initially originated from, the Andalusian element however had been much more removed from this way of life which had been much more aligned with the Mediterranean world. These differences were multiplied and strengthened by the Pashas themselves over the course of their stay by being resupplied with their brethren. Over time this factionalism did not recede, on the contrary, the 400 men that another Pasha - Ahmad b. Yusuf al-Ildji - brought with him were “(...) été dispersés sur les bords du Fleuve, chaque groupe d'entre eux ayant été rejoindre le bataillon de renégats ou d'Andalous auquel il était incorporé, (...)”⁶²⁷ This citation also offer an explanation as to why the Arma did not become a coherent group. The constant reinforcements that trickled through the desert until 1618 continuously strengthened old identities of social groups that existed in Morocco and these became constantly reaffirmed on the Middle Niger Bend when members of these groups were sent south. Other sources also report similarly. According to al-Zaiyani, a Moroccan scholar of the 18th century, the Moroccan ruler al-Mansur sent: “(...) gens du Sous, des Hiha, Arabes Ma'qil, Arabes Gusam, gens de Marrakech Fès et de Sigilmâsa.”⁶²⁸ The troops were thus drawn from all across the Moroccan realm and kept these identities on the Middle Niger Bend. At the same time the Pasha was also, at least initially, selected from Morocco and sent down and did not stem from the ranks of the Arma themselves. So a leader that was unknown to everyone who he lorded over had to lead an assortment of groups who also normally did not live that close to each other and whose separate identities got constantly reinforced.

The competition and jealousies between and within the divisions was so intense that no stable system of power transition ever materialised. In the end the deciding factor was which division held the most power at any given moment. This advantage was al-

⁶²⁶ Haidara (L'Espagne musulmane et l'Afrique subsaharienne), P.34.

⁶²⁷ T/S-F, P.340.

⁶²⁸ al-Zaiyānī (Histoire de La Dynastie Sa'dide: Extrait de al-Turguman), P.52-53.

ways very fleeting however as the bigger divisions were equally matched.⁶²⁹ This splintering of the Arma forces into different factions was already initiated by Pasha Djoudar, who had disappointed his master, trying to negotiate with the defeated Askya, as pointed out in the chapter on “A short history of the Middle Niger Bend”. In consequence al-Mansur sent a new Pasha, Mahmud Zarqun, south. However Djoudar and his commanders enacted precautions against the new Pasha who was to depose Djoudar. He had been very aware of the possibility that his ideas of a deal with the defeated Askya may put him add odds with al-Mansur and had prepared for such an event and letters had arrived from Marrakech before the new Pasha Zarqun had reached the Niger with his own host. Prior to the arrival of his replacement, Djoudar and Ahmad b. al-Haddad, one of his commanders who was very much in favour of coming quickly to terms with the Askya, had the lieutenants assemble and gave them 100 mithqal each and they promised in return that “all swore that no harm should befall him [Djoudar]”.⁶³⁰ This kind of politicking, of intentionally splitting the forces into several factions, each pretender hoping to draw the strongest factions towards himself, foreshadows what was to come later. Upon arrival, Djoudar was deposed but remained influential and the army had to transfer the loyalty to Zarqun. Although openly hostile to Djoudar he could not move against him as the latter had made sure through his gifts that he could not be harmed further. Haddad however, demoted as well, fled to Marrakech and told al-Mansur that Mahmud Zarqun was corrupt and diverted funds into his own pockets. The Sultan, convinced, sent a replacement in 1595. Zarqun, informed by a letter of his end, decided to attack an enemy position with inadequate forces, getting himself killed before being dishonoured.⁶³¹

According to the Tadzkirot al-Nisian, after al-Mansur’s death in 1603, which had ignited a fierce succession struggle in Morocco, the influence of Marrakech began to wane. In 1618 the last reinforcement of 400 soldiers arrived from the metropole. New Pashas were from now on elected by the Armas themselves. The post of Pasha began to rotate mainly between two different divisions, the Fas and the Marrakush who lorded

⁶²⁹ Saad (Social History of Timbuktu), P.169-170.

⁶³⁰ T/S-E, P.195.

⁶³¹ Saad (Social History of Timbuktu), P.185.

over further factions like Drawis and the Shraqa (People of the east - a division mainly stemming from Tlemcen), each electing a Pasha for a specific period of time.⁶³² That such a system was in place is supported by the Tarikh al-Sudan which mentions the reorganisation of the army under Pasha Lonko in 1608-1609 where the “Fez battalion [became] the right wing, and the Marrakesh battalion the left wing, putting the renegades and the Andalusians under them.”⁶³³ It is unlikely that the reorganisation of the army along the same lines as the initial factions that fought over the office of the Pasha was a coincidence. The reorganisation of the armed forces was probably just making official what had already been recognised reality in any case and than later translated into the political sphere where these faction began to fight against one another over the post of the Pasha. These three main different military divisions, who fought over the post of the Pasha, also produced, once settled, according to Saad, their own outcrop of unknown and unimpressive literati which split into two contending factions, the Fes(iyyin) and the Marakesh(iyyin). These two often argued over who is to lead the third big, but smaller and less powerful division, like the Drawis. Other divisions were either too small, like the Shiadhma, Shtuka, Hayyua and others, to be worried about, or were ultimately destroyed, like the Ahla Shraqa. The different divisions began to hunker down in separate quarters within Timbuktu, the main polarisation being between the Djingerebir and the Sarekeine mosques.⁶³⁴

Although elected, the Pasha could easily be ousted by a vote of confidence. This led to a string of Pashas a.d. who tried to regain their former office. In addition, every new election of a Pasha led to a reelections bonanza of the lesser offices, as the new Pasha usually felt forced to remove the military-chiefs of the two main divisions, the Kabara-Farma and others officials, with individuals he had more confidence in. This meant that no cohesion between the different groups could ever be enforced. If breaches between the distinct groups began to emerge there was nothing or no one who would steer it back into the pack, resulting in total social fragmentation.⁶³⁵ Songhay, for all its faults, had

⁶³² Anonymous (Tedzkiret), P.282.

⁶³³ T/S-E, P.247-248.

⁶³⁴ Saad (Social History of Timbuktu), P.117.

⁶³⁵ Abitbol (Tombouctou et les arma), P.74.

managed to mould a somewhat cohesive common identity. Even during times of civil war, every aspirant was keen on gaining the throne of Songhay, on becoming Askya, not on just breaking away to become independent as was the case with the Arma. Even the 'Ulema of Timbuktu, who in the last days of the empire had major issues with the rulers of Songhay wanted to reform the empire, not create an autonomous polity. This kind of unity was never achieved by the Moroccans, on the contrary, they began to drift apart themselves and their lifeline to the north started to fray.

The Arma make a name for themselves as quite ruthless and violent people. Right from the outset the Moroccan's did nothing to appease the population whose realm they had conquered. After in October 1591 the "most stupid"⁶³⁶ Timbuktu-Mondio, a Songhay official of old, had tried to oust the Moroccans from Timbuktu and failed miserably, the Moroccans retaliated and "unsheathed their swords against people at every turn, and thus kindled the fire of revolt."⁶³⁷ The disregard of the Moroccans regarding the traders on the Middle Niger Bend was further demonstrated by the following set of actions:

*"Brusquement, le matin du septième jour, ils virent arriver devant la porte de leurs maisons les Marocains, avec leurs bagages et leurs chevaux. Les Marocains se précipitèrent sur les habitants, les abreuvant d'injures, de menaces et de coups, et leur firent vider les lieux en employant la force et la violence; puis ils se partagèrent entre eux les maisons et y entrèrent en même temps que les propriétaires en sortaient. (...) Cependant la plus grande partie des biens des habitants était demeurée dans leurs maisons et, une fois qu'ils en eurent été expulsés, pas un ne put revenir chercher ce qu'il avait laissé. Quant aux Marocains, ils se mirent à joindre les maisons et les rues les unes aux autres et à démolir une partie des bâtiments. Jamais épreuve plus cruelle ni plus grande ne s'était abattue sur les gens de Tombouctou, ni qui fût plus amère que celle-là. Le pacha Djoudar convoqua les ulémas et les négociants de Tombouctou et exigea d'eux les esclaves et les travailleurs nécessaires à la construction du fort."*⁶³⁸

⁶³⁶ T/S-E, P.197.

⁶³⁷ T/S-E, P.197.

⁶³⁸ Tarikh Al-fattash, P.280.

In addition the *Tarikh al-Fattash* reports about several other instances of serious misbehaviour of the Moroccans, aggravating the population of the Middle Niger Bend ever further.⁶³⁹ Tempers began to boil and the notables of the city, merchants and scholars mainly, complained to the Qadi, Abu Hafis Umar, about the unacceptable behaviour of the Arma in Timbuktu and asked him to act. Initially he held back, sending a message through the Ashra' Mondio to some of the leaders of the city, the Sharifs, that they "should take precautionary steps" and "should not risk their lives and should be wary of the Arma"⁶⁴⁰ against the Moroccans. The messenger however is supposed to have changed the words into: "Qadi Umar orders you to conduct a jihad against them."⁶⁴¹ The next morning the city rose against the Arma. It is unlikely that it actually happened that way as the story has all the markings of being invented or transmitted via Chinese whispers. The motivations of the actors are left completely unclear, especially the messenger is never mentioned before or later and despite him being the most crucial factor in this story we are left in the dark regarding his reasoning for relaying the opposite meaning of the intended message, most likely because al-Sadi thought that this was not the point of the story. What is important here is the word "dijihad". By this choice of words al-Sadi moved the Arma into the realm of the *Dar al-Harb*, into the house of war. According to this, the Arma were no Muslims. Thus with one stroke of the pen, al-Sadi had given a reason for their appalling and immoral conduct: they were pagans. He thus moved the uprising into the religious realm and thus made the struggle into one of religious legitimacy, which had been an issue for the 'Ulema under Songhay already. With this he also erected a barrier between the society of the Middle Niger Bend and the invaders. The former were Muslims the latter were not. What we see here is that al-Sadi's argument is not consistent. On the one hand he tried everything to link Takrur to North Africa. The already mentioned citation that the culture of the Middle Niger Bend came uniquely from the Maghrib⁶⁴² stands in direct contrast to the sentiment expressed here. Al-Sadi, like Ahmad Baba and others authors expressed an intense yearning for being

⁶³⁹ see e.g. *Tarikh Al-fattash*, P.281.

⁶⁴⁰ T/S-E, P.205.

⁶⁴¹ T/S-E, P.205.

⁶⁴² Here translated as the "west", the meaning of "Maghrib" in Arabic. T/S-E, P.30.

associated with the Muslim heartlands while simultaneously being absolutely horrified by what those who hailed from this part of the world did to their home.

From the next day on, Timbuktu was in armed turmoil, lasting for two months, ending on the 17th of December 1591. 76 Moroccan soldiers were killed and the garrison besieged. During this time the different Tuareg factions intervened as well. The Magsharen however were disunited. The eastern branch under the leadership of Koi Awasamba invaded Timbuktu, looting and burning entire quarters. The Arma were supported by the Tuareg under their leader Awasamba who they had installed as Magsharen-Koi. Awasamba was no stranger to Timbuktu as he had grown up in the "Qadi's household".⁶⁴³ He supported his new masters because it was them who had made him chief of the Magsharen, so he threw in his lot with them. It has to be added though that this also emphasises the importance Timbuktu and other towns along this berth had for the inhabitants of the desert. Awasamba not only attacked Timbuktu because he was aligned with the Arma but also because it was an important city for his people and by being one of the main attackers he made clear that he laid tentatively claim to it; it was a demonstration of power, already foreshadowing the conflict between Tuareg and Arma.

Pasha Mahmud Zarqun, Djoudar's successor, heard about the dire state of his capital, but was out on campaign. Instead of going himself, he told one of his commanders, Qa'id Mami, to "undertake a slaughter of the people of Timbuktu, and kill every last one of them."⁶⁴⁴ He however instead managed to orchestrate a reconciliation between the trapped Arma who were under the leadership of Qa'id al-Mustafa and the population of Timbuktu.⁶⁴⁵ The 'Ulema of Timbuktu also wrote a letter directed to the Moroccan ruler Mulay Ahmad, through private channels, asking for forgiveness, emphasising that it was all the Arma's fault and stressing that "they were in obedience to God and His Prophet, and thereafter to Mulay Ahmad."⁶⁴⁶ It is telling that they do not state that their allegiance lies with the local Arma administration, which was emphasised by lodging

⁶⁴³ T/S-E, P.206.

⁶⁴⁴ T/S-E, P.207.

⁶⁴⁵ T/S-E, P.206-207.

⁶⁴⁶ T/S-E, P.217.

the complaint via non-official channels. The ‘Ulema was not opposed to the rule of worldly rulers, but they had a problem if they challenged their own authority. Meanwhile Zarqun fought against Dendi-Askya Nuh but suffered extremely high rates of attrition. His position against the opponent did not improve while his men ran out. The situation taking a turn for the worse he decided to return to Timbuktu in the September of 1593 in order to regroup and assess the situation he found himself in. His image among his own soldiers was at a low point and rebellions in the different towns along the Middle Niger Bend appeared to be imminent. He viewed the ‘Ulema as the main culprit of his sorrows as they provided much of the opposition he fought against in his own domains. Fuel to the fire was that the Qadi had filed a complaint against him with al-Mansur on grounds of callousness and excessive brutality. Pasha Mahmud, being infuriated with the Qadi wrote him a letter in December 1591, after the calm in Timbuktu had been restored,⁶⁴⁷ complaining:

*“Nous avons reçu des nouvelles de l'agitation et du désordre auxquels se sont livrés les habitants de Tombouctou (...) et des séductions du démon que les agents de l'Askya (...) rebelle et malfaisant ont entretenues dans leurs esprits. Nous avons appris qu'ils ont créé des difficultés à nos partisans qui se trouvent dans cette ville,(...) Mais comment, alors que tu es le personnage exemplaire de ce pays Sudanaï, celui dont la parole est écoutée, pareille agitation a-t-elle pu naître, vous présents? Comment, alors que vous compte, parmi les amis de cette dynastie hasimide [Sa'did], as-tu pu laisser la population accomplir ses mauvais desseins quand il vous était loisible d'éteindre le feu de la rébellion! (...) En bref, de cette affaire, c'est toi qui portes la responsabilité; les crimes commis par les sujets, le sort des malheureux dont le sang a été versé, tout cela retombe sur toi, (...) je te fais part, (...), de mon mécontentement, (...) Comment, quand cette agitation a pris naissance, ne nous as-tu pas averti par l'un de tes messagers?”*⁶⁴⁸

⁶⁴⁷ al-Mansur (Letter from Mulay Ahmad al-Mansur to Qadi Umar B. Mahmud), P.305-307.

⁶⁴⁸ Lévi-Provençal, E. ‘Un document inédit sur l’expédition Sa’dide au Soudan’. *Arabica: Revue d’Etudes Arabes* 11, no. 1 (1955): 89–96, P.95-96.

The Pasha puts the blame squarely on the Qadi, saying that “[p]rimary responsibility in this matter is yours, and the sins of the subjects, and the unfortunate ones whose blood has been spilt, are upon your head.”⁶⁴⁹ The Pasha makes a clear distinction between the Qadi who heads the local ‘Ulema and the “common folk [which] have no sense unless they find someone who will restrain them.”⁶⁵⁰ The purge of the scholars that followed this letter, further elaborated on below, shows that this was not some over-the-top reasoning but a plain description of how the Arma saw their political reality.

Nevertheless, recognising the key role the Qadi and his family, the Aqits, played he chose to appease them and other notables at first. Although he held Qadi ‘Umar responsible for what happened he added:

*“But certain things became apparent to us, and because of them we have accepted your excuse. From you we only need pious invocation, and that your baraka should accompany us.”*⁶⁵¹

The ‘Ulema seemed to be content with this gesture but they did not realise what was to come. The letters final words had kept the scholars from rebelling further but the machinations for their purge had already been set in motion. The rebellion had shown the Arma that they did not have control over those who had the biggest mindshare of the population and that their political and social control over the region was extremely tenuous. The rebellion had lasted for several months during which the Arma were constantly on the backfoot, while their force’s main body was far away fighting. A situation like this was utterly unacceptable as it threatened the very existence of the Arma holdings and something had to be done which was to implement a burned earth policy. The problem for the Arma was that they had not implemented a functional civil administration. The Muslim estate on its part had misread the situation and overplayed its hand. The rebellion which intention was to (re)establish the Muslim estate as a force to be reck-

⁶⁴⁹ al-Mansur (Letter from Mulay Ahmad al-Mansur to Qadi Umar B. Mahmud), P.307.

⁶⁵⁰ al-Mansur (Letter from Mulay Ahmad al-Mansur to Qadi Umar B. Mahmud), P.307.

⁶⁵¹ al-Mansur (Letter from Mulay Ahmad al-Mansur to Qadi Umar B. Mahmud), P.307.

oned with did not realise that the Arma did not play with Songhay's rules, which had relied on the ideological underpinnings of the Muslim estate to hold the empire together. The Arma never intended to use the Muslim estate in such a grand scale way which the scholars did not realise. Thus instead of scaring the Arma into realising that they were a vital part of a successful occupation of the Middle Niger Bend, they scared the Arma into believing that they were one of the main forces undermining their very survival. Curiously such momentous events are not mentioned in the *Tarikh al-Fattash* which also does in general not leave a good hair on the Moroccans. We know however that Ahmed Baba and other were abducted to Marrakech though from independent sources, most notably, Ahmad Baba himself who rose to prominence in Marrakech. Thus, it is clear that something happened that led to the scholars being abducted and a rebellion is a likely explanation for it, especially as the Muslim estate had the motives. We can assume however that the details not necessarily exactly happened that way. It is nevertheless instructive to look at them as they are an expression of how Takrur fought ideologically against the Arma.

When Zaqun finally arrived in Timbuktu, after having been two years in the field, on the 20th October 1593, he ordered the local 'Ulema to gather at the Sankore mosque so that they may pay allegiance to al-Mansur. Once arrived, the Arma locked the doors around them and enclosed the area with armed men. The Qadi, his brother and many other members of the intelligentsia were arrested and thrown into the prisons of the Qasbah, the fort, after a minor tumult broke out which was suppressed, leaving nine scholars dead. This was not only due to the rebellion that had taken place but also because Tuareg forces, to which many scholars were kin, had overrun the Arma garrison of Ras al-Ma beforehand.⁶⁵² The houses of the scholars were then looted and the spoils distributed among his own men and new measures were put in place. The main market was moved closer to the fort for better control, a new Qadi appointed and all imprisoned scholars were exiled to Morocco in April 1594.⁶⁵³ The *Tarikh al-Fattash* comments on what had happened:

⁶⁵² Saad (*Social History of Timbuktu*), P.178.

⁶⁵³ T/S-E, P.218-221.

*“Cependant, lorsque ces personnages furent partis pour l'exil, Tombouctou devint [comme] un corps sans âme. Sa vie fut bouleversée, ses conditions d'existence devinrent tout autres et ses mœurs se modifièrent.”*⁶⁵⁴

With the expulsion of its intellectual elite, Timbuktu entered its final decline from which it should never recover. The scholarly activity of the city, housed in one of the earliest universities in the world, never picked up again. It has to be said however that although Zarqun's actions put the final nail into the coffin, the decline was already structural. The area in which Timbuktu lay was beginning to feel the pressure of desertification more and more, making the region not only difficult to live in but also politically unstable as less arable land had to support a rising number of people.⁶⁵⁵ Congruently, the trade routes, which had led through its gates were beginning to grow narrower as it began to route around it. In the west, European traders began to exploit the possibilities in earnest and in the east new empires rose and offered routes through the Sahara. What Timbuktu had done however in tandem with cities like Walata and Djenne, was to infuse the Sudan with its own kind of scholarship and intellectual tradition, which was easily able to stand on its own. It had been a forge and beacon of ideas and a lighthouse for men of learning. Rural communities had sent their children to Timbuktu to acquire knowledge and they brought that back with them when they returned home. These cities, with Timbuktu at its helm, had created a network of scholars and their ideas, the echoes of which we can still hear today.

The scholars regained some of their power in the following years and even though over time the Arma and the Songhay merged into one, becoming the core of the notability until the French arrived.⁶⁵⁶ One of the reasons for this was the continuity the remaining elements of the Muslim estate was able to provide. All the Qadis which had been appointed in Timbuktu between 1599 and 1750 died after very long periods in office. This also indicates a marked difference between the military/ruling estate and the religious/trading estate. In contrast, holders of political offices changed fast. Initially they were able to hold on to power for a few years, but this degraded quickly to a few

⁶⁵⁴ T/F, P.308.

⁶⁵⁵ Webb (Desert Frontier), P.48.

⁶⁵⁶ Saad (Social History of Timbuktu), P.230.

months or even weeks only. They were often appointed against considerable opposition as the case of Djoudar had shown, a strain which the Arma administration usually could not endure, or were appeasement candidates, leading to further exploitation of the Arma's political weakness.

This recognition became also manifest through the fiscal sphere. Saad points out that the Arma began to tax the merchants which in very short time provided a large part of the state income. Saad argues that this shows a formal recognition of the religious-mercantile estate as a power in its own right.⁶⁵⁷ The Arma themselves however evolved into a "group of status" in the Weberian term. One had to be born Arma to be a Arma. They inherited their status and their charisma from their predecessors and had a monopoly on the political power. The rest of society, the Alfas, the smaller merchants the semi-literate scholars and all the others, ordered themselves around these two groups according to their proximity or their distance from them. The scholars, who had, in contrast to the Songhay nobility, stayed in the city during the Moroccan invasion, felt their allegiance mainly tied to the city they lived in and to the larger body of scholars elsewhere in the Sudan. This identity was so strong that its geographic extend even received its own name of "Takrur". The status of the scholars was not tied to the political survival of a certain political entity like the Songhay rulers or the Arma were but to the status of the city they lived in. They provided the link between the Tuareg confederations of the Sahara and the organised polities of the Middle Niger Bend, although out of practical considerations regarding the conduct of trade and for ideological reasons, they tended to prefer more organised structures which ultimately was one of the factors which led to the acceptance of the Arma. This view is expressed in a quote from Sheik al-Mukthar al-Kunti who died in 1811:

"The dynasty of the Arma (Moroccans) was better than that of the (Iwillimeden) Tuaregs because they adhered to the policy of a kingdom. As for the Tuaregs, they conquered without knowledge of the policy of a kingdom and the estab-

⁶⁵⁷ Saad (Social History of Timbuktu), P.123.

ishment of offices according to the Shari'a. They ruin and do not build and construct."⁶⁵⁸

They understood however that they relied on the Tuareg for smooth conduct of their trade operations and as a counterweight against the more centralised polities. The mid-nineteenth century Timbuktu scholar al-Bakka'i said that:

*"Timbuktu could not have any prosperity without the [cooperation] of the Tuareg. (...) People of the deserts and of cattle are important for the prosperity of towns and villages."*⁶⁵⁹

Although on the whole the scholars and traders preferred a comparatively stable system like the Arma provided to the ephemeral structure of the Tuareg confederations, they tried to stay away from their conflicts, cooping them instead to their advantage as a human highway across the Sahara and as (unsuccessful) guarantors of political stability. For the scholars, the Arma, although weak, were for a long time the best bet for their own survival on the Middle Niger Bend. After the purge there also simply was no choice as the power of the 'Ulema had been broken.

It is striking to see here that although the Songhay elite had for the large part long been Islamised and the Moroccans could look on a longer tradition of Islam as any scholar of the Sudan, the scholars still managed to separate themselves from them on the basis of their religious function, despite Islam not having an official priesthood. Their success in separating themselves from the military class was so great that they acquired quasi-ethnic status. There were the "political scholars", they were in most cases not part of the court but dealt with it in some manner. The Qadi and a large part of the 'Ulema of Timbuktu fit in this group. They had strong links to the Berbers and Arabs of the Sahara and were the mediators between the world of the desert and the Middle Niger bend. They lived mainly in Timbuktu and Gao and the oasis towns, like Awdaghust and Walata and they had nearly no penetration at all into the areas further south. They were Bidan and Zwaya and thus in order to enter their circles one had to be born that way.

⁶⁵⁸ Quoted in Norris, H. T. *The Tuaregs: Their Islamic Legacy and its Diffusion in the Sahel*. Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1975, P.99.

⁶⁵⁹ Ahmad al-Bakkà'i, *Two letters to al-Hâjj 'Umar*, in: Saad (Social History of Timbuktu), P.151.

Saad writes that especially in Timbuktu a “patriciate” could be found that remained a stable feature over several centuries and provided a stability nowhere else to be found in the Sudan. Scholarship was one basis on which it rested but trading wealth was another. With the passage of time, the riches amassed by the traders, who were often scholars themselves or had close family ties to those who were, passed on to their descendants giving birth to a trader/scholar class who formed a stable “mercantile bourgeoisie” bound together by family ties and a shared outlook. According to Saad, it was this combination of wealth and scholarly activity which gave them their power.⁶⁶⁰ The drastic measures implemented by the Moroccans under al-Mansur following the riot which broke out in Timbuktu, put a serious damper on the power of the scholars. As a result the status of the scholars eroded and the quality of scholarship declined.

Djenne, another main city of the Middle Niger Bend, was closely intertwined socially and economically with Timbuktu, the situation there was important to both scholars and the Arma. However the situation there also was also tenuous. According to the Tarikh al-Sudan, Djenne had pledged allegiance to the Arma via letter.⁶⁶¹ It was ruled by the Djenne-Mondio Bukarna who had been installed by Askya Ishaq, the last Askya of Songhay. They immediately accepted the overlordship of the Arma. In order to underscore their power and presence in the city, the Arma installed a new Qadi of their choosing.⁶⁶² The reason why Djenne rolled over so easily is because the city relied heavily on Timbuktu for its economic fortunes. If the Arma had decided to cut Timbuktu off from Djenne the trans-Saharan trade would never reach the city which was one of its main assets. Another reason was that Djenne needed protection from an armed force. Djenne was known to be rich and became a magnet for those who wanted to raid its storehouses. After having received the letter Qa'id Mami was sent to Djenne in order to show presence. However, after he and his entourage had left the town, former officials of Songhay talked their way through its gates and:

“Two or three days later they seized the Jenne-mondyo Bukama and plundered all the goods in his residence. They also seized the Moroccan qadi and put

⁶⁶⁰ Saad (Social History of Timbuktu), P.227-228.

⁶⁶¹ T/S-E, P.207.

⁶⁶² T/S-E, P.208.

him and the Jenne-mondyo in irons and sent them off to Madma, one of the towns of the land of Kala."⁶⁶³

With this an uprising in Djenne had started. This however was different in quality to what had happened in Timbuktu. If we believe al-Sadi then according to the citation just given, the rebels were outsiders who mainly came to loot not because they had any interest in retaking the town from an invader. In Djenne there appeared to be much more of a split in the population. Some reverted on their oath of allegiance and al-Sadi specifically mentioned that the rebels only looted "the merchants who had close relationships with the Arma."⁶⁶⁴ After they had done their deeds they decided to leave Djenne. Al-Sadi accuses them of "great wickedness and oppression in Jenne during those days."⁶⁶⁵ The contrast in al-Sadi's accounts of the uprising in Timbuktu and the rebels of Djenne is striking. The first is portrayed as just whereas the latter is portrayed as mainly motivated by greed. Both uprising however were undertaken by Takruri, old inhabitants of the Middle Niger Bend, against the Arma. It is thus interesting that al-Sadi describes the rebels of Djenne in such a negative light and sides morally with the Arma which he slanders otherwise on every twist and turn. We have to remember though that al-Sadi termed the uprising in Timbuktu a "dijihad", a religious struggle against an illegitimate regime, spearheaded by the 'Ulema of whom he was a part. The rebels of Djenne however were (former) nobles of Songhay who had no direct link to the Muslim estate. These warriors just did what they always did: raiding. They also targeted the merchants of Djenne, many of whom were part of the Muslim estate and most likely had at least professional links to their counterparts in Timbuktu, although family was also often involved as we have seen with the Aqits. These warriors however did not heed the counsel from the 'Ulema, whereas the Arma had just managed to reconcile themselves with the 'Ulema of Timbuktu and thus apparently accepted the authority of the scholars of Timbuktu. (This was after Mami's attempts at reconciliation but before the purge of the Muslim scholars.) The Muslim estate's agenda had always been to get accepted in its own right and the Arma had made the appearance of acceptance of that claim, whereas

⁶⁶³ T/S-E, P.209.

⁶⁶⁴ T/S-E, P.209.

⁶⁶⁵ T/S-E, P.210.

the Djenne rebels had not. The scholars of Timbuktu were to realise too late that they had badly misread the Arma's intentions who had no interest in giving the 'Ulema an inch. When Pasha Mahmud Zarqun finally returned to Timbuktu from campaigning he immediately asked to arrest "Qadi Umar and his brothers"⁶⁶⁶ thus removing the central figure of the religious estate and weakening the opposition against him.

When the Djenne-Koi died in 1592, having ruled for 36 years, the Arma appointed a successor who was not of the traditional ruling family. This led to the immediate alienation of the ruling elite, who were distrustful of the Makhzan in any case. After many misgivings, the Arma reverted their decision in 1597 and invested a Koi stemming from the local ruling strata, but it was too late and an uprising took place. Finally Masina joined up forces with the remains of the old empire of Mali also took its chance⁶⁶⁷ whose then ruler, Sultan Mahmud, dreamt of a resurgence to former glory and tried to take back Djenne in 1599. To this end he sent emissaries to former vassals of Mali, trying to recruit them. This largely failed however and no one but two, Kala and Binduku, did respond. He had also sent a message to Kala-Sha Bukar, who we have already met in the chapter on "Honour". For al-Sadi this noble is an example of honorific conduct, a hero of Takrur. According to the *Tarikh al-Sudan*, the Kala-Sha's attitude towards the Malians was friendly but ultimately he thought their request futile and refused his support. Mali and Masina then gathered their forces and attacked to the north, a feat Mali had not accomplished in over a century. However, they failed in taking the city and the king of Mali fled on his horse.⁶⁶⁸ He was pursued by local Moroccan allies, but when they caught up with him, they did not kill or bind him. If we are to believe the sources they got of their horses and hailed him as worth worthy of a king, telling him to move with haste as otherwise the Moroccans would get hold of him, bringing dishonour to his name.⁶⁶⁹ Although they were enemies they remembered their past as allies coming from the same stock, giving the last greeting to a dying empire that was fading into oblivion. True or not, this episode speaks about the lasting effects of honour and grace which

⁶⁶⁶ T/S-E, P.218.

⁶⁶⁷ T/S-E, P.233-234.

⁶⁶⁸ T/S-E, P.234.

⁶⁶⁹ T/S-E, P.235.

steered the conduct of the Sahelian societies. Many groups in this area remembered themselves being part of Mali, tracing their lineages back to its glory days. By showing respect they held high their own cherished memories and values, linking themselves to a great past. The Moroccans however were not part of this shared history and were thus not expected to behave in such a manner. Although allied to Moroccans the people of the Sudan defied them with such conduct which also shows the very tenuous ideological hold the Moroccans had over the societies of the Middle Niger and emphasises the point that Takrur had birthed a civilisation on its own, with its own values, legends and dreams.

When the Moroccans took up the pursuit of the fleeing Malian forces, Fulani forces intercepted and beat the Moroccans. This, combined with the stalemate against Nuh marked the end of their expansion. From now on they just tried to hold on to what they had.⁶⁷⁰ This tells us how weak the Moroccan presence really was as their first setback buried their whole initial policy. Instead of becoming the successor to the Songhay empire, they became just another political player in the region. They were the strongest in Timbuktu and Gao where they managed to largely deal with the Tuareg on their terms. Luckily for them there were several main factions in the Tuareg camp, the Aulimadan, the Tadmekkat and the Magsharen. When the Aulimadan attacked Gao in 1647, the Moroccans could count on the support of the Magsharen and their combined forces were able to push the aggressor back into the desert. But the continued siphoning of strength opened paths for the different Tuareg groups between the strongholds of the Moroccans whose footprint grew ever smaller. In 1648 and 1652, they were incapable of resisting another threat posed by combined Fulani-Arabo-Berber forces. The Moroccans were saved by their attackers alliance falling apart. Ultimately some groups, like the Aulimadan, sought reconciliation and submission to the Moroccans until the latter were crushed in 1737 by the Tel Tadmekkat.⁶⁷¹

The situation became further aggravated by the problem of a changing climate that made the Middle Niger Bend dryer and thus less amenable to agriculture. The constant fighting added to the difficulties of producing foodstuffs. The problem grew so severe

⁶⁷⁰ Abitbol (Tombouctou et les arma), P.69.

⁶⁷¹ Anonymous (Tedzkireth), P.162-170.

that Pasha Haddu (Jul. 1618 to Jan 1619) “(...) exempta la population de la dîme du Kanaï pendant cette année là, à cause des dommages qui résultaient encore de la cherté des vivres.”⁶⁷² So despite the already declining trade and the lingering expectation from Marrakech that the outpost on the Niger actually generated revenue, the Pasha had to forgo on a chunk of his tax revenues in order to keep his subjects happy. The desertification led to long droughts. In 1633:

*“(...) il y eut une disette excessive tell qu'on n'en avait jamais vu de semblables. Cette disette, allant sans cesse croissant, se répandit par toutes les provinces et toutes les contrées. Elle atteignit une intensité si grande qu'une femme mangea son propre enfant. Dieu seul sait le nombre de gens qui périrent de faim. On était tellement épuisé et sans forces qu'on ne s'occupait plus de rendre les derniers devoirs aux morts, si bien que là où un homme mourait on l'enterrait, que ce fût dans une maison ou dans la rue, sans laver le corps ni prononcer aucune prière. Cela dura environ trois ans, puis, grâce en soient rendues au Maître des mondes, la disette cessa.”*⁶⁷³

Other droughts happened in 1641 and 1669 to 1670,⁶⁷⁴ bringing the economy on the Middle Niger Bend to its knees. Another important factor was that of distance and the dissociation that came with it. On the one hand the conquest was seen highly critical in Morocco itself, leading to not enough support in forms of men, weapons and general supply. Ahmad Baba reports that Mawlay Zidan, one of al-Mansur's sons complained bitterly:

*“(...) that the total number of men his father sent in expeditions from the time of Pasha Jawdar to that of Pasha Sulayman was 23,000 men from among the elite troops of his army, and their names were recorded in a register which he showed me. He said, 'My father squandered them to no effect. No more than five hundred of them came back to die in Marrakesh. The rest all died in the Sudan'.”*⁶⁷⁵

⁶⁷² T/S-F, P.341.

⁶⁷³ T/S-E, P.193.

⁶⁷⁴ T/S-F, P.401.

⁶⁷⁵ T/S-E, P.245.

As Ahmad Baba is not the most impartial source here, we cannot be sure how much of this quotation is true, but it is clear that al-Mansur's initial dream of conquering the sub-Saharan gold-fields had failed as he did not realise that the Middle Niger Bend itself was only a relay station for this precious metal and not its source. He thus had sunk a large amount of money into a venture that was doomed from the start. Despite this Willis writes in his analysis of the Arma that only unfortunate events led to the decline of the Moroccan outpost on the Middle Niger Bend.⁶⁷⁶ This is unlikely however. Although Willis is certainly right that the recall of Djoudar in 1599 to Morocco and the death of Mawlay Ahmad in 1603 increased the speed with which the Arma polity descended into chaos it was by no means the only factor. Even if they had had a leader with exceptional ability they wouldn't have had enough clout in order to make their domains secure. Songhay prospered because it was able to impose a "corridor sanit " along the Niger to use Hunwick's words. At all times it was able to protect their most vital asset, the river, which provided communication and transportation and also fertilised and watered its banks, enabling Songhay to grow grain in huge quantities. The Arma were never able to do this, as they did not have the necessary amount of soldiers or understanding of terrain. This also meant that they had a hard time to subject others into vassalage and to increase their numbers this way. The Bambara, Fulani and Tuareg constantly threatened and ventured into this corridor which split the Pashalik into separate different entities who over time began to fight amongst each other. Another problem was that of increasing aridity which increased the pressure primarily from the north but also other groups than the Tuareg posed severe problems for the Moroccans.

All these problems led al-Sadi to put the Songhay past into rosy terms:

*"Since the time when the amir Askiya al-hajj Muhammed had ruled the land of Songhay none of the rulers of neighbouring territories had attempted to invade them, because of the strength, toughness, bravery, courage, and awe-inspiring nature that God Most High had endowed the Songhay with."*⁶⁷⁷

What the author of the Tarikh al-Sudan tries to do here is to set up an opposition between the glory of Songhay and the weakness of the Arma polity. Although he spoke

⁶⁷⁶ Willis (The Western Sudan), P.536.

⁶⁷⁷ T/S-E, P.194.

truth in the sense that the Arma had a much harder time holding on to their territories than Songhay, underscored by the constantly spinning carousel of Pashas coming and dying, this was not the point al-Sadi tried to make. This paragraph is followed by the argument that Songhay fell because:

“(...) they exchanged God's bounties for infidelity, and left no sin against God Most High that they did not commit openly, such as drinking fermented liquors, sodomy and fornication⁶⁷⁸ (...)”

This underscores that times were worse than they had been, as al-Sadi tries to explain the fall of an empire, the brake-down of security. What he does though is probably overstating the case. The final decade of Songhay was a time of internal strife and rebellion, with one Askya following another one, much like the situation under the Arma. Initially, the Arma administration was increasingly more stable than the final years of Songhay. The three Askyas after Dawud reigned 41, 16.5 and 12 months and the first three Pashas were in power 9, 42 and 20 months. The Pashas that then followed reigned for 1.5 years (Pasha Mahmud Taba' and Pasha 'Ammar), four years (Sulayman) and eight years (Mahmud Longo). This is not only an improvement over the last Askyas, but comparable with the duration of the reigns of the four Askyas between Askya Muhammed and Askya Dawud. This means that the rule of the latter two, lasting 36 and 34 years respectively were extraordinarily long and the exception to the rule not only if compared to other Askyas but also compared to other rulers in the whole of the Sudan and it was the credit on which Songhay had existed. The Arma were, viewed comparatively, not exceptionally bad rulers, it was just that these two Askyas had had exceptionally long and successful reigns. Al-Sadi, like other authors, latched onto this success and declared these rulers to idols and mythologised their reign. In their reigns he saw the Islamic vision of a Muslim ruler fulfilled and justified as they were hugely successful while at the same time the Muslim population thrived and their economic and social situation improved, which speaks for a cooperation between the two estates. The Chronicles of Agades, written after the fall of Songhay, wrote this regarding the relationship between the religious and the ruling estate:

⁶⁷⁸ T/S-E, P.194.

*"Mais le manque de sultan dans leur pays leur était funeste, car un pays sans sultan n'est ni tranquille ni fréquenté. C'est une formule de la religion; «la royauté, perles de la religion, est une racine, et le sultan est un gardien. Ce qui n'a pas de racine est abattu: — ce qui n'a pas de gardien est perdu».*⁶⁷⁹

According to the author of this citation, the realm itself is an expression of religious bliss, moving it, as a concept much closer to the Muslim theocratic concept of rule. The ruler ("le sultan") is just the guardian of this realm. His task is to move the realm he rules closer to an idealised Muslim state. Those with the most expertise to deem if the state moved into the correct ideological direction were the members of the 'Ulema. Thus the religious estate was adamant in demanding a ruler but he had to rule according to the ideals of the local 'Ulema. It has to be kept in mind that this part of the Chronicles of Agades was written during a time of extreme instability in Air, where Agades is located, thus the call for a strong leader that could put an end to strife and insecurity was not just a religious wish but also a very mundane desire that was simply clothed in religious language. By doing so, the Muslim estate phrased its own aims as a solution to a crisis, that would, if resolved, give them ample opportunity to install themselves at powerful positions in the new Muslim order. In addition the blueprint to the resolution of a broken political and social situation were "great men". Mohammed and the first four caliphs had provided the precedent as to how to unite a disparate people and so it seemed only logical for scholars steeped in this thought that this was the appropriate resolution to every crisis of leadership. As other citations show this combination of instability, a desire to overcome it by employing a "Muslim hero" that would become the guardian of the new Muslim realm was a common aim on the whole of the Middle Niger Bend after the empires of Songhay and Mali that had once ruled supreme began to brake down into smaller warring units.

With this narrative, a Sudanic identity was forged that could withstand the Bidan and Moroccan ideological attacks. When Songhay still ruled supreme on the landscape of the Middle Niger Bend, the religious estate always tried to set itself apart from the ruling estate, even under Askya Muhammed and Askya Dawud as we have seen in examples given beforehand. It is striking that through attacking outside force, this was

⁶⁷⁹ Anonymous (Chroniques d'Agades), P.157.

merged into one Sudanic identity that became known as Takrur, linked together by referring to a past that was fast fading into myth. The Songhay of the Askya Dawud and Askya Muhammed became the stuff of legends and an example of pious rulers that because they followed Islam with its precepts spelled out by the 'Ulema, were successful. Songhay became to Takrur what Rome was to Europe in the Middle Ages, an ideal of splendour. It was only logical to the authors of the Tarikhs to whom history was primarily a teacher of morals that the fall had to be due to the last Askyas being infidel, fornicating and sodomising. The Arma, as foreigners, having brought down Songhay were mainly portrayed through this lens of providing a foil to give Takrur its own identity. They were cruel, hostile and exploitative, but also weak in body and mind, which is why their reign is portrayed as a failure.

9.2.2 The splintering of the Arma and their diffusion into the Sudan

Already in deep trouble when the support of the metropole waned, the Arma descended into their final decline after al-Mansur's death in 1603 and the ensuing disintegration of the Sa'dian empire as al-Mansur's sons fought against each other, tearing the empire apart in their squabbles.⁶⁸⁰ This also meant that the four Pashas sent south between 1603 and 1618 (when the last Pasha was sent from Morocco) lost credibility as they had no strong backing. As Saad points out, many of the newly sent Pashas also died suspiciously quickly and especially Djoudar is suspected of having poisoned two of his successors and strangled another one. Other Pashas tried to guard themselves against attacks by those they intended to rule. The last Pasha sent by al-Mansur, Sulayman, had the precaution to set up himself on the outskirts of Timbuktu and to forbid the fraternisation of his troops with the local population. With this he also insured that he had close control over his own troops, thus having a force he could rely on. That his fears were justified was made clear later on after he was recalled on al-Mansur's death and replaced with Pasha Mulay Bu-Faris. When Mulay Zaidan superseded his father al-Mansur in 1603, Sulayman was sent south again. However, on this journey he was

⁶⁸⁰ Abitbol (Tombouctou et les arma), P.81.

killed by Shraqa clansmen who apparently had dealt with Bu-Faris blessing.⁶⁸¹ Moroccan control had deteriorated heavily over its outpost on the Niger. With the disintegration of the Sa'dian empire after al-Mansur's death in 1603 the metropole itself rapidly lost interest in their colony on the Middle Niger Bend. Conversely, although not always in words, in acts it became very clear that the Arma began to see themselves more and more as independent from their northern homeland.

With the metropole waning and their local position weak, there was no centre of social gravity, no rallying point for a common social identity. This promoted a growing split between the different Arma factions. In 1612, when Pasha 'Ali ben Abdallah al-Telemsani rose to power he demanded from all his subjects an oath of allegiance to the Moroccan ruler Abou-Mahalli who had just ousted Mawlay Zidan from the throne in Marrakech. This did not go down well with some of the Arma who rather stuck with their old ruler.⁶⁸² For those members of the Arma who were intent of cutting themselves loose from the Pasha this was the perfect opportunity as they could declare the new ruler in Morocco as illegitimate, thus declaring the Pasha as illegitimate, thus giving them much more freedom to do their own bidding. The downside to this plan was that they cut themselves off from any form of further support. This time around the Pasha managed to keep most of his soldiers in line but the cracks in the administration were becoming deeper. Some smaller factions, like the soldiers living in Kagho, however never switched allegiances. The Pasha also managed to generate ill will against him in his Qa'ids.⁶⁸³ Especially Djenne seemed to have been a centre of discontentment. When, after six months, Mawlay Zidan managed to turn the tables and rid himself of Abou-Mahalli, claiming the throne once more, the Arma of Djenne moved against Timbuktu and Pasha 'Ali ben Abdallah was relieved of his post in March 1617 and thrown into prison by his own soldiers.⁶⁸⁴ In 1618 Marrakech sent the last Pasha southwards. Ah-

⁶⁸¹ Saad provides a comprehensive narrative overview of this episode in: Saad (Social History of Timbuktu), P.186.

⁶⁸² T/S-F, P.335-336.

⁶⁸³ T/S-F, P.337.

⁶⁸⁴ T/S-F, P.3338.

mad b. Yusuf al-Ildji,⁶⁸⁵ accompanied by 400 men as reinforcements.⁶⁸⁶ He only reigned from March 1618 to July 1619 and was then deposed by his own troops who then chose Qa'id Haddou, a man from their own midst, as new Pasha.⁶⁸⁷

The cord with Morocco being cut and their legitimacy in free-fall, the Arma were forced to adapt their tactics in order to survive. As the brute force methods of Pasha Djoudar and Mahmud Zarqun had yielded limited results, Pasha 'Ali b. 'Abdelkader tried another route by emulating the Mande and Songhay symbols of old. In 1628, after his ascent to power, he asked Dendi-Askya Dawud to marry his daughter to him with whom he Arma had a truce and who also were fighting for their own survival:

“Arrivé à Koukiyà, le pacha y campa avec son armée, puis il envoya des messagers à l'askia Daoud [Dawud], fils de l'askia Mohammed Bâno, fils du prince. Askia Daoud, pour lui proposer de faire la paix et en même temps lui demander la main de sa fille. Les messagers emportèrent avec eux une grande quantité de cadeaux. L'askia accepta de faire la paix et il donna au pacha la main de la fille d'un de ses proches. Puis il expédia des messagers qui partirent en même temps que ceux du pacha qui retournaient auprès de leur maître et les chargea de remettre au pacha la lettre par laquelle il lui annonçait qu'il acceptait la paix et le mariage proposés. Depuis ce moment les meilleures relations de confiance, d'amitié et de cordialité s'établirent entre l'askia et le pacha et subsistèrent tout le temps que celui ci demeura au pouvoir. Le pacha rentra ensuite à Tombouctou.”⁶⁸⁸

What the Pasha tried to do is to pick up where the Songhay Askya Dawud (ruled 1549 to 1582) had left off. He married the Dendi-Askya's daughter because he wanted to place himself into the Songhay lineage of ascension. He wanted to become Askya himself and so he chose to don himself with the visible signs of this office. After marrying the Dendi-Askya's daughter he wanted to emulate Askya Mohammed and go on the hadj.⁶⁸⁹ He returned in 1632 and very quickly became mired in the old problems again.

⁶⁸⁵ In some places of the T/S-F called “Ammar”.

⁶⁸⁶ T/S-F, P.339.

⁶⁸⁷ T/S-F, P.341.

⁶⁸⁸ T/S-F, P.356.

⁶⁸⁹ T/S-F, P.358.

Kagho would not recognise the Pasha's claims to rule and Djenne would have none of it either. They in fact formed a temporary alliance in order to vanquish the Pasha who moved his troops against Kagho because they had imprisoned his brother who he had sent as a messenger. The battle resulted in a sound defeat for the Pasha:

*"(...) les habitants de Kâgho se hâtèrent de livrer combat; en un clin d'oeil le pacha et ses compagnons furent mis en déroute et réduits à prendre la fuite. Les vainqueurs s'emparèrent de la barque qui portait son trésor et de sa femme qui se trouvait à bord."*⁶⁹⁰

The Pasha was captured as well but because of the intercession of the Arma-Askya Mohammed Benkan he was treated well and set free. He immediately went back to Timbuktu and put a new army together in order to attack Kagho once more. He sent 700 mithqal to Djenne in order to lure them to his side. However when he finally set off, he was unknowingly confronted by rebellion as troops in Bouri wanted to have him replaced:

*"Le pacha 'Ali ben 'Abdelkader, qui prit la voie de terre et se mit en marche dans la matinée du lundi, n'avait connu, avant son départ, ni cette révolte, ni sa déposition, Il poursuivit donc sa marche pour rejoindre ses troupes et ce fut en cours de route qu'il apprit la nouvelle des événements qui venaient de se passer. Il rebroussa chemin aussi tôt et rentra à Tombouctou; mais il fut abandonné par tous ses compagnons,"*⁶⁹¹ (...)"

With his plans unravelling he finally met his demise on 24th of July 1632 at the hand of his own troops in Timbuktu. The plans of Pasha 'Abdelkader had thus completely failed and it is instructive that he essentially was not in control but that after his first failure at Kagho he became driven by his men whom he had relinquished control to. It is also clear that the different Arma strongholds were essentially independent of each other. They saw themselves as descending from the same stock, an asset on which they sometimes banked, with varying success, but often acted completely separately from each other. Some Pashas were able to unite some areas but it all very quickly fell

⁶⁹⁰ T/S-F, P.359.

⁶⁹¹ T/S-F, P.362.

apart again.⁶⁹² The idea to unify the Middle Niger Bend behind the old symbols of Songhay's rule did not work, from all we can infer, it did not make any impression on the rest of the Arma population.

So in some respects the Arma were in a similar catch 22 as the Askyas were beforehand. The old system of holding on to power did cease to work and the introduction of a new one did not garner enough support in order to become feasible. Whereas the Askyas had almost made it, the Moroccan attempt did not even come off the ground. In the end that allowed third parties to move in, first the desert dwellers from the north and later the Bambara and Masina from the south, crushing the Arma between them.⁶⁹³ The Arma however not only had problems with themselves but also with the Sudanic population they wanted to rule. Qa'id Mellouk arrested Djinni-Koi Bokar who was subsequently killed in Timbuktu. A local Sudanic leader called Yousaro used that as a motivation to move against the Arma and managed to draw other Kois and local Sudanic nobility on his side. At the height of the crisis :

*"(...) la colère des Sudaniens et ils avalent juré que si les gens de Dienné ne leur livraient pas le caïd Mellouk pour le tuer et venger leur chef, ils se rendraient eux-mêmes à Dienné et y tueraient tous les blancs appartenant au Makhzan, mais sans faire de mal aux autres."*⁶⁹⁴

The situation eventually wound down when the Pasha sent another Qa'id who gave out gifts to ameliorate the insurgents and removed Mellouk from his position. That the Arma were not able to impose their way of life and rule on the Middle Niger Bend is also evidenced by the fact that even the Arma-Askya lost influence with the Sudanic population in areas where their presence began to fade the quickest. The Tarikh al-Sudan reports that in 1653:

⁶⁹² So'oud al-Sharqi b. Ahmad 'Adjrud (Oct. 1632 - Aug. 1634) seemed to control both Timbuktu and Djenne. T/S-F, P.389.

Pasha So'oud seemed to have oppressed Djenne heavily because of former enmity. T/S-F, P.389.

⁶⁹³ T/S-F, P.420, there were also attacks from other groups like the Sonfontira, see T/S-F P.433.

⁶⁹⁴ T/S-F, P.381-382.

*“Le personnage qui est actuellement le prince des noirs dans la ville de Dienné est le Djinni Koï Abou Bekr, que les nègres dans leur langage appellent Ankaba la; il est le fils du Djinni Koï Mohammed Benba, fils du Djinni Koï Isma’il. Il s’est révolté contre les gens du Makhzen de Dienné et il a gagné la campagne.”*⁶⁹⁵

This situation deteriorated further as the Dendi Askya kept attacking the Djenne area ruled by a Qa’id of the Arma, besieging the fort Koubi.⁶⁹⁶ Although Djenne was not taken, the episode reflected so badly on the Arma’s ability to project power they let out their anger at the inhabitants of Timbuktu whom they suspected on being complicit on the attack or whom they wanted to demonstrate that such a thing was not to happen in Timbuktu:

*“When Qa’id Haddu returned to Timbuktu with his men they behaved as if they had barbs on their bodies or were acting as leopards. They broke up assemblies, and for a long time no two persons would congregate to chat. Even before the main force reached the city, the commander-in-chief gave orders that at the time of the evening prayer, and once before it, there should be a patrol to enforce this order rigidly, to such an extent that during the nights of the ‘great month’ the panegyrists could only chant the Prophet’s praises immediately after the sunset prayer, though it had been their long-established custom to wait until after the evening prayer.”*⁶⁹⁷

These major setbacks had dire consequences for the Moroccans as they weakened their tenuous hold over their areas even further, giving rise to several uprisings. They were able to regain control but al-Sadi reports from Timbuktu, one of the cities afflicted by these rebellions, that the Moroccans reacted with terrible suppression.

*“(…) they behaved as if they had barbs on their bodies or were acting as leopards.”*⁶⁹⁸

⁶⁹⁵ T/S-F, P.461.

⁶⁹⁶ T/S-E, P.251-252.

⁶⁹⁷ T/S-E, P.253.

⁶⁹⁸ T/S-E, P.253.

They imposed a curfew, meetings of more than two men were forbidden and religious activity was heavily clamped down upon.⁶⁹⁹ The dire straits the Moroccans were in shows in how they fought back. Instead of counter attacking they resorted to punishing several communities which they suspected as allied with Songhay. This meant that the Pasha and his confidants had lost trust in their own troops.

Additionally, despite the Arma being successful in fending the Dendi-Songhay off, the situation in Djenne did not improve but developed into a full scale revolt:

“Qa’id ‘Ali b. Abd Allah went on his way to Jenne accompanied by Askiya Bukar. He was preceded by Qa’id Ahmad b. Yusuf on foot, since the whole territory of Jenne had risen in revolt and the inhabitants of all the villages along the river had fled to al-Hajar. The first of Qa’id Ali’s boats to reach the town of Saqa was attacked by cavalry from the territory of Satunka, who plundered it and took off. Qa’id Ali passed on his way without paying attention to them. He found that the people of Kuna had revolted and attacked the musketeers in the fort, but God had given them victory, and the local people had fled to al-Hajar.”⁷⁰⁰

Despite the Djenne-Koi being one of the leaders of the rebellion Qa’id Ali did not punish him but instead:

“(…) judged that it would not be profitable to arrest the Jenne-koi, as this would cause a turmoil that would not easily be quieted. So he imposed a huge fine on him. The Jenne-koi collected a huge sum from the various groups (qabd’il) under his control, who paid it swiftly. They were happy that he had been spared, since he was respected and held in affection by them.”⁷⁰¹

This again resulted in turmoil within the Arma powerstructure as several of its members felt being treated unfairly. Ali eventually used the confusion in the March of 1617 in order to claim the title of Pasha himself from Pasha Lonko, the last ruler of the Arma that had been appointed by Marrakesh itself.⁷⁰²

⁶⁹⁹ T/S-E, P.253.

⁷⁰⁰ T/S-E, P.253.

⁷⁰¹ T/S-E, P.255.

⁷⁰² T/S-E, P.256-257.

After another large scale rebellion of Djenne that had started in 1632 under Pasha 'Abdelkader and ended two years later with Timbuktu gaining some semblance of control the then reigning Pasha So'oud first ensured to gain the allegiance of the local Koïs in close vicinity to Djenne:

*“Le pacha ne reçut d'autre visite des chefs de ces contrées que celle du Chi-la-Koï et du Oroun-Koï; quant au Da'-Koï et au Oma-Koï, ils se contentèrent d'envoyer une députation pour le saluer.”*⁷⁰³

Only thereafter did he go into Djenne which had been subdued by force beforehand and ruled the city from his military encampment. The Tarikh reports that the rule was not a happy one. Old ceremonies that signified rule on the Middle Niger Bend were also employed again signifying a return to the Middle Niger Bend model of rule and a return to pre-Islamic religious ruling rituals of old. When the Da'anika-Koï submitted to the Pasha he: “(...) fit des vœux pour lui, mit de la poussière sur sa tête et reçut ensuite la promesse d'avoir l'aman pour lui et son allié (...)”⁷⁰⁴ This resorting to acknowledging the old rituals and coercions of rule became also clear in victory. When the Arma fought victoriously against the Dendi-Askya under Pasha Sa'id b. 'Ali al-Mahmudi (Jul. 1635 to Oct. 1637) he had the Arma-Askya Mohammed Benkan with him and after conquering a central town he gave it under the control of “Mohammed ben Anas, fils du prince Askia Daoud”,⁷⁰⁵ thus recurring to old nobility in order to bolster their own claims. After the Pasha left, the Dendi-Askya however immediately reaffirmed control, deposing Mohammed ben Anas. Djenne remained a fickle city to control.⁷⁰⁶ The stalemate between Djenne and the Arma only truly ended in 1653 when the Djenne-Koï fled the city. By this point however the Arma of Djenne had been become so independent of Timbuktu that its Makhzan became a distinct entity from its sister in the north. Until this point

⁷⁰³ T/S-F, P.389.

⁷⁰⁴ T/S-F, P.428.

⁷⁰⁵ T/S-F, P.400.

⁷⁰⁶ The sources always show the Pashas and the Qa'ids as those that do and the Askyas and Koïs as those that are ordered, but it is equally likely that the active and the passive part of this relationship was not as neatly divided, unfortunately the sources do only report the first picture.

in time, Djenne revolted again and again which sometimes then triggered other revolts in other cities the Arma claimed theirs. When Djenne revolted in 1643 Timbuktu followed suit.⁷⁰⁷ In this case Pasha Mesa'oud asked the 'Ulema in order to help reconcile him with the rebels which ultimately proved unsuccessful but hints to them being seen as rather independent and moral authorities, a position they had under Songhay as well.⁷⁰⁸ It also shows however that they had lost most of their clout as they were never able to actually further a peace between the groups. They were seen as neutrals because they had been neutered and were only called upon when one side was desperate enough that it would call on them in times of need. But now not because they were seen as being uninvolved strangers, but because they were weak. Under Songhay, conflicts were usually brought before the Qadis before armed hostilities broke out, under the Arma the Qadis were called upon after one side had come under serious military pressure which meant that the side who was stronger had no interest in listening to the scholars. After Pasha Mesa'oud had been deposed the rebels found 400 mithqal in jewellery, representing the whole of the governments wealth.⁷⁰⁹ This meant that the economic situation of the Arma was dire. This combination of military weakness and monetary problems prompted the Pashas to raid their surroundings:

“Deux raisons nous avaient décidé à nous mettre en per sonne à la tête de nos troupes: La première, c'est que nous désirions visiter à fond et dans tous ses recoins les localités qu'ils habitaient malgré réloignement de ces régions cl lu distance à franchir avec nos troupes tant à pied qu'à cheval. Nous voulions écarter les soupçons qu'aurait pu émettre quelque stupide imbécile qui, si nous avions laissé, sans rien faire, s'accomplir les actes de rébellion et de désordres contre notre autorité et sur nos terres, commis par eux ou d'autres coupeurs de routes et malandrins, aurait dit que c'était à cause de notre faiblesse et de notre impuissance. (...) La seconde raison, qui m'a fait entreprendre cette expédition, c'est,

⁷⁰⁷ T/S-F, P.402.

⁷⁰⁸ T/S-F, P.402.

⁷⁰⁹ T/S-F, P.404.

d'une part, que la situation actuelle était critique et que, d'autre part, le palais manquait d'argent."⁷¹⁰

Their problem however was that they were never able to actually gain control of the areas and people they conquered. They only ever achieved tenuous holds that at best amounted to short income boosts and at worst, delivered defeat. The other powers around them did the same to the Arma which led to a decline of the whole region which could be felt by everyone. Thus all the polities in the area resorted to a low-tech approach to empire, extracting the wealth out of the local economy and often exporting it in the form of slaves, thus making the whole region poorer. The seeds of a more developed form of rule, like the plantations and taxation that were planted under Songhay completely withered away. The problem for the Arma was that they held on to the most fertile ground in the area and lorded over the major cities which were great prizes for those who could get their hands on them, but contrary to their enemies, the Arma had no hinterland to retreat to. The Bambara in the south and the Tuareg in the north were not on the verge of extinction when they lost a battle, whereas for the Arma, every battle lost on their own territory was crucial, losing strongholds was a catastrophe. That the Arma were never able to deliver a final blow to one of their enemies is shown in this excerpt:

*"Il [Pasha Ahmad b. Yusuf al-Adjnasi] attaqua toutes les populations qui se trouvaient là, Arabes et Touareg, et s'empara de leurs troupeaux, qu'il chassa devant lui. Les victimes de cette agression suivirent le pacha pendant quelque temps, puis, craignant d'être vaincues par lui, elles s'en revinrent en arrière."*⁷¹¹

Thus it came as a bad surprise when the Awilliminden Tuareg attacked Gao in 1647 while the Arma themselves were on an expedition against the Sonfontira. This meant that the northern border was completely breaking down and that the Arma had no control over the Tuareg anymore. The problems for the Arma however did not end there as a large part of their troops were also made up of Tuaregs, other desert dwellers and Sudanic ethnic groups. This becomes clear when the Tarikh al-Sudan describes another crisis. When a sheikh revolted in 1652 it is reported that he took "(...) tous les proprié-

⁷¹⁰ T/S-F, P.433-434.

⁷¹¹ T/S-F, P.445.

taires de troupeaux, Arabes, Touareg, Foulânes et autres.”⁷¹² with him. Thus in the troupes there was a split between the Sudanic element, the Fulani, and a Bidan element. The latter are again split into “Arabs” and “Touaregs”. This distinction was often made according to genealogy which in turn was often subject to a very flexible interpretation. We can see a further distinction when the Pasha Ahmed ben Abderrahman al Hayyouni (Feb. 1647 - Oct. 1648) asked Qa’id Mohammed ben Aïsa to rally the troops by referring to “soldats marocains et arabes”.⁷¹³ So the army of the Arma was split along ethnic lines and they had to rely on foreign elements. The Bidan groups, Arabs and Tuareg, and the Arma had a very precarious relationship. The Tuareg, on whom the Arma relied to a great extent in their battles were a potential liability the moment they fought against other Tuareg.

After the attack against Gao in 1647 had been repulsed and Pasha Abderrahman had died, the new Pasha had to deal with the Arabs and the Tuaregs again, whom he had to appease after an important sheikh had been killed, whom both these Bidan groups considered important. He needed their, at least tacit, support as he moved against Kagho, an Arma stronghold that was in rebellion against Timbuktu- again⁷¹⁴ - highlighting the Pasha’s reliance on troops and social groups outside his direct control. Djenne also rose time and again against the Pasha in Timbuktu, thus dividing the Arma and weakening both their strongholds at once:

*“Du jour où il avait été nommé pacha [Yahya b. Muhammed al-Gharnati] il avait commencé à molester les habitants de Dienné sans raison, ni motif. Aussi ces derniers ne lui obéissaient ils point et rejetèrent ils tous ses ordres derrière leur dos jusqu’au moment de sa déposition.”*⁷¹⁵

The realm of the Arma further disintegrated as time went by. Pasha So’oud lost to his Amin Abdelkader in June 1634 which: ”(...) était motivée par la mauvaise foi, le

⁷¹² T/S-F, P.446.

⁷¹³ T/S-F, P.437.

⁷¹⁴ T/S-F, P.438.

⁷¹⁵ T/S-F, P.441.

désordre et la vilénie qui régnaient parmi la population.”⁷¹⁶ When Pasha Mohammed ben Mohammed ben ‘Uthman died in 1643 the Tarikh al-Sudan reports that:

*“Sous le gouvernement du pacha ci dessus mentionné, les portes de la révolte s’ouvrirent à la fois de tous côtés et en tons lieux. Dieu veuille qu’il n’en résulte rien de fâcheux, ni pour nous, ni pour les musulmans et qu’il nous fasse la grâce de nous en délivrer.”*⁷¹⁷

Another indicator of the waning power of the Arma was the number of men they were able to field. Whereas Songhay was able to field several ten thousand soldiers at once the Arma reacted to a major rebellion with “Un corps de cinquante soldats, pris dans la garnison de Tombouctou”⁷¹⁸ (...)” which in turn means that the Arma’s enemies were also small scale warlords.

Meanwhile, independent Songhay had seen a new ruler, the Dendi-Askya al-Amin. He gave command of his troops to Dendi-Fari Seyyid Karaj-Iji and sent him on a mission to destroy the Moroccans once and for all. The two armies met in June 1612 but no battle ensued. Al-Sadi says “puis on se sépara sans combat en se tournant le dos pour prendre deux directions opposées.”⁷¹⁹ There is no report of what exactly happened but al-Said suggests that the Moroccan commander Qa’id Ali had sent gold to the Dendi-Fari convincing him not to attack. The sources also make clear that Ali had sought a conciliatory policy before as he had come to realise that force would not garner the desired results and that Dendi-Fari Seyyid Karaj-Iji had been raised in Timbuktu, suggesting that he had links to the same nobility and religious estate that Ali had contacted in order to pursue his ideas. This makes it possible that the two leader who faced each other on the battlefield had already dealt with each other and come to an agreement.⁷²⁰ The nobility of Songhay did not let go of its old instincts and each member tried to further its own position as much as possible. It is quite possible that the Dendi-Fari thought to buy his way to the throne, as even Askya Nuh, who had given Songhay a fighting

⁷¹⁶ T/S-F, P.392.

⁷¹⁷ T/S-F, P.444.

⁷¹⁸ T/S-F, P.444.

⁷¹⁹ T/S-F, P.307.

⁷²⁰ Saad (Social History of Timbuktu), P.190.

chance after the devastating defeats against the Moroccans had succumbed to infighting. The Dendi-Askya was not impressed however and sentenced him to death. Qa'id Ali on the other hand was able to capitalise on this and deposed the reigning Pa-sha Mahmud Lonko, making himself ruler of the Moroccan domains.

Effectively, the remains of Songhay and the Arma had fought each other to a complete standstill. They were both politically and economically paralysed, mired in their own internal politicking. The Arma had too tenuous a hold over Djenne, Timbuktu and Gao as to be effective in the long term and Songhay had lost access to the Niger and its towns which had been the heart of its empire. But even the Arma turtled into their strongholds and basically gave up the surrounding areas which essentially began right behind the gates of the cities and forts. Timbuktu even lost access to its own harbour five kilometres south as roaming nomads made the trek too dangerous. With the lines of commerce, transport and information being cut between the different Arma outposts each became more independent from each other as they could only meet by sending large troop contingents across which were mostly used to attack each other. This in turn meant that the scholarship which had flourished under Songhay began to wither away as the boundaries between the different scholarly circles that had existed in the different cities and had bounced off and fertilised each other became frontiers made of long stretches of wasteland where communication was impossible. So what the Arma conquest had done was to cut out the Middle Niger Bend from the desert society and also from the Sudanic society. The only points of contact became war. The Moroccan leaders tried to bind it to Marrakech which in some ways unintentionally worked. For example, Ahmad Baba left his mark in the Middle Niger Bend and in Morocco, but such instances were far and few between and on the whole the project was a spectacular failure. On the whole however the Sudan was weakened substantially and the Tuareg and other Bidan groups gained the upper hand against the Sudan world. As the Bidan saw the Sudan mostly as a hunting ground for slaves⁷²¹ the Sudan world a one way relationship between the Sudan and the Bidan on the Middle Niger bend developed and scholarly exchange, which relies on a two way exchange, ceased and moved elsewhere as was described in the chapter on "Muslims".

⁷²¹ See for example Webb (Desert Frontier)

Under the Songhay Empire, the ability to hold sway over a large swath of land and especially people was the main objective and rationale behind the decisions of the rulers. As the realm of the Arma disintegrated this idea was not gone but stopped reigning supreme. With the breakdown of civil order and the insecurity created in its wake political sovereignty became just one asset among others. The Pashas became, in order to use a modern concept, warlords. In Chojnacki analysis they combined, “political, economical and military logic” and who used violence in order to control markets and social relationships. As there was no strong authority, armed strife could be pursued without virtually any personal cost involved.⁷²² One of several examples of these intertwined factors can be seen here:

*“Le samedi, 23 du mois de ramadan de l'année 1032 [21 juillet 1623], arriva à Tombouctou le caïd Abdallah-ben-Abderrahman-El-Hindi; il était à ce moment caïd de Benba. Il entra dans la ville au moment du lever de l'aurore, entouré de ses compagnons; il voulait essayer de se faire nommer pacha, et c'était le cheikh Ali- Ed-Deraouï, l'amîn du sultan, chargé de percevoir les taxes de Toghâzza, qui l'avait engagé avenir dans ce but. Mais, ni le caïd Mohammed-ben-Abou-Bekr-El-Amin, ni les chefs de l'armée ne lui furent favorables et on le contraignit même de quitter la ville sur-le-champ.”*⁷²³

It is not clear if there was a pact between Ali Ed Deraoui and the Qa'id but this passage shows the clear interaction between local financial and military interests that tried to claim political authority as well. Because of the defraying social and political situation, these were no grand operations but coups d'état were always limited to small areas like individual cities. It is telling that Qa'id Abdallah

“(...) quitta donc la ville de Tombouctou, accompagné du cheikh Ali Ed Deraouï qui emmenait avec lui tout son bataillon de renégats et un certain nombre

⁷²² Chojnacki, Sven. ‘Gewaltakteure und Gewaltmärkte: Wandel der Kriegsformen?’ In *Neue Kriege: Akteure, Gewaltmärkte, Ökonomie*, edited by Siegfried Frech and Peter Trummer, 73–99. 1. Aufl. Basisthemen Politik. Wochenschau Verlag, 2005, P.77.

⁷²³ T/S-F, P.345 another similar example is on P.348.

*d'hommes appartenant à d'autres bataillons. Ils allèrent camper au port de Kabara, (...)*⁷²⁴

He thus camped in the port of Timbuktu, which was right next to it and cut the city of its supplies coming from the south. The Pasha thus had not enough troops to expel the Qa'id, although he himself had only a very limited amount of troops. Thus the Pasha was so powerless that he could not act against one of his smaller lieutenants despite him being rather weak himself. The latter had to invite the troops of Djenne, who promptly did so. The Pasha in turn send out the scholars and elders of Timbuktu in order to achieve a peaceful resolution of the conflict but to no avail. This shows that the scholars were still individuals of repute but that their power was declining. They are not mentioned by name and only in passing, they clearly had no great role in the conflicts to play anymore. The battle between the two sides resulted in a draw and hence was a loss for both.⁷²⁵ Both had squandered men and material thus only increasing the relative strength of their neighbours.

The Middle Niger Bend fragmented into a microcosmos of differing pretensions and claims that constantly overlapped and competed with each other, fragmenting the region into ever smaller splinters of spheres of influence. As no group had the means to overpower others individual groups fought in never ending conflicts as there was no central political idea that gave a common direction to the different groups. Despite Songhay being a construct made up of a multitude of different social groups, common ideas, in the form of religion, embodied in the institutions of the realm which had been made visible by figures like the Askya and the Farmas had trumped individual aspirations. This system eventually broke down and was swept away by the Moroccan invaders but they brought nothing to replace it with, which in the end proved to be their own undoing. With the death of al-Mansur in 1603 and the last reinforcements sent south in 1618 the social cord between Morocco and the Middle Niger Bend was fraying fast and in 1660 the Arma finally stopped the khutba - which meant they stopped praying for the Sa'id ruler in Marrakech which marked the end of their orientation towards the north.⁷²⁶ With

⁷²⁴ T/S-F, P.345.

⁷²⁵ T/S-F, P.345-346.

⁷²⁶ Abitbol (Tombouctou et les Arma), P.15.

both Morocco and the Arma being focused on themselves while each falling apart in its own way, they left each others sphere of influence. The developing rivalries between the different Arma cities accelerated and were often exploited by other powers in the region, like the Tuareg, who were often used by the Arma as auxiliaries but had no firm allegiance to one city or another. They could thus position themselves more often on the winning side then not, especially as they often provided the bulk of the fighting force. One Arma faction always lost, the Tuareg always won, no matter which side carried the day. Eventually, they had worn each other down while the outside pressure increased that the Arma had to yield to other powers. Walata was lost at the latest in 1704/05 when the Berabish took over control,⁷²⁷ which was the first important city to fall, the others soon followed. In 1737 the final battle against the Tuareg was lost and the Arma ceased to exist as an independent polity, finally falling completely into the fold of the Sudan and becoming part of Takrur.

⁷²⁷ Anonymous. 'Les Chroniques de Oualata et de Néma'. Edited by Paul Marty. *Revue des Etudes Islamiques* II et III (1917): 355–426 et 531–575, P.357.

10. Conclusion

The history of the social groups of the Middle Niger Bend is one of mutual influence that not only engendered certain communalities but also strengthened the boundaries between them. One factor that all groups shared was a religious outlook that suffused everything in life. This was especially true for social relationships, where both internal as well as intergroup relations were regulated by supernatural beliefs. The internal vertical stratification of a group was ultimately derived from the “head”, the ruler of the group whose status originated from his ability to use the supernatural powers that he had access to and under whom the different ranks then formed. The relationship between members of the same group on a horizontal level also followed a logic derived from supernatural notions as was argued in the chapter on “Muslims on the Middle Niger Bend” and “Honour, Islam and the Arma”. However, these norms were prone to local variation which made it difficult to have one single ideology of rule and social cohesion. Thus Songhay society was regulated according to religious principles that were highly diverse across its realm. These concepts were malleable and by modifying these concepts, social change could be induced, which is what happened when Islam was introduced on a larger scale on the Middle Niger Bend. Askya Muhammed and Askya Dawud used localised forms of Muslim belief, introduced by the Muslim as estate, as a great unifying agent that bound the empire together while at the same time tapped into the benefits Islam and the Muslim estate, that began to settle in the major towns, brought with it. However, the people of the Middle Niger Bend made Islam their own which is highlighted when al-Maghili tries to argue for a North African form of Islam which is rejected by the local Muslim estate. Most local Muslims opted for the way of integration, not separation, and tried to form their social surroundings into a form that suited them while at the same time became influenced by the supernatural ideas that already existed. So in the end a local orthodoxy developed that endorsed production of amulets for sale, venerated local saints and brought down Askyas with maledictions.

By inviting Muslim supernatural ideas into the realm, the rulers of Songhay not only managed to introduce a homogenising agent but also roped in another social group that increasingly became attached to the empire as it in turn benefited greatly from its securi-

ty and economy. The Muslims in turn drew in the social groups of the desert, the Sanha-ja and the Tuareg to whom they were related to by kin, to the extent that it is often hard to distinguish between Bidan and Sudan. Although Islam was used to tear down boundaries between groups it simultaneously undermined the old system of authority of the Askyas and the rest of the nobility who had a vested interest in keeping the old system of honour alive that relied on pre-Islamic notions of valorous conduct. Thus by eroding internal differences, another boundary was strengthened, that between the ruling/warrior and the Muslim estate. This split became especially apparent on the issue of hurma which the Askyas often could not respect as it meant to question their absolute power in the realm and was also non-negotiable for the scholars as it represented one of the keys to their supernatural claims. Both sides were not able to back down and both sides were not able to disentangle themselves from this conundrum because both were invested too much into the other side of the social boundary. Muslim thought had influenced claims for leadership in Songhay to such an extent that the Askyas were dependent on the Muslim estate for their own rule while the Muslim estate was dependent on Songhay for its own livelihood as they had long abandoned the stance of the disengaged diasporic Muslim, which was exemplified through the gift system that bound them together. Although both sides strengthened the boundary ever further, especially after Askya Dawud had abdicated, both sides were increasingly dependent on one another. The influence through the boundary between the two groups is also demonstrated by the reaction al-Sadi and Ahmed Baba show in their writings to the Moroccan invasion, despite them coming from different sides. Al-Sadi creates Sudanic heroes like the Kala-Sha and invokes the honour of Takrur against the marauding Arma. Thus by resting on old ideas of honorific conduct he creates a counter identity against the Moroccan invaders, erecting a boundary between the Sudan and the newcomers. Ahmad Baba argues similarly as was pointed out in the chapter on "Slavery and horses". His argument rests on the assumption that Muslims must not enslave other Muslims, thus arguing that all of Takrur are adherents of Islam, a mark of pride. With this the scholars also ultimately gave up their diasporic ideal for good. By reifying warriors and presenting them as ideals of the Sudanic character, they claimed them also for themselves, thus giving up their own position, as being apart from the rest of the Middle Niger Bend society. With the physical

destruction of the Muslim estate the Moroccans pushed the surviving members to into integrating themselves into the local social structures, letting the Muslim estate die.

The rebellion of 1588 was the result of a social reform by communication through a boundary that had become porous without having managed to completely change the ruling system. The Balma'a was able to gain the support of the west by being a Muslim but the system of ascension within the ruling estate was still very much a system based on honour. Negotiation and exchange was replaced by brute violence which brought down both estates. Initially, despite having backed the losing side of the battle, the Muslim estate was not as hard hit as the ruling estate as they were neither as directly dependent on an army nor were they subjected to the purge that the Askya instated. The relationship between the two estates at that moment is not completely clear. Despite the Muslim estate being greatly displeased with the ruler's conduct, they were still invested in Songhay as was shown by the reaction (or rather their lack) to the overtures from al-Mansur. That there was no complete breakdown is also evidenced by the absence of blow-back they received from the ruling estate. The Moroccan invasion in 1591 initially hit the Songhay ruling estate hardest and essentially wiped it out. This meant that a new situation developed that consisted of the newly formed estate of the Arma and the remaining Muslim estate. The latter however more or less dealt with the Arma as they had done with the Askyas. They had not realised however that the Moroccans had a different relationship in mind. Consequently no proper *communitas* between the two ever developed. The Arma did not completely replaced the former Songhay ruling estate but introduced a new layer of identity by bringing a North African attitude with them. They retained the position of Koi, Fari and so on, kept some of the personal but exchanged others. They had come as conquerors from North Africa who saw the Sudan as a well of slaves and not as a source of learning and culture that was in any form enticing. By completely ignoring a powerful element of Sudanic society while simultaneously being pushed too hard by the Muslim estate who voiced its own demands a rebellion occurred. As the Arma did not recognise the Muslim estate as legitimate in the sense that it was an independent factor of power that demanded influence, as it had been under Songhay, they wiped it out too. This left the Arma with no internal competition left, but also no platform of exchange that would be able to develop new ideas and was able to act as a

regulating outside force that was able to change how the Arma perceived their own relationship with the other groups of the Middle Niger Bend. Instead what they replaced it with was internal division. The Arma were divided into different factions that became reinforced by supplies. No attempt was made to integrate the different groups into one and no attempt was made to build a platform that was capable of introducing communitas.

Under Songhay, the Muslim estate was able to work with the ruling estate (and vice versa) and establish communitas because ultimately they had different aims. The Muslim estate was not interested in the actual trappings of rule or direct political power. It was interested in furthering Muslim thought and culture, which would make it easier for them to live as Muslims, conduct trade and live a life they found worthwhile. The ruling estate on the other hand was happy to leave these things to the Muslims as long as they received their share and were able to pursue their own power plays. They were thus able to influence each other and by doing so provided each other with tools they could use in their own social group. There were points of contention, as the aforementioned hurma and the relationship grew more difficult after Askya Dawud, as Islam, it being a legitimising tool for power and thus inherently political, but even after the rebellion of 1588 would have been the possibility to come to a new understanding between the two estates. All this was essentially impossible for the different Arma factions, because they all vied for the same goal: control of the Pashalik. Thus mutual agreement was essentially impossible. This not only made rule faction vis-a-vis faction difficult but also gave no footing with regards to other social groups in the area, who did not recognise the demand of the Arma, to be considered the rightful rulers of the Middle Niger Bend. The rest of Songhay, Kebbi, Mali, Tuareg and all the others had no inclination to bow down to the Arma. The Arma thus had no internal, mutual recognition of who was considered rightful ruler and also had no outside recognition as well. Initially they tried to create a link of legitimacy to the Middle Niger Bend by reviving the Askyaate and also by keeping a number of offices that had existed under Songhay. But through the existence of Dendi-Songhay, that was recognised by other local powers like Kebbi this did not work. Additionally, it was all too obvious that the Arma-Askya was essentially a puppet and had no real power. When Pasha Abdelkader tried to introduce legitimacy into his rule by

marrying the daughter of the Dendi-Askya, the Arma factions did not recognise his claim to power, he had just tried to legitimise and got rid of him. The Arma were never able to introduce a working form of *communitas* that was able to introduce a stable element of rule.

Songhay was able to survive for as long as it did because it was able to create a system that made two groups work together and each group ameliorated the inbuilt strains the other group had. The problem Songhay had was that these two groups were not able to stave off stagnation. Both groups benefited from an economy that preyed on its surrounding and extracted wealth and pushed that wealth outside the realm. At the same time both groups had no interest in changing this system as it would have meant the destruction of their own social group. The warriors were reliant on the horses as armament and the Muslim estate was reliant on the slavery as it brought in the money they needed to feed their scholars. But especially the later Askyas were not able to stave of the internal strain such a system ultimately produced as with increasing success came increasing demands. The Muslim estate became ever more influential in the political realm what was before an area that was clearly in the hand of the warriors. The ruling estate on the other hand impinged to an ever greater degree on the authority of the Qadis. Although initially the two groups had different ideas about what they wanted to achieve, they increasingly competed about the same points of contention. The communication through the boundary that separated the two groups had been working “too well”, aligning their interests too much. Thus it was an unstable system that was not capable of internal reform and that could easily become unhinged, which it did in 1588.

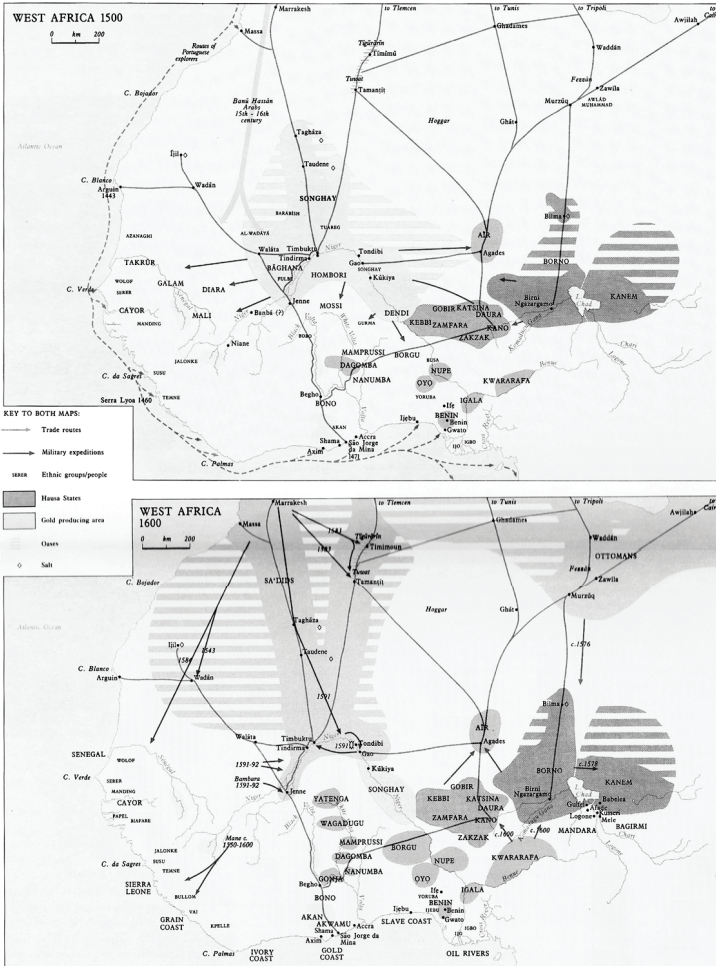
The Arma had no system at any point that softened their internal shortcomings. There was no social group outside the Arma that through its influence that penetrated through a boundary with the Arma could create such a positive feedback effect. The Muslim estate might have provided this, especially as many scholars looked positively to the north but by its destruction they had taken themselves that chance. The relationship between the Arma and the scholars had quickly turned sour as they actually wanted two very different things, that in this case were not mutually beneficial. The Muslim scholars were not interested in Morocco but were essentially married to the Songhay empire and the society of the Middle Niger Bend whereas the lifeline for the Arma and

the intellectual basis for them being what they were came from Marrakech. The scholars of the Middle Niger Bend wanted the Moroccans to help them establish a realm to their liking but grounded in the Sudan - however, the Arma wanted to create a Moroccan outpost. This very quickly turned into enmity which ultimately the Arma won in the short run, because they had the guns, but everyone lost in the long run, because the Arma had killed those who could have provided the ideological glue which would have put the Middle Niger Bend together. This in turn aggravated the situation for both sides as the deteriorating security of the region added to the difficulties of reestablishing this base of scholarship as exchange on which scholarly reputation ultimately rests, becomes impossible, the liminal zones in this area had been shut down. Thus the Arma had destroyed their one shot at gaining legitimacy with the local population which in turn put their whole project in jeopardy because they failed to provide that which worldly rulers always should provide if they are interested in holding on to power: security. They had to rely on their force of arms which stopped to be coming quite quickly and who have the inherent potential of being a highly unstable means of control as there was no overarching sense of purpose guiding those who held them.

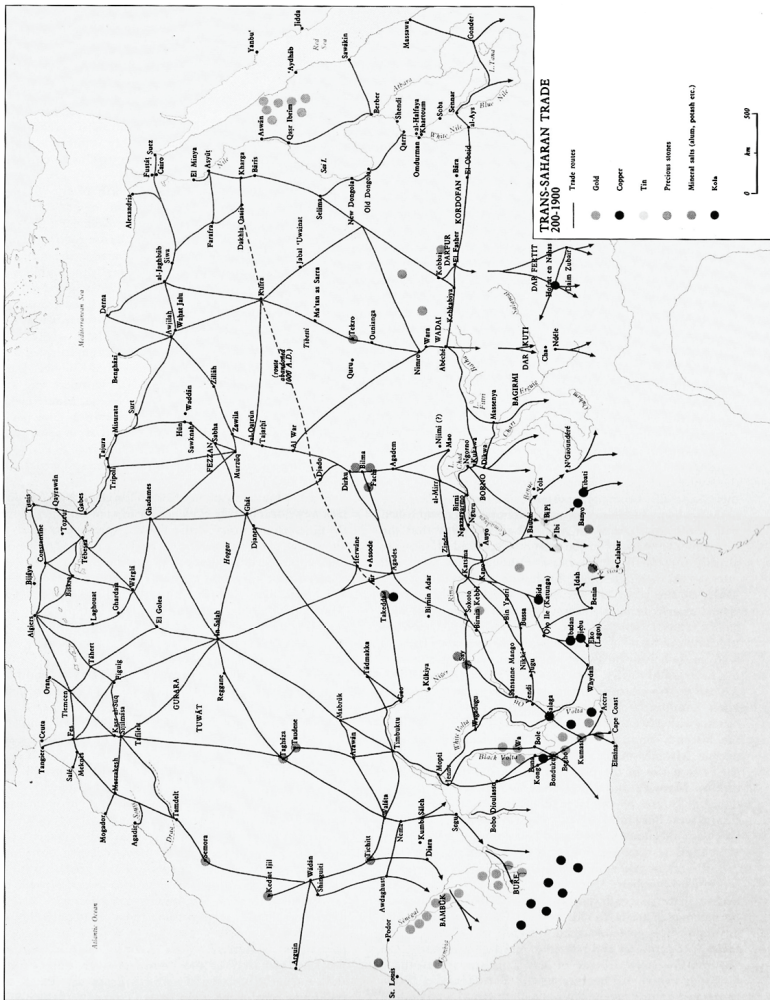
Songhay and the Arma show two contrasting systems. Whereas Songhay had a very primitive pluralistic system, consisting of two powerful estates, that regulated each other and had come into being not so much by design but essentially through chance, the Arma had no such thing. The internal groups of the Arma had no dampening effect on the most harmful outgrowth of their system and a very rigid top-down system that was not self-regulating but falling apart right from the start.

This system, that had developed under Songhay was not immediately gone when the Moroccans arrived but could have been co-opted by them. They essentially let that option expire in 1593 with the destruction of the Muslim estate. With this they essentially initiated an institutional breakdown on the Middle Niger Bend that they were not able to stave off, opening the gates to foreign invaders whom they could not withstand due to their internal disintegration sweeping them away.

11. Maps



Map 1: Trans-Saharan Trade 200-1900 (taken from: Ajayi and Crowder (Historical Atlas of Africa, Map 29)



Map 2: Trans-Saharan Trade 200-1900 (taken from: Ajayi and Crowder (Historical Atlas of Africa, Map 32)



Map 4: North and West Africa, Towns and Regions (taken from: Hunwick (Timbuktu and the Songhai Empire), P.358

12. Rulers of Songhay from Sunni Ali until the Moroccan invasion

Taken from: Hunwick (*Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*), P.332-337

1. Sunni Ali 1464(?) - 6 November 1492. Extended the area of Songhay considerably. According to the Tarikhs he died a natural death but assassination at the hand of Askya al-Hajj Muhammed is not out of the question.

2. Abu Bakr Dao (Sunni Barou) 6 November 1492 - 2 April 1493. Was defeated and dethroned by Askya al-Hajj Muhammed

3. Askya al-Hajj Muhammed b. Abi Bakr, 2 April 1493 - 15 August 1529. He seized the throne from the last of the Sunni dynasty Abu Bakr Dao, after defeating him in battle.

4. Askya Musa, son of Askya al-Hajj Muhammed, 15 August 1529 - 12 April 1531. He deposed his father in a bloodless coup. Later, his brothers conspired together and killed him.

5. Askya Muhammed Bonkana, son of Umar Komadiakha, 12 April 1531 - 12 April 1537. Muhammed Bonkana was able to snatch the throne from Alu, son of Askya al-Hajj Muhammed by a ruse after Musa's assassination. He was later deposed by the Dendi-Fari Mar Tumzu.

6. Askya Ismail, son of Askya al-Hajj Muhammed, 12 April 1537 - between 12 November and 11 December 1539. The date given by Tarikh al-Fattash, however - 15 December 1539—seems more likely as it leaves a shorter period when Songhay was without an Askya. Ismail was appointed by the Dendi-Fari Mar Tumzu after the latter had deposed Muhammed Bonkana. Ismail died, apparently in Gao, whilst his brothers were campaigning.

7. Askya Ishaq I, or Ishaq Bei, son of Askya al-Hajj Muhammed, 27 December 1539 - 25 March 1549. He was proclaimed Askya by his brothers as soon as they returned to Gao from their campaign. He died a natural death.

8. Askya Dawud, son of Askya al-Hajj Muhammed, 26 March 1549 - between 21 July and 19 August 1582. TF gives 17 Rajab 991/6 August 1583. He seems to have come to the throne unopposed, and died a natural death in his estate at Tondibi.

9. Askya [Muhammed] Al-Hajj, son of Askya Dawud, 16 August 1582 - 16 December 1586. He was deposed by his brothers and died shortly afterwards.

10. Askya Muhammed Ban, son of Askya Dawud, 16 December 1586 - 9 April 1588. He seems to have been the choice of those brothers who revolted against Askya Al-Hajj, though others opposed him. He died, perhaps from an epileptic seizure, while waiting to engage Balma al-Sadiq in battle.

11. Askya Ishaq II, son of Askya Dawud, 9 April 1588 - between 15 March and 12 April 1592. There was an attempt to install Mahmud, a son of Askya Ismail, but this was foiled. Askia Ishaq was defeated in battle on 13 March 1591 by the Sa'dian forces under Pasha Djoudar, and was later deposed by his brother Muhammed Gao.

12. Askya Muhammed Gao, son of Askya Dawud. His brief reign was brought to an end when he fell victim to a trap set by Pasha Mahmud Zarqun, successor to Pasha Djoudar and was killed along with some of his senior commanders. His brother Sulayman was spared, and became the first puppet askiya of Timbuktu.

13. Askya Nuh, son of Askya Dawud, c. 1592-99. After leading a heroic resistance, he was eventually routed by Qa'id Mansur, and subsequently deposed by his following in favour of his brother al-Mustafa, who was shortly afterwards deposed by another brother, Muhammed Sorko-ije. He, too, was soon deposed, and Harun Dankataya, son of Askya Dawud took command, and was still ruling in 1608.

13. The Pashas

Taken from: Abitbol (Tombouctou et les Arma), P. 250

1	Djoudar	Nov. 1590 - Aug. 1591
2	Mahmud b. Zarqun	Aug. 1591 – 1595
3	Mansur b. Yakko (b. 'Abd al-Rahman)	March 1595 - Nov. 1596
4	Mahmud Taba	Dec. 1596 - May 1598
5	'Ammar (al-Fata)	Feb. 1599 - May 1600
6	Sulayman	May 1600 - July 1604
7	Mahmud Longo	July 1604 - Oct. 1612
8	'Ali b. 'Abd Allah al-Tilimsan	Oct. 1612 - March 1617
9	Ahmad b. Yusuf al-Ildji	March 1617 - July 1618
10	Haddu b. Yusuf al-Adjnasi	July 1618 - Jan. 1619
11	Muhammad b. Ahmad al-Masi	Jan. 1619 - Nov. 1621
12	Hammu b. 'Ali al-Dar'i	Nov. 1621 - Jan. 1622
13	Yusuf b. 'Umar al-Qasri	Jan 1622 - May 1627
14	Ibrahim b. 'Abd al-Karim al-Djarari	May 1627 - May 1628
15	'Ali b. 'Abdal-Qadir	May 1628 - July 1632
16	'Ali b. al-Mubarak al-Masi	July 1632 - Oct. 1632
17	So'oud al-Sharqi b. Ahmad 'Adjrud	Oct. 1632 - Aug. 1634
18	'Abd al-Rahman b. Ahmad al-Shiadhmi	Aug. 1634 - July 1635
19	Sa'id b. 'Ali al-Mahmud	July 1635 - Oct. 1637

20	Mas'ud b. Mansur al-Za'ri	Oct 1637 - April 1643
21	Muhammad b. Muhammad b. 'Usman	April 1643 - Nov. 1646
22	Ahmad b. 'Ali al-Tilimsani	Nov. 1646 - Feb. 1647
23	Ahmad b. 'Abd al-Rahman al-Hayyuni	Feb 1647 - Oct. 1648
24	Yahya b. Muhammad al-Gharnati	Oct. 1648 - Oct. 1651
25	Ahmad b. Yusuf al-Adjnasi	Oct. 1651 - Aug. 1654
26	Muhammad b. Musa	Aug. 1654 - May 1655
27	Muhammad b. Ahmad al-Shiadmi	May 1655 - March 1657
28	Muhammad b. al-Hadj al-Shtuki	Summer 1657 - Summer 1659
29	'Allai al-Harusi	Summer 1660 (1 day)
30	AI-Hadj al-Mukhtar al-Sharqi	Summer 1660 (3 months)
31	Hammu b. 'Abd Allah al-Ildji	Summer 1660 - Feb. 1661

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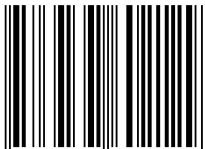
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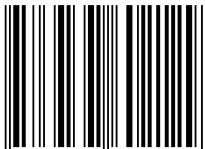
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