

CHAPTER 2

Genesis of a social tradition

a decline in the extent of literacy and this naturally had a reflection upon the tradition of higher Islamic learning. One almost senses a premonition on the part of the chroniclers of what was yet to come. The city which boasted of some 150 Qur'anic schools in the sixteenth century had but some 20 to offer when the French gained control of it in the late nineteenth century. In the meantime, the population had declined to as little as one-quarter or one-fifth of what it had been and some of the central wards of the town remained uninhabited until recent years.⁵

Yet, for all that, the city retained much if not all of its essential characteristics (and its traditions) despite the decline. The seventeenth-century chroniclers attest equally to the sophistication of their own time as to that of the past they lament.⁶ Many of the same families which had thrived under Mali and Songhai continued to wield their influence up to much later times. The tradition of learning remained so much alive that the French found it favourable to their interests to incorporate it partly into the new administration.⁷ The assimilation of the Ruma which began as early as the mid-seventeenth century revived the power and influence of the scholars to such an extent that Paul Marty, one of the foremost researchers of West African Islam, described Timbuktu as 'a little democratic republic'. According to Marty, 'The city was at all times self-administered internally by its *Jamā'a*'.⁸

Approaching the history of Timbuktu from the standpoint of the tradition which conditioned the status and role of scholars offers the advantage of bringing out the element of continuity over the centuries. Indeed, and as a starting point, the approach enables us to enquire adequately (even if retrospectively) into the origins and growth of Timbuktu during a period of almost three centuries which are not sufficiently documented in the sources. Judging from later records, Timbuktu took on the character of an ethnically diversified settlement right from the beginning during the twelfth century when Timbuktu originated as a commercial town. The traditions which evolved in the settlement, and especially those which revolved around the role of scholars (parochial leaders and judges), enabled the town to develop its own personality and, in due course, to establish and preserve a power of collective action to a considerable extent. The scholars played a city-wide integrative role which transcended the organization of each quarter while at the same time drawing some of its strengths from it. Here, as in most non-Western cities, municipal institutions did not emerge independently, nor did Timbuktu ever become formally a city-state.⁹ The ethnic diversity of the population, and especially that of the mercantile and learned elite, prevented the emergence of a strong kingship tradition such as we encounter further south at an early date in the city of Jenne.¹⁰ Nonetheless, a strong sense of solidarity among the citizens did emerge and this was both symbolized and ritualized in the institution of the Friday congregation at the Main Mosque (Jingerebir).

The role of Muslim scholars (*ulamā'*) in Timbuktu is treated in this study as part of a social tradition which exerted a continuous influence upon the organization and character of the city throughout its history. The essence of this tradition was that status and influence, including recognition among the ranks of notables (*ʿayān*), could most readily be derived through the acquisition of Islamic learning. Scholars in this tradition were the leaders of the urban community, its spokesmen *vis-à-vis* the rulers, and the regulators of its public affairs. In their combined roles as notables and a learned elite, the scholars could marshal considerable resources and mobilize wide sectors of the city's population. This gave them a dominant voice in the internal affairs of their community. In view of the religio-political organization of Islam, their impact was strongly felt at the administrative level as well as the political.

Some of the implications of the role of scholars in Timbuktu have already been observed by John Hunwick and Sekene Modi Cissoko in their contributions on the sixteenth-century history of the city. Cissoko underlined the prestigious position gained by Timbuktu, as an active and vibrant centre of learning, in the Songhai empire complex.¹ Hunwick, on the other hand, implicitly ascribed the phenomenon of autonomy to the unusual dynamism exhibited by the scholars, and especially by the Aqīt family among them, during the Songhai period.² The wealth and commercial importance of Timbuktu at that time, along with the legendary image which it evoked in post-mediaeval Europe, have made the pre-seventeenth-century history of the city a subject of commentary in many recent publications. However, there has emerged a tendency throughout to look at later periods as less significant in themselves or as constituting a dramatic departure from the patterns established up to Songhai times.³

The earliest surviving chronicles from Timbuktu are in large part responsible for this. Written in the middle of the seventeenth century by scholars who had experienced the transformative impact (and ravages) of the Moroccan conquest, these recall with marked nostalgia the essential independence of their city under Mali and the Songhai.⁴ The intervening 60 or so years since the establishment of the Moroccan Ruma regime had witnessed

The factor of Islam in the development of Timbuktu cannot strictly be treated along the same lines as in other Muslim cities north of the Sahara. For there existed an element of 'frontierism' in West African Islam which is perceptible only in the earliest periods in North Africa and the Middle East. In West Africa, on the other hand, in areas which are adjacent to each other we often encounter some of the same phenomena from the eleventh century, and earlier, up to the nineteenth century. The borders of Islamic diffusion remained quite fluid, and this led the Muslim or Islamized community, much more thoroughly than elsewhere, to define its own identity and its sense of solidarity in Islamic terms. The parochial aspects of Islam remained very strong here and exerted a city-wide impact, whereas in the mainlands of Islam they gave way to a process of fragmentation directly proportionate to the size (and sometimes ethnic divisions) of the city.¹¹ Likewise, predominantly politico-military considerations which gave rise to dynastic changes often came to be perceived in the Western Sudan in terms of Muslim conceptions of legitimacy.

When Timbuktu came into being in the twelfth century, Islam had penetrated many market-towns and state capitals to the west and east, as well as to the south. Already, in the eleventh century, we encounter the phenomenon of royal subscription to Islam (in varying ways) in kingdoms ranging from Gao in the east, to Takrur and Sallî in the west, to the small kingdom of Mallî (a precursor of Mali), to the southwest.¹² Presumably, a similar trend had been taking place among the small chieftaincies of the southern Sahara and the process was consolidated under the impact of the Almoravid militant Islamic movement of the late eleventh century.¹³ The developments of the twelfth century are obscure, but it seems that the diffusion of Islam was aided by the formal Islamization of the kingdom of Ghana and by the growth of an important tradition of learning among the Soninke, or the 'people of Ghana'.¹⁴ Future developments in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries would incorporate Timbuktu along with practically the entire region of the Western Sudan into the empire of Mali, the greatest geopolitical formation in the history of West Africa. The legacy of this power came partly to be inherited during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries by the more closely-knit Songhai empire which, like its predecessor, was strongly influenced by royal subscription to Islam and its propagation in varying degrees throughout its realms.¹⁵

Thriving under the auspices of first Mali and then the Songhai, Timbuktu's chroniclers and traditionists have impressed upon us two main features concerning the history of their city: first, that it originated as an exclusively Islamic settlement right from the date of its foundation at the hands of Tuareg tribesmen c. 1100 A.D.; and secondly that the city's tradition of learning had begun to match those of much older cities in the heartlands of Islam when it was incorporated into the empire of Mali c. 1325.¹⁶ These assertions reflect the collective memory of later generations and we have little by way of

independent evidence to confirm them. Nonetheless, they help emphasize the extent to which the status and reputation of Timbuktu was enhanced by its Islamic image.

One of the implications of being an exclusively Islamic city in West Africa was to enjoy a high degree of autonomy with respect to the dominant state in the area. At the earliest, this amounted to a tendency towards quarantine on the part of the Muslim community, but the separation was never complete.¹⁷ Owing to the predominantly commercial preoccupation of Muslims, the level of intercourse with non-Muslims was always high and it is this which facilitated the processes of conversion.¹⁸ From as early as the tenth century we have the evidence of Ibn Hauqal to the effect that Muslim merchants who settled in the kingdom of Ghana, as also in the now obscure kingdom of Kugha, enjoyed a distinct status and were administered autonomously by their judges.¹⁹ By the eleventh century, Muslim settlements grew into virtual cities vying with the royal capitals at least at the twin cities in the kingdoms of Ghana, Sallî and Gao.²⁰ Survivals of this tradition are exemplified by the town of Dia (also Zâgha, Jâgha) to the southwest of Timbuktu in Massina where, according to tradition, even the Malian kings did not enter the gates though they were the acknowledged supreme leaders of Islam in their time.²¹

The tradition of learning in Timbuktu, for which a precursor is found at Dia, assured the city a status and prestige which overshadowed the initial phenomenon of autonomism brought by waves of settlers from earlier Muslim settlements. Whether Soninke or Berber, from Ghana and its Sahelo-Saharan tributaries, or North Africans who had migrated extensively in the Western Sudan, the settlers all more or less subscribed to the importance of Muslim scholarship. Tuaregs who opted for a sedentary existence became major recruits to the ranks of scholars. They were to be joined by Wangara, or mercantile Malinke, during and after the supremacy of Mali, and by Songhai and Massina Fulâni throughout the earlier periods in the city's history.²²

The Muslim sciences which the various settlers brought and fostered in the city went hand-in-hand with the widespread commercial contacts of these groups to secure for the growing town a measure of non-interference from outside. For one thing, the settlers themselves commanded considerable wealth along with widespread networks of trade and alliances in the area. Additionally, however, the security of the city was in its Islamic image; its mosques, schools and shrines began to be conceived early as its guardians. In the psychological mood which prevailed after the pilgrimage of Mansa Mûsa of Mali (and again on the return from the Hâjj of Askia Muhammad over a century and a half later), Timbuktu gradually gained an aura of 'sanctity' and assumed for itself a sort of inviolability. Its acknowledgement of Malian, and especially Songhai, rule at a later time, was perceived as a voluntary act which bound the city through the Muslim

the information available for later, better-documented periods. The chroniclers have left us unmistakable evidence that they themselves did not know the precise outlines of the growth of the city. Much as in their case, we have to draw our own inferences on the basis of available knowledge concerning the groups who played an important role in the history of the city during the fourteenth and, more especially, the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Additionally, we are able to draw upon the evidence of the early Arab geographers concerning settlements which had preceded Timbuktu to importance in the area. Though limited in some basic respects, the available corpus of information enables us at least to offer an adequate outline of the areas from which Timbuktu inherited its settlers and its traditions.

The highly diversified ethnic composition of Timbuktu and the complexity of its demographic history are illustrated by the fact that Tuaregs, Berbers, Soninke, Songhai, Arabs, Malinke and Fulāni all played a prominent role in its leadership at various periods. The above groups do not exhaust the list and the high incidence of assimilation, through intermarriage and the integration of slaves, produced many mixed groups such as the Tamashagh-speaking Bella and the Songhai-speaking Ghabibi and Ruma. Among the latter, the Bella are sometimes alleged to be descendants of an autochthonous group which inhabited the location since time immemorial.²⁹ In practice, we cannot be sure about this any more than about the origin of the Maghsharen Tuareg who make an early appearance in the history of Timbuktu. The Tuareg as a whole were seen in the seventeenth century as a branch of the Masūfa who, in turn, were a branch of the Sanhāja Berbers. The early ethnographic history of the region is quite obscure, and the most that can be said is that Timbuktu received a highly diversified and mixed body of settlers. Besides the permanent settlers, we should perhaps mention a 'floating population', especially of nomadic Tamashagh-speaking Tuareg and, later, of Arabic-speaking Barābish, who made their appearance in large numbers during the caravan seasons and at times of drought or instability.³⁰

The data at our disposal indicate that the population of the city ranged between 30 000 and 50 000 inhabitants in the sixteenth century when Timbuktu experienced its 'golden age' of prosperity and Islamic learning.³¹ By very indirect evidence we may also infer that the population amounted to some 10 000 inhabitants when the empire of Mali incorporated Timbuktu around 1325, the growth being more or less gradual from then on.³² However, it is not possible to arrive at an ethnographic breakdown of the community at any given period. Data from the present time, which indicate Songhai-Ruma predominance, reflect post-seventeenth-century transformations. Among other things, the past three centuries have witnessed a growth followed by a decline in the Fulāni element, as well as a general emigration of Berber (Sanhāja) and Malinke groups who figured

monarchs with the realm of Islam (the *umma*) as a whole. In both cases, the relationship was reciprocal. Recognition on the part of a thriving centre of learning reinforced the prestige of the ruler and he, in turn, bestowed some privileges on the scholars which greatly enhanced their influence. At the level of economics, similar considerations went into operation. Timbuktu, like other commercial centres, benefited immensely from the regularity and safety of trade brought about by the exigencies of empire-building. The rulers, for their part, had no interest in directly controlling these centres so long as a *laissez-faire* policy secured the flow of goods to and from their domains.²³

There was no question, here as elsewhere outside Europe, of the city's evolving a corporate character with a legally defined body of citizenry. A rudimentary tendency in that direction (or at least a vague recollection of such a tendency) is evidenced in the case of Jenne, Timbuktu's major trade partner to the south, judging from the legends which recall the city-state's Islamization.²⁴ But the need for encouraging the arrival of merchants, whether for short or extended stay or permanent settlement, reinforced the *ad hoc* character of urban organization. It has often been pointed out that Muslim law and ideology recognized no permanent organizational unit other than the entire *umma* or community of believers.²⁵ This, though a highly theoretical premise difficult to reconcile with the historical fragmentation of the Muslim world, was not entirely irrelevant to the self-conceptions of Timbuktu. At all times the scholars betrayed a marked preference for associating their city, either directly or indirectly, with whatever power seemed to represent supreme leadership in Islam.²⁶

Perhaps the most characteristic feature of Timbuktu was its openness to newcomers. For the people of its Sahelo-Saharan hinterland, its markets were a source of supply just as the tombs and shrines of its departed scholars were places of pilgrimage. The wealth of the city and its commercial *floruit* were perceived as an extension of the *baraka* (divine grace) with which it was endowed.²⁷ Most importantly, however, Timbuktu was a 'capital-city' for the pastoralists of the Sahara, just as it was an emporium for the people of the Sudan. The pastoralists of the region sought Timbuktu for their goods and some of their food supplies, as well as for learning and 'culture'. Similarly, students and scholars from various locations to its south came to the city to study and teach in the growing metropolis of the Sahelo-Saharan. The reputation for piety and learning of its leaders made Timbuktu a place of refuge and security. Moreover, in the emerging Islamic world of West Africa, the city was a main link along the caravan routes which led towards the pilgrimage in Mecca.²⁸

Growth of a commercial settlement

Much as in the case of its social traditions, the demographic origins and growth of Timbuktu need to be investigated retrospectively on the basis of

far more prominently in the early history of the city than is indicated by their numerical strength today.³³ Indeed, today, most groups except the Tamashagh-speaking Bella and the Arabic-speaking Hassānis (the latter being mainly relatively recent settlers) are indistinguishable. For, while most speak the Songhai language, it is only among a few families that actual lines of descent may be established with certainty.

The precise provenance of the various groups which settled the city in its period of growth is obscured by the high degree of geographical mobility which has historically characterized merchants in the Western Sudan.³⁴ What we know are the immediate locations from which some of the settlers came, and these were highly diversified settlements in themselves. Nonetheless, it would be useful to outline the general directions of these movements provided they are not equated strictly with questions of ethnic origin. These may perhaps be discussed in terms of northern, southern, eastern and western factors in the demographic growth of Timbuktu.

The northern factor, closely related to the Saharan and trans-Saharan trade, was important both in stimulating the rise of Timbuktu and in consolidating its economic and demographic growth. For, although Timbuktu owed much to the rich region of the Niger delta to its south, nonetheless the site may have remained marginal to the economics of the area if it had not been for the influence of Saharan commerce, as a first step, and for the influence of trans-Saharan commerce later. The key stimulus would seem to have come from the salt-mines of Taghāza located in the middle of the Sahara some 500 miles due north of the city. Al-Sa'di indicates that Tuaregs from the Maghsharen branch first used the location of Timbuktu sometime around 1100 A.D. as a permanent storehouse for their goods while they themselves persisted in their nomadic way of life which took them from the Niger to the town of Arwān to the north. Traditions of recent record have added to this detail the claim that the Bella were already in a servile relationship to the Tuareg and that they were entrusted with the upkeep of their stores.³⁵ It is possible indeed to visualize a rudimentary beginning for the trade which later predominated at the site in the exchange of cattle and hides for agricultural produce between the Tuareg (or their Berber ancestors) and between ancestors of the Bella drawn from among the agricultural societies of the Niger. But it seems that the salt-trade, possibly first carried by local Tuareg or Masūfa, was the main attraction for more dynamic merchant groups.

The salt-trade of Taghāza had previously been carried, and continued to be so for a very long time, to the much more extensive Tuareg settlement of Tadmekka. Also known as al-Sūq (Ar. 'the market'), in the Adrar of Ifoghas, Tadmekka had been the Saharan emporium of Gao, the old kingdom on the Niger some 250 miles to the east of Timbuktu.³⁶ The ancient importance of Tadmekka is attested by the fact that it gave its

alternate names to the militant Kel Tadmekkat and the clerical and more peaceable Kel el-Suk (Kel al-Sūq). Both clans became prominent in the history of the area from the seventeenth century onwards. The ancient town was mentioned as a large well-built city during the eleventh century by al-Bakri, and it has since held a special position in Tuareg legend as a once-flourishing centre of learning which was allegedly destroyed by the defamed Songhai monarch, Sunni 'Ali.³⁷ It would seem, in fact, that its decline was a protracted one which, though possibly affected by the fortunes of Gao, began long before the rise of Sunni 'Ali in the late fifteenth century and continued thereafter. Essentially, the location of Timbuktu, with Kabara as its riparian port on the Niger, was far more advantageous for the exchange of salt in return for the products of the Middle Niger Delta. Indeed, during the eleventh century, al-Bakri had mentioned a town named Tīreqqa whose location must have been in or near the location of Timbuktu and Kabara. Tīreqqa had been a small town whose market was a meeting-place between the people of the kingdom of Ghana and the people of Tadmekka. Quite probably, Timbuktu replaced Tīreqqa as a market town, beginning from around 1100, and in the process it drew settlers both from the Niger floodplain and from Tadmekka. The early prominence of Tuareg scholars in Timbuktu, not specifically related to the Maghsharen, would suggest that these moved to the settlement from Tadmekka and were probably (along with Soninke from Ghana) the first large-scale merchants at the location.³⁸

The eastern factor in the demographic growth of Timbuktu is suggested by a general body of evidence which suggests that the city of Gao witnessed a gradual decline from the ninth century down to the fifteenth century prior to the rise of the Songhai empire at the site. As already mentioned, the kingdom of Gao had evolved into a twin settlement in the eleventh century and, although its earliest traditions have been overshadowed by those of the Songhai empire which made Gao its capital, the city would seem to have been the centre of an ancient state which attracted much of the produce of the Niger bend area and exchanged it for North African goods through the intermediacy of Tadmekka and, further to the east, Tagedda.³⁹ So far as we can tell, the decline of Gao had been gradual, though the funerary inscriptions nearby suggest a change of dynasty in the twelfth or thirteenth century.⁴⁰ Later, in the early decades of its incorporation by the empire of Mali, Gao probably witnessed some revival during the early to mid-fourteenth century. But it seems that a major upheaval resulted in the abandonment of the city beginning somewhere around 776 A.H. (1374/5 A.D.). At that time, the North African historian Ibn Khaldūn met a Sijilmāsi scholar named Muḥammad b. Wāsūl who had lived in Gao and had been employed in its judiciary. The latter told him of a devastating struggle over Gao between Mali and the Berber Tuaregs of the Tagedda region. The text of Ibn Khaldūn in the section on the Sudan is

ambiguous but in the prolegomena the author says, 'Gao, . . . at this time is devastated'.⁴¹ It seems quite possible that an exodus of the inhabitants took place at this juncture and the importance of the city was not revived until the rise of the Songhai empire. Ibn Baṭūta had visited Gao and associated with its scholars in its better days. He described it as 'a large city . . . one of the best and biggest in the Sudan'.⁴² The decline of Gao during the late fourteenth century and the early fifteenth century almost certainly resulted in the diversion of much of its commerce westwards to Timbuktu. Similarly, it would seem almost certain that settlers from Gao (Songhai and others) contributed to the growth of Timbuktu, beginning even at a much earlier time.

The southern factor, or the extension of the trade of Timbuktu through Kabara along the Niger upstream, is emphasized in our sources to the point of seeming exaggeration. The ambiguity concerns the city of Jenne, some 250 miles to the southeast, in the eastern side of the Niger floodplain. The traditions of this city, like its demographic composition, seem to have incorporated those of earlier more important political and urban formations in that area. Jenne was allegedly founded in the second century of the Hijra (eighth and ninth centuries A.D.) and became officially Islamized towards the end of the sixth century (say somewhere around 1180 A.D.). At that time, we are told, when Timbuktu was still a minor settlement, Jenne boasted of no less than 4200 scholars already established in 'its lands'. At present, we have no confirmation of extensive Islamization at an early date in Jenne, except to say that the twelfth-century geographers did indeed emphasize the diffusion of Muslim learning among the people of the kingdom of Ghana. Interestingly, one of the geographers who emphasized this was al-Zuhri, an author who described the lands of Ghana by the name of 'Janāwa'.⁴³ Al-Sa'di heard that Jenne was the only power in the area which resisted incorporation into the empire of Mali. In this case too, we may suspect interpolation between the traditions of Jenne and those of ancient Ghana, especially since the geographer al-'Umari assigned a special sovereign status for Ghana within the domains of Mali.⁴⁴ Although the evidence is indirect, it would seem to us more than probable that al-Sa'di simply confused Ghana (or its legacy in the Niger floodplain) and Jenne. He heard that the lands of Jenne had once comprised over 7000 villages, close to each other, which would seem to designate the entire floodplain of the Niger. Jenne itself may have inherited a political legacy from Ghana, and that, besides the phonetic proximity of the names, may account for al-Sa'di's confusion.

The importance of Jenne (or Ghana, as the case may be) for this discussion lies in the assertion by al-Sa'di that, 'It was because of this blessed city that people flocked from all horizons to Timbuktu, from its east and west and from its north and south'.⁴⁵ Al-Sa'di also wrote that when Timbuktu first arose to commercial importance 'the people who

came most to it for commerce were the people of Wagadu'.⁴⁶ It is now widely agreed that Wagadu was the native Soninke name for ancient Ghana, and hence the probable confusion between Jenne and Ghana is more strongly suggested. Indeed, perhaps al-Sa'di was unwittingly also referring to the commerce of Ghana (or at least that part of Ghana which flourished in the Niger floodplain) when he wrote that Jenne was the meeting place between salt-merchants from Taghāza and between gold-merchants from Bītu. The latter location can be identified with Bighu, or some other earlier settlement, neighbouring the gold-producing area of the Akan forests. Although it is now believed that the exploitation of Akan gold did not begin as early as in the Bambuk and Bure regions, it seems to us quite possible that it began as early as the eleventh century, and possibly even earlier. The trade in gold, coupled with the agricultural wealth of the Middle Niger Delta, probably stimulated the earliest examples of state-formation and urbanization in the Western Sudan.⁴⁷

Jenne itself probably remained a relatively unimportant settlement judging by the fact that it was not mentioned by any of the early Arab geographers and travellers. Though the city clearly had urban precursors in its region, its growth may well have been simultaneous with that of Timbuktu. A stimulus for the growth of Islam and for the regularization of trade, in both places, might have come from the city of Zāgha, located in the rich Massina area on the western side of the Niger floodplain. Zāgha has been identified with Dia and it holds a prominent place in the legends of dispersal of Soninke scholars and clerics who are associated with ancient Ghana.⁴⁸ In the fourteenth century, when what remained of Ghana was alone accorded sovereign status in the Malian imperial system, Dia, as already mentioned, enjoyed the privileges of an inviolable centre of learning and commerce. Its early importance and its tradition of Islamic learning are confirmed by external Arabic sources as well as by Soninke and Fulāni traditions. Though it remained a sizeable town for a long time to come, emigrations seem to have reduced its importance from the fourteenth century onwards.⁴⁹ Some of the migrants clearly moved south-west to Jenne, and probably also to Kābura and Bītu, while others, it seems, contributed to the commercial and demographic growth of Timbuktu.⁵⁰

Traditions which attribute the introduction of architecture from Jenne to Timbuktu would seem to point either to the legacy of the kingdom of Ghana in the Niger floodplain or more specifically to Dia. For one thing, Jenne itself is sometimes said to have been founded from Dia.⁵¹ Moreover, according to *Tārīkh al-Fattāsh*, Askia Muḥammad recruited fully 500 masons from Zāgha after the conquest of the town for the Songhai. Later, these masons were thought to have been responsible for building up Gao, the Songhai capital, as well as the provincial capital of Tindirma, not far to the southwest of Timbuktu.⁵²

Al-Sa'di in the seventeenth century seems to have been aware of an extensive body of traditions which suggested that Timbuktu inherited its urban legacy, and with it its Islamic legacy, principally from further south. For reasons which are largely beyond us, however, he chose likewise to emphasize the Western influence on Timbuktu, from the regions of Walāta and Kumbi Saleh, it seems, in even stronger terms. He mentioned neither Tadmekka directly nor Dia but burdened us with the assertion that 'civilization' came to Timbuktu from further west. 'The techniques of town-building came from nowhere but *al-maghrīb*', he said, 'and the same holds true for the tenets of religion and the procedures of commercial transaction'.⁵³

By *al-maghrīb*, al-Sa'di may have meant Morocco, or the Arab West, but the context of his statement suggests that he was referring to the Sahelo-Sudanic West. Particularly important was a town known by the name of Biru, which has been identified with Walāta, some 400 miles due west of Timbuktu. This predominantly Berber Masūfa settlement had apparently served as the emporium of Wagadu, the core territory of the kingdom of ancient Ghana whose location is yet to be determined.⁵⁴ In its most flourishing days, Biru was a most varied settlement, according to al-Sa'di:

Companies of merchants travelled towards it from all over the horizons. The most elect of scholars and virtuous men, along with men of wealth of every tribe and country, settled within it. They came from Egypt, Wajal, Fazzān, Ghadāmis, Tuat, Teflālet, Fās, Sūs, Bītu and other places.⁵⁵

All of these, along with Berbers from all branches of the Sanhāja, eventually moved to Timbuktu. 'The growth of Timbuktu was the ruin of Biru', the author says, but he does not indicate the chronological context of this migration. The itineraries of Mansa Mūsā's pilgrimage and Ibn Baṭūta's visit to Mali suggest that Walāta in the west, like Gao in the east, was still a major terminus for the trans-Saharan trade in the mid-fourteenth century.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, probable decline in the general region of Walāta is suggested by the fact that the important site of Kumbi Saleh, to the southwest of Walāta, appears to have been abandoned in the thirteenth century.⁵⁷ Hence, both in the East and West, we observe a pattern of gradual decline which resulted from or stimulated the growth of the central route via Timbuktu from the twelfth century onwards. Presumably, in the earliest phases, the commerce of the city centred upon the salt-for-gold trade, as on the exchange of cattle for grain between the pastoralists of the Sahara and the agriculturalists of the Middle Niger Delta. The extension of the Saharan trade past Taghāza all the way to North Africa probably accelerated with the transfer of the merchants of Biru to Timbuktu.

The settlement of Timbuktu accordingly belongs to two main phases which probably overlapped with each other. The first phase brought

settlers from north and south, and probably principally from Tadmekka and Dia. North African merchants long established at Tadmekka and in the Middle Niger Delta probably also contributed settlers to Timbuktu from an early date.⁵⁸ The initial growth of the city, principally at the hands of Soninke and Masūfa, encouraged the arrival of other settlers in much larger numbers during the second phase, including mercantile communities both from Walāta (or Biru) and Gao. Presumably, the transplantation of the entire mercantile population from Biru to Timbuktu was still apace when Ibn Baṭūta made his journey through the Sudan in the middle of the fourteenth century. During that same period, Timbuktu increasingly received Wangara settlers who had long been famed for their participation in the gold commerce and who came to be closely associated with the commerce of the empire of Mali. The arrival of Songhai and Fulānis may have begun also in the fourteenth century, though, in all probability, both elements did not enjoy a strong position in the city prior to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.⁵⁹

The ethnic diversity of the settlers naturally exerted a divisive influence, as Horace Miner has suggested in a general statement concerning the entire history of the city.⁶⁰ Certainly, in the earliest periods, the ethnic distinctions must have been quite strong, as many groups maintained their contacts with their original homes. Thus, it is no coincidence that a Malinke scholar, as we shall see, occupied the imamate of the Main Mosque (the parochial leadership of Timbuktu) during the last days of Malian sovereignty over the city. Later, after the revocation of Malian sovereignty, Tuareg scholars who were probably allied to the Maghsharen (at least by language) enjoyed an ascendent position in the city. Later, when the Songhai Sunni 'Alī rose against the Tuaregs, many scholars and merchants fled back to Walāta, while others possibly from Tadmekka fled further east to Tagedda. Finally, it may not be coincidental that Fulānis achieved prominence in the city when the Sultanate of Massina became an appreciable power in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁶¹ The position of the various groups in the city was certainly influenced by their ethnic background and other alliances.

Nonetheless, there was a remarkable degree of sharing in the prerogatives of power and influence. The original kinship relations of the various groups became weaker from one generation to another, partly because of intermarriage, but especially owing to the exigencies of joint ventures in commerce. The tradition of Islamic learning confirmed this trend when individuals from various groups found it advantageous to study under scholars from outside their families. The standing of a scholar depended upon the recognition of his abilities in the entire community rather than his immediate kinship group. It was this primarily which determined the selection process to the major religio-administrative posts. Common subscription to the tradition of Islamic learning seems to have contributed to the integration of the city more than any other factor.

By the fifteenth century Timbuktu had become compactly built and the arrival of new settlers began to be balanced by the departure of groups which found more favourable commercial opportunities elsewhere.⁶² The population became more or less stable and this consolidated the growing sense of common identity among the citizens. The Main Mosque, located in the southwestern section of the city, played a major integrative role. Presumably, the area around that mosque was the most thickly settled in the earlier periods. The influence of the Main Mosque (Jingerebir) was equalled only by that of Sankore, in the northern quarter, an ancient mosque which became the main forum for interaction among scholars and literati. Historically, and perhaps beginning in the sixteenth century, the Sankore quarter drew more settlers from among the 'whites' of the city, the Sanhāja, the Tuaregs and the Barābīsh. Interestingly, however, one of the earliest references to scholars there suggests that these were 'blacks', presumably Soninke and Malinke Wangara. It seems more than doubtful that the earliest patterns of settlement followed strictly ethnic, linguistic or colour criteria. Perhaps they were patterned in part upon the directions from which the settlers came. Thus, Soninke and Sanhāja who migrated from Walāta may have settled in one ward, while other Soninke from Dia may have settled close to Fulānis who migrated from the region of Dia. Certainly, we have evidence of intermarriage between Sanhāja and Fulāni in the Massina region, while in the case of Soninke and Wangara it is often difficult to establish a distinction. The fact that the earlier settlements had already witnessed considerable intermixture probably facilitated the process of integration among the settlers in Timbuktu. Eventually, the strongest integrative factor was exerted by the institution of the judgeship (*al-qadā'*), especially as this institution assumed many of the prerogatives of rulership.

The emergence of patrician families

The political history of Timbuktu during its first two centuries of growth and development is summarized by al-Sa'di in a statement to the effect that the first introduction of 'government' (*al-mulk*, presumably a gubernatorial post) came about when the city was incorporated into the empire of Mali in the early fourteenth century. This, along with later indications on the area of Timbuktu more generally, suggests that the city and its region had no central authority in its formative periods. Indeed, even later under the authority of Mali, the role of 'government' *per se* appears to have been minimal. The same was true, as we shall see, of the period of Maghsharen ascendancy during the mid-fifteenth century. At around 1400, or shortly thereafter, when the internal history of the city first comes to the limelight, we learn that Timbuktu was to all practical purposes governed by its 'patrician' families of scholar-notables. Hence, logically, we must consider

that a similar pattern had been growing since the first beginnings of settlement at the site.

The silence of our sources on the first two centuries or so, from 1100 to 1300 A.D., lends itself to any number of explanations. The Masūfa Tuareg who roamed the adjacent Sahara, and who seasonally camped at the settlement for procuring their supplies of grain from the Niger, may have acted as the 'overlords' of Timbuktu in the special sense that they guaranteed its safety and the safety of its southern Saharan trade-routes in return for a tribute. This pattern was to be repeated on an informal basis at a much later time, during the late eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries, when the Kel Tadmekkat and the Kel Tingeregif respectively, became the dominant pastoralist powers in the area. In the earliest periods, however, there is no serious evidence of a centralized or appreciable power among the Masūfa Berbers of the region. Certainly, there exists no coherent support for the theory advanced by the early French writers to the effect that the militant Islamic Almoravid movement which arose in the Western Sahara during the late eleventh century gave rise to a vast but short-lived empire in the Sahelo-Sudan.⁶³ At most, we have a reference to a certain Yahya b. Abu Bakr as an *amir* of Masūfa who exerted influence on Ghana around 1100 A.D. and succeeded in inducing its kings to adopt Islam. Conceivably, this *amir* may well have been an important chieftain in the region of Timbuktu, and his obscure career may well have stimulated the first rise of Timbuktu around 1100, but we do not know the relationship between this *amir* and the leaders of the western Almoravids who are specifically identified as Judāla and Lamtūna. Locally, the Masūfa seem to have been a junior partner (if anything) in an alliance which was headed by the kingdom of Ghana. Al-Zuhri indicates that the Islamization of Ghana was followed seven years later by the adoption of a 'true' Islam at Tadmekka, following a long struggle, it seems, which culminated in an ascendancy for Ghana at Tadmekka.⁶⁴ Unless the information of al-Zuhri is in error, we may perhaps assume likewise an influence for Ghana in the region of Timbuktu along the route to Tadmekka. Nonetheless, it seems doubtful that this influence gave rise to any stable sort of government at Timbuktu, whether by Soninke or Masūfa, prior to the age of the empire of Mali. Pending further research on the earliest periods in the Western Sudan, the political legacy which the city inherited from its earliest periods seems to be one of autonomous self-administration by the settlers.

For the most part, we are inclined to suggest that the local Masūfa participated in the Saharan commerce, furnishing camels and escort, along with other settlers, but they enjoyed no privileges over them. Some of the settlers, and especially the Sanhāja and Lamtūna Berbers, who shared an obscure kinship with the Masūfa, were slow to abandon their military inclinations when they settled to a sedentary or semi-sedentary mercantile existence. Similarly, the Soninke and, later, the Wangara and Fulani

settlers, who controlled the southern trade-routes, had probably adopted a measure of Islamic militancy in the wake of the Almoravid movement. Indeed, we have indirect evidence to suggest that the settlers at Timbuktu as a whole retained a militant, though obscure, sort of organization until the security of commerce by the early fourteenth century reduced their need for hardihood. The first permanent structures, aside from the mosques, were probably more in the nature of caravanserais for the storage of goods. The protection of these probably devolved on the whole community.⁶⁵

This might explain why the judicial post of *qāḍī*, rather than strictly a politico-military post, ultimately became the main administrative function in the city. The *qāḍī* settled the occasional disputes which undoubtedly arose as of an early date and regulated the relationships of settlers with visiting merchants. Quite probably also he was the parochial leader of the community, recognized as *imām* at the existing structure which served as a mosque and which, judging by its later prominence, may have been an earlier and more modest version of the Sankore Mosque.⁶⁶ What appears certain is that the city drew increasing numbers of merchants and scholars to its confines. Traditions later recalled that the Hijazi settler 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Tamimi found the town virtually teeming with Sudani scholars (perhaps Soninke) when he first arrived there c. 1325.⁶⁷ The importance of the town is attested around the same time by the fact that it attracted the Andalusian architect Abu Ishāq al-Tuwaiḥin and the wealthy Egyptian merchant and financier Sirāj al-Dīn al-Kuwaik.⁶⁸ A few decades later, Ibn Baṭūṭa made a point of visiting Timbuktu and his account indicates clearly that it was the most important town at the time along the main route between the Malian capital and Gao.

The incorporation of Timbuktu into the empire of Mali enabled the city to share in the extraordinary safety which Ibn Baṭūṭa observed (and marvelled at) throughout the domains of the empire of Mali. In other respects, the period of Malian sovereignty, and most especially during the mid-fourteenth-century heyday of Mali, did not transform the status of the city in any fundamental manner. At most, we gain a strong impression to the effect that the growth of Timbuktu accelerated most during the middle and last decades of the same century.

The long period of Malian sovereignty over Timbuktu witnessed one dramatic and probably devastating event when the city was conquered and sacked by the non-Muslim kingdom of the northern Mossi. The wording of al-Sa'di on this subject lends itself to the supposition that the conquest took place either in the 1320s or 1330s, shortly after the establishment of Malian sovereignty, or that it took place much later, somewhere around 1400 or shortly thereafter. An early-fifteenth-century date appears more plausible, first because Mali was fast declining at the time, and secondly, because Mossi power became a major factor in the Niger bend area during

the fifteenth century. The failure of collective memory on this point may signify a break in Timbuktu traditions which was caused by the conquest. Similarly, it may reflect reluctance on the part of the chroniclers to admit an extended role or influence for a 'pagan' power in their Muslim city. They hasten to indicate that Timbuktu acknowledged the sovereignty of the empire of Mali for a full century of the Muslim calendar, corresponding to 1336-1433 A.D.⁶⁹ Mansa Mūsā was allegedly the one who established Malian sovereignty over the city during a visit on his return journey from the pilgrimage to Mecca. This event took place in 1324/5, as we know from external Arabic sources, and accordingly, it pre-dates the beginning of Malian sovereignty as remembered by later generations in Timbuktu.⁷⁰ All other indications in fact suggest that Malian rule, though a powerful constitutional legend in later times, had a limited effect upon the organization of Timbuktu.

The contemporary evidence of Ibn Khaldūn, by far the most reliable on Mali, enables us to arrive at a reasonably accurate interpretation of Timbuktu traditions. Mali's expansion northeastwards towards Gao, along the course of the Niger, dates apparently to 1300 A.D. or shortly thereafter. At that time, the reigning monarch, Sakūra or Sabkura, actually subjugated the kingdom of Gao, but he did not, it seems, venture north of the river.⁷¹ Thus Timbuktu may have been left on its own until Mansa Mūsā's return journey from Mecca in 1324/5. Traditions first reported by Dubois in the nineteenth century claim that Mūsā was actually invited to the city by its inhabitants, presumably by the *qāḍī* and the scholars, when they heard of his presence at Gao.⁷² This may seem somewhat fanciful in the telling but it probably holds a measure of truth. Mūsā remained long enough at Gao to have a mosque erected at the outskirts of the city.⁷³ His entry to Timbuktu may then have been negotiated and the scholars would have been more than willing to incorporate the city into the domains of a widely recognized Muslim monarch. He is alleged, though with some hesitation, to have been responsible for erecting the Main Mosque, Jingerebir.⁷⁴

The association of Mali with the beginning of 'government' at Timbuktu seems to pertain principally to the erection of a governmental palace, the Ma'Dugu (perhaps Ma'a Dugu or Magha Dugu). This palace was located at the outskirts of the town near the canal which seasonally brought the Niger inundations towards Timbuktu. It is possible that Mansa Mūsā or his first two successors, Mansa Magha and Sulaimān, appointed Malinke governors in the city as we know they did in Walāta.⁷⁵ Alternatively, Mali may have stimulated the emergence of a recognized chieftaincy post (or a 'kingship') for the first time in the area's history at Timbuktu. When Ibn Baṭūṭa arrived in 1352, during the reign of Mansa Sulaimān, he found the government of the city in the hands of a Masūfa prince, named Farba Mūsā, who was drawn from among the Sanhāja-Tuareg settlers. Farba is

clearly a Malian title, but it seems that Mūsa was largely independent of Mali. He was entitled to bequeath chieftaincy titles and honours without formally acting on behalf of the Malian monarch.⁷⁶ Though the evidence of Ibn Baṭūta is both brief and sketchy, a substantial Malian presence in the city did not come about until much later.⁷⁷

A change in the fortunes of Timbuktu seems almost certainly to have taken place towards the end of the century, during the reign of Mansa Magha II.⁷⁸ Ibn Khaldūn's informant, already mentioned above, told him that in 1374 Mali was mounting campaigns to the area beyond Gao and planning an expedition much further east against the Tuareg of the Tagedda region.⁷⁹ This suggests probable breakdown of earlier accommodations with a variety of Tuareg and other Sanhāja clans, accompanied by a formidable Malian presence along the northern and eastern bend of the Niger.⁸⁰ Timbuktu probably received its share in the form of a Malinke garrison which was established now, perhaps for the first time, in the city. This garrison could not have been very strong, for we are expressly told that it was withdrawn from the city, sometime around 1400 or shortly thereafter, when the Mossi conquered Timbuktu.⁸¹ However, the garrison did return and was to remain in Timbuktu until the revocation of Malian sovereignty in 1433 A.D.

The last years of the Malian regime are better documented than earlier times and they illustrate the extent that power was shared within the city. For one thing, it seems that a substantial Malinke community (and perhaps predominantly mercantile Wangara) had in the meantime settled at Timbuktu and came to be distinguished in its commercial and scholarly pursuits from the Malian garrison. The governor who held the title of Timbuktu-Koy ('King of Timbuktu') was a Sanhāja Berber named Muḥammad Naḍ whose Ajir clan had a presence both at Shingit in the southwestern Sahara as well as in the Niger floodplain in the region of Massina.⁸² He seemingly did not have full command of the garrison but managed nonetheless to dispose of an armed following of his own. Even the institution of the judgeship which might have helped centralize the administration was now fragmented in the transitional period, possibly as a result of the upheaval which had been caused by the Mossi conquest. The sources confront us with three scholars belonging to the early fifteenth century each of whom is given the title of *Qāḍī*. In practice, the information available on these three judges, in addition to the few details surrounding Muḥammad Naḍ and his family, provide us with our earliest internal view of Timbuktu society.

Mention should first be made of Muḥammad Muaddab (Modibo) al-Kaburi, a scholar of high stature, whose descent and age became somewhat confused in the memory of later traditionalists.⁸³ He is described as a contemporary of 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Tamīmī, who flourished from 1325 onwards, and at the same time he is assigned to the ninth century

A.H., which began in 1397 A.D. Judging from his relations with a few scholars whose chronology or genealogy is known, he acted as *Qāḍī* towards the very end of the Malian presence and lived for sometime thereafter teaching some of the most prominent scholars of the succeeding generation. His judicial functions may have centred on the Soninke element in the population of which he was apparently a member. He and thirty other scholars who shared his venerated graveyard originated in the town of Kābura, in the Niger floodplain south of Dia.⁸⁴ The legends which shroud them, along with other Sudāni scholars, 'blacks' possibly from Dia, suggest that their families had been among the earliest settlers, probably pre-dating Malian times.⁸⁵

The second judge, whose tenure of the *qāḍī* is specifically assigned to the last days of the Malian regime was a Berber settler originally from Walāta or Bīru. Known variously as al-Qāḍī al-Hājī or al-Qāḍī al-Hayy, the man may have extended his jurisdiction over the Tuareg and Berber elements sometimes identified, along with North Africans, as 'whites' (*biḍān*). He himself ultimately departed from the city, possibly under duress from the Malinke or Muḥammad Naḍ, and settled in Banku where his burial place became an object of veneration. But his sons remained in Timbuktu and their descendants figured prominently in its history for two centuries thereafter.⁸⁶

The third judge, possibly the chief *qāḍī* at this time, was a Malinke scholar known to us by his personal name as Mūsa. In one instance he is described as Katib Mūsa thereby suggesting that he had occupied a clerical-fiscal post earlier in his career.⁸⁷ He travelled to Morocco and studied in Fez before apparently assuming his judgeship. He combined that post with that of *imām* of the Main Mosque. As *qāḍī*, it seems, he was concerned with cases involving the Malinke community, as also probably the garrison, and he held court in front of his residence.⁸⁸ But as *imām* he was the acknowledged parochial leader of the whole city. It is rather interesting that a Malinke held this post, especially as he is described as the last of a series of Sudanic scholars to occupy it since the days of Mansa Mūsa.⁸⁹ Of his immediate relations we know very little except that a close associate of his, a Saharan Berber scholar named 'Abdallāh al-Balbāli ultimately succeeded him to the imamate. He himself probably lost the judgeship when Malian sovereignty was revoked but he maintained himself as *imām* under Maghsharen sovereignty until he died.⁹⁰ We may recognize a descendant of his in a prominent sixteenth-century scholar named Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. 'Alī b. Mūsa, but the evidence is not clear-cut.⁹¹ His family later gave way in the leadership of the Malinke settlers to scholars from the Baghayughu clan who migrated from Jenne.

The transfer of politico-military power, along with part of the city's revenues, from Malians to Maghsharen, is indicative of the *ad hoc* arrangements that conditioned the organization of the city. The Magh-

sharen continued to shy away from settlement in Timbuktu but they managed in the meantime to build a substantial military capability under a chief named Akil. Their presence is recorded at the village of Amdagha on the Niger and as far north as Arwān on the way to Taghāza.⁹² They began, it seems, with a series of incursions on caravans and markets alike and possibly harassed the Niger port-town of Kabara, to the west of Amdagha. This naturally threatened the commercial existence of Timbuktu, but the Malian garrison did not respond. As al-Sa'di remarks,

The people grumbled on account of the damage and losses incurred and the fact that they (the Malians) did not stand up to them and fight them. They said: 'The country which is not defended by its sultan does not lawfully belong to him. The Malians then acknowledged [their loss of Timbuktu] and returned to their country.'⁹³

An arrangement was reached whereby Muḥammad Nāḍ retained the post of Timbuktu-Koy while the Sultān of the Maghsharen was recognized as overlord. The revenues were distributed in three parts, one-third each for Akil and Nāḍ apparently, the remaining third being allotted to a body of troops whose allegiance is not fully clear.⁹⁴ The arrangement outlived Muḥammad Nāḍ and enabled his son 'Umar to succeed him. Ultimately, however, after 40 years, it broke down. This was partly because of internal strife and partly as a result of the rise of the Songhai empire under Sunni 'Alī.⁹⁵

The career of Muḥammad Nāḍ represents an attempt at establishing a Timbuktu-based dynasty. He had been 'one of the lords of the place' in Malian times, we are told, and this suggests that members of his family might have held the post of Timbuktu-Koy previously.⁹⁶ He established close and friendly relations with the scholars so that traditionalists thereafter recalled him with respect. When a *sharīf* (a descendant of the Prophet) arrived in the city and settled there he erected a mosque in his name and appointed him its *imām*. This mosque of Sīdī Yahya al-Tādulsī was to remain the third most important in the city and, at times, it was identified as the mosque of Muḥammad Nāḍ.⁹⁷ Muḥammad managed to keep Akil at a distance from the affairs of the city, but his son 'Umar was not as successful. After a falling out between them, 'Umar actually invited Sunni 'Alī to march on the city. This was to have dire consequences for some of the established families in Timbuktu, but 'Umar managed thereby to have his brother al-Mukhtār succeed him under Sunni 'Alī.⁹⁸

The polarization of power between Akil and the Timbuktu-Koy greatly enhanced the influence of the major merchant families during the Maghsharen interlude. Though details are scanty, it seems that the family of al-Qāḍī al-Hājī, enjoying relations with Banku, became the most powerful. Its members allied themselves closely with a Tuareg family led by And-Agh-Muḥammad al-Kabīr. The latter's pedigree suggests an early

establishment in Timbuktu with a possible origin in the city of Tadmekka.⁹⁹ Possibly on the initiative of Akil, And-Agh-Muḥammad was appointed *qāḍī* and he seems to have been the only one who held the title at the time. He apparently accumulated considerable prestige as a result and he passed it on to a multitude of descendants for several generations. It is probable, indeed, that the power which subsequently came to be lodged in the post of *qāḍī* was consolidated during his tenure. Whether by coincidence or as a direct result, the family which inherited the post for a long time to come was allied by marriage to him.

The family in question were recent settlers established in Timbuktu by Muḥammad Aqīt. H. T. Norris has found in the long pedigree of this man evidence of a possible descent from the leaders of the Almoravid movement in the eleventh century.¹⁰⁰ Even so, Muḥammad Aqīt's family had settled in Massina and this may suggest, once again, a southern influence from Dia. This does not deny the Mauretanian origin of the Aqīts for al-Sa'di describes the people of Massina, presumably the Sanhāja among them, as originally from Tishīt.¹⁰¹ Muḥammad Aqīt must have been involved in the caravan trade at some point in his career for he is said to have had an engagement with Akil in which he wounded him. A Soninke family interceded on his behalf and he moved to the city early in Maghsharen times.¹⁰² His son 'Umar married a daughter of And-Agh-Muḥammad al-Kabīr and this, along with his wealth, secured a position among the notables for his sons and their descendants.¹⁰³

It is not possible to identify all the important families which acquired some of the characteristics of patricians in the city. Our sources being from a later time are subject to prejudices which resulted in the omission of many an important individual. Thus, for example, of the descendants of 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Tamīmī, none is named except his grandsons Ḥabīb and al-Mā'mūn. This may result from the fact that Ḥabīb served as judge under Sunni 'Alī and al-Mā'mūn refused to join the posthumous propaganda campaigns against the ill-reputed Songhai monarch.¹⁰⁴ Other prominent scholars are mentioned only by their personal names and, in the absence of any references to their *nisba* or pedigree, it is impossible to determine their familial and kinship affiliations. Nonetheless, it comes out very clearly that the world of Timbuktu had long been dominated by its wealthy merchant families. Throughout Malian times they seem to have secured for Timbuktu its basic autonomy. Under the sovereignty of Akil the situation was ideal for them; the Timbuktu-Koy, Muḥammad Nāḍ, represented a family which was only one among equals. Accordingly, during the 40 years which elapsed there appears to have grown a universal interest in maintaining the *status quo*.

The threat of Sunni 'Alī

The period of Songhai sovereignty over Timbuktu belongs to two phases which are sharply distinguished in our sources. The first, under Sunni 'Alī

(c. 1468–1492) was marked by violence, while the second, under Askia Muhammad and his successors (c. 1492–1590) gave Timbuktu the most peaceful and flourishing century in its history. Writing in retrospect, the chroniclers of the seventeenth century shower abuse against Sunni 'Ali, describing him as a tyrant, to the same extent that they sing the praises of Askia Muhammad. The main reason for this is that Sunni 'Ali was an upstart who threatened the established order of things with no specific claims to legitimacy, while Askia Muhammad gave a certain legality to the new order, firstly by accommodating the scholars and, more importantly, by undertaking the pilgrimage to Mecca. In the Timbuktu interpretations of history, he rather than Sunni 'Ali was held to be the founder of the new order.¹⁰⁵

A number of opinions have been offered by recent authors to explain the more or less universal condemnation of Sunni 'Ali among scholars. Triand went as far as to treat the early history of the Songhai empire in terms of a struggle between a 'Muslim party' which triumphed with the accession of Askia Muhammad and a presumably anti-Muslim party led by Sunni 'Ali.¹⁰⁶ Tringham put the same thesis in better perspective. He said:

'Ali had no use for Islam, the religion of urban communities. Its learned men constituted a state within a state and were critical of rulers for lukewarmness in Islam and indulgence in pagan rites. Confident in his own power, 'Ali did not need their support and refused to compromise with a religion which involved paying allegiance to a law higher than himself.¹⁰⁷

This interpretation has much to confirm it in the chronicles, but it fails to take full account of their inconsistencies. For the sons and grandsons of Askia Muhammad were also lax in the observance of Muslim rites, yet their sovereignty was recognized and supported even after the arrival of the Moroccan conquerors. The author of *Tārīkh al-Futūsh* faithfully records the places where Sunni 'Ali performed the holiday prayers of Ramadan year-by-year during his campaigns, while al-Sa'di says: 'Despite his ill-treatment of scholars, he acknowledged their worth and often said: "Without the *'ulamā'* the world would no longer be sweet and good".'¹⁰⁸

The history of Timbuktu in this period can be readily understood in terms of a struggle on the part of patrician families to preserve their influence in the face of a rising power which threatened it.¹⁰⁹ The importance of their city, and its attractiveness to conquerors, lay strictly in the commerce which they attracted to its confines. Accordingly, their strength rested primarily in their ability to transfer their activities elsewhere and, thereby, deprive the conqueror of his prize. This is precisely what happened in three stages until the city was virtually evacuated.¹¹⁰ It might have lain in ruins for a long time thereafter had not Askia Muhammad subsequently reversed the policies of his predecessor.

Sunni 'Ali was a poor administrator, though a military genius, who was prone to react to events rather than shaping them himself. The expansion

of his kingdom, begun under his immediate predecessor (and completed under Askia Muhammad) promised to fill the political vacuum caused by the disintegration of the empire of Mali. Accordingly, he was liable to be supported by the scholars, provided he adopted the proper course of action, but he did not take advantage of the situation.¹¹¹ When he first appeared on the approaches to Timbuktu, he made no assurances to any of the inhabitants even though he had been in contact with the Timbuktu-Koy since the last days of Muhammad Nad.¹¹² This precipitated a massive exodus of the wealthiest merchants and scholars, at least among Tuaregs and Berbers who inhabited the Sankore quarter.¹¹³ Even Umar b. Muhammad Nad who expressly incited him against Akil found it safer to join the exiles though he left his brother al-Mukhtār behind in charge of the family household. Akil himself, though unable to confront the Songhai ruler in open battle, took full advantage of the situation. He supplied a caravan of 1000 camels which enabled the evacuees to reach Walāta.¹¹⁴

Finding the city without its Timbuktu-Koy, Sunni 'Ali responded rather diplomatically by naming his brother al-Mukhtār as his successor. Concerning the more sensitive post of *qāḍī*, the evidence is suspiciously lacking. If the aged And-Agh-Muhammad al-Kabir was still alive at this time, it seems almost certain that he was abused and demoted. For we know that his sons, the scholars Maḥmūd and Aḥmad, were killed by Sunni 'Ali, while his daughter, the wife of Umar b. Muhammad Aqit, was imprisoned. Whether as a cause or as a result, the surviving head of this household, al-Mukhtār al-Naḥawī b. And-Agh-Muhammad, fled the city to Walāta, along with 'Umar Aqit and his sons.¹¹⁵ These events, though the sequence is not fully known, closed the door upon any permanent accommodation between Sunni 'Ali and Timbuktu.

The Songhai commander tried to salvage the situation by showing great respect to some of the remaining scholars but mutual misunderstanding prevailed. He appointed a grandson of 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Tamimi, al-Qaḍī Ḥabīb, to the judgeship and showered favours on his cousin al-Ma'mūn. This act could not have been inconsequential considering that 'Abd al-Rahmān had first come to the Sudan in the company of Mansa Mūsā. Sunni 'Ali also disposed himself favourably towards 'Abdallāh al-Balbāli who had succeeded Kātib Mūsā to the imamate. Indeed, when he later defeated the Fulāni Saṅqara clan in Massina, he dispatched some of the captive women as slaves to the scholars in Timbuktu. This act, which probably enraged the Fulānis in the city, was far from universally acclaimed. As Muslims the women were not subject to enslavement, in the eyes of the scholars, and some of them, like 'Abdallāh al-Balbāli, found a way out of the difficulty by marrying the captives.¹¹⁶

It seems that some sort of uprising took place in Timbuktu similar to that which was to follow upon the Moroccan conquest in 1590. Sunni 'Ali might have been on the Niger at Kabara at that time for he is said to have ordered

the enslavement of 30 women from the And-Agh-Muhammad family and their dispatch thence. These never gave up their veils, according to our source, and were killed upon Sunni 'Ali's orders on the way. The same fate awaited two of And-Agh-Muhammad's sons, as already mentioned, and his daughter was imprisoned. This precipitated a new exodus from the city which probably dates to 875 A.H. (c. 1470 A.D.), corresponding to a year or two after the conquest.¹¹⁷

The most victimized group among the inhabitants were from the family of al-Qāḍi al-Ḥājj and their kinsmen. Something of their influence is preserved in the tradition that Nāna Tinti, daughter of Abu Bakr b. al-Qāḍi al-Ḥājj, was a close associate of Askia Muhammad's mother Kasa. The two met together on several occasions when Muhammad, at that time a general in Sunni 'Ali's army, already suffered inconveniences at his hands. Later, Abu Bakr became a confidant of Askia Muhammad while his son 'Abd al-Rahmān was appointed to the judgeship of Timbuktu.¹¹⁸ This may suggest, though the evidence is sketchy, that the notables of Timbuktu, now dispersed through a wide area, actively sought alliances against Sunni 'Ali.

We have it on record that Sunni 'Ali humiliated several members of the al-Ḥājj family and on one occasion caused al-Faqīh Ibrāhīm, son of Abu Bakr, to stand a whole day under the scorching sun as a humiliation and punishment. Subsequently, certain members of the apparently large clan fled to Tagedda to seek Tuareg support on a large scale. The Songhai commander retaliated by killing many of those remaining and imprisoning others, both men and women, and a party which fled towards Walāta was overtaken at Shīb and massacred to the man.¹¹⁹ We do not know when precisely this happened, but stories of the martyrs became powerful legends among Tuaregs in the east where members of the al-Ḥājj clan settled permanently.¹²⁰

The exodus of merchants and scholars to Walāta and Tagedda probably brought the commerce of the Niger bend to a standstill. Sunni 'Ali's forces, being accustomed only to river traffic, could not effectively control any portion of the southern Sahara. At one point he embarked on the almost impossible project of digging a canal from the Niger towards Walāta, but whether by coincidence or otherwise he had to give up the project to confront the more mobile forces of the Mossi kingdom threatening his rear.¹²¹ While besieging Jenne around 1487 it seems, he realized that the exodus from Timbuktu had become irreversible. According to *Tārīkh al-Fatāsh*: 'He heard that the people of Timbuktu were all fleeing. Those originally from Bīru returned to Bīru. Others went to Fututi and Tishit. Each group was returning to the place of its origin.'¹²² At this point Sunni 'Ali ordered all the remaining inhabitants to transfer to Hawiki, a location across the Niger probably just south of Kabara. Having even imprisoned the Timbuktu-Koy al-Mukhtār, he apparently abandoned the notion of

controlling the city and its neighbourhood. It is doubtful that Hawiki could have replaced the Timbuktu-Kabara axis as a terminus for the Saharan trade, but we know that many Timbuktuans lived in it virtually as captives for a full five years up to Sunni 'Ali's death. Among them, besides presumably the *qāḍi* and *imām* above mentioned, were Sidi Abu'l-Qāsim al-Tuāti, of North African origin, and the two brothers Mahmūd and Aḥmad Aqīt.¹²³ It is extraordinary to find that the latter had returned to Timbuktu, for in the meantime he had travelled from Walāta on the pilgrimage to Mecca and resided for some time in Cairo. Later in his career, he travelled to Hausaland in northern Nigeria where he taught at Kano and Katsina.¹²⁴ After the death of Sunni 'Ali, his brother 'Abdullāh settled in Tazekht in southern Mauretania and refused to return to his birth-place when urged to do so. The lords of the Sankore quarter were divided amongst themselves, he explained, and he otherwise did not wish to reside where 'the seed of Sunni 'Ali' might have been living.¹²⁵

Even in his own lifetime Sunni 'Ali approached an image comparable to that of an Antichrist in the minds of devout Muslims. The Egyptian scholar al-Suyūṭī, though he never visited the Sūdān, described his rise to power as a calamity comparable to the loss of Spanish lands by Islam.¹²⁶ In 892 A.H. (1486 A.D.) as Timbuktu later heard, invocations against Sunni 'Ali were made in Mecca in the presence of the jurist 'Abd al-Jabbār Kaku.¹²⁷ Al-Maghili later contributed to the defamation of the Songhai ruler when, in his *risāla* to Askia Muhammad, he questioned his qualification to a true Muslim identity.¹²⁸ Sunni 'Ali's hatred of the Fulānis and his persecution of the Sanghara clan among them became a point in their favour. In the nineteenth century it was claimed that Sunni 'Ali had persecuted the Sanghara because he knew that the twelfth true caliph was to arise among them.¹²⁹ Though there must have been quite a few, among them al-Qāḍi Ḥabīb, who refused to join the posthumous campaign against Sunni 'Ali, condemnation of his acts ultimately became a rallying force around which Timbuktuans could be unified.¹³⁰

Askia Muhammad became a beneficiary of the campaign when he deposed Sunni 'Ali's son, Abu Bakr Dā'u, and assumed the rulership of the newly carved empire. He reversed his predecessor's policies *vis-à-vis* Timbuktu, but the legacy could not be fully erased. Among other things, the And-Agh-Muhammad family did not quite regain its former influence and the same could be said, though the picture is rather complex, of the descendants of al-Qāḍi al-Ḥājj. The And-Agh-Muhammads, at least, gave way for a long time in the leadership of Timbuktu to their allies by marriage, the descendants of Muhammad Aqīt. Specifically, Mahmūd b. 'Umar Aqīt, who had studied under al-Qāḍi Ḥabīb and probably served as his deputy before the death of Sunni 'Ali, became virtually the lord of Timbuktu in the second part of Askia Muhammad's regime. He was followed in that role by a succession of sons throughout the Askia dynasty.

Restoration of the patriciate

Our information becoming more and more detailed as we approach the fifteenth century, it becomes apparent that the major families in Timbuktu constituted a loosely-knit patriciate. Like other patricians known in history elsewhere, its members suffered considerable disunity but shared a great deal in common interests and attitudes. Sunni 'Ali had favoured some elements at the expense of others, but his policies proved catastrophic. By the end of his reign, Timbuktu was essentially abandoned, its inhabitants having relocated in a number of places, including Walāta, Tagedda and Hawiki. His successor, Askia Muhammad, clearly dissociated himself from his policies and encouraged the process of resettlement. Those at Hawiki were apparently the first to return and, accordingly, they exerted considerable influence on the reorganization of the city. Others gradually followed suit and the city reassumed its former autonomous status.

If we may believe the sources, Askia Muhammad was greeted as a saviour right from the beginning of his reign. This comes out most clearly from the opening pages of a contemporary chronicle which was incorporated later in the seventeenth century into a work by Ibn al-Mukhtār Qunbul, giving its name of *Tārīkh al-Fatāsh* to the whole compilation.¹³¹ The original author, clearly a contemporary of Askia Muhammad, says:

God has favoured us by bringing forth in our own age this triumphant *imān*, the just caliph and victorious sultan, Askia al-Hājj Muhammad b. Abu Bakr, the Tawradī of origin, the Kawkawi of residence . . . Lands opened before him to the east and the west while emissaries came to his court individually and in droves. Kings submitted to him [in large numbers] whether willingly or by force. By virtue of his *barakāt* we have attained a state of well-being and benefaction after we had been in difficulty and misery.¹³²

The text of this chronicle, or at least its first part, has come down to us in a highly defective, nineteenth-century copy which was subjected to emendation under conditions which will be discussed in their own place. Enough remains, however, to indicate that it was written in or around 925 A.H. (1519 A.D.).¹³³ Traditions later assigned its composition to al-Qāḍī Maḥmūd b. al-Mutawakkil Ka't, a scholar of Soninke origin apparently, who died in 1002 A.H. (1593 A.D.).¹³⁴ In fact, it appears more likely that Maḥmūd b. 'Umar Aqīt, or a close relative of his, was the original author.¹³⁵

It seems that considerable disagreement arose among traditionalists and chroniclers concerning the sequence of events in the transitional period between the later years of Sunni 'Ali and the early reign of Askia Muhammad. Thus, the pilgrimage of Muhammad c. 902 A.H. (1496/7 A.D.), by far the most significant of his actions so far as Timbuktu was concerned, is surrounded by controversy. According to the defective copy of *Tārīkh al-Fatāsh*, which claims that Maḥmūd Ka't, though belonging to

a later generation, accompanied him on the journey, Askia Muhammad was declared the eleventh of the twelve true caliphs by the Egyptian scholar, 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Suyūṭī, in Cairo.¹³⁶ This legend recalls an earlier visit by a monarch from the Western Sudan which, in fact, is recorded by Suyūṭī in his autobiography. He says:

Then in the year eighty nine (889 A.H. or 1484 A.D.), the pilgrim caravan of Takrur arrived, and in it were the sulṭān, the *qāḍī*, and a group of students. They all came to me, and acquired knowledge and traditions from me . . . A eunuch servant came in the company of the *qāḍī* as a present from his cousin. The sulṭān of Takrur asked me to speak to the Commander of the Faithful (the nominal Caliph 'Abd al-'Azīz) about his delegating to him authority over the affairs of his country, so that his rule would be legitimate according to the Holy Law. I sent to the Commander of the Faithful about this, and he did it.¹³⁷

It would be tempting to identify the *qāḍī* in question as Ḥabīb and his cousin as al-Ma'mūn wālīd 'Amarād of the Timbuktu sources.¹³⁸ But, in that case, we would have to assume either that al-Suyūṭī made an error concerning the date,¹³⁹ or that Askia Muhammad undertook the pilgrimage long before his accession to Songhai rulership in 899 A.H. (1493 A.D.).¹⁴⁰

The relations of al-Suyūṭī with West Africa are quite as complex as they are multifaceted. For one thing, they are closely bound with the Egyptian scholar's claim to recognition as the *mujaddid* (the renovator of the faith) of the ninth century.¹⁴¹ Al-Suyūṭī was the author of an extended *fatwa* addressed to a certain Muhammad b. Muhammad b. 'Ali al-Lamtūnī who, in the judgement of Hunwick, was from the region of Air.¹⁴² The Egyptian National Library houses another letter addressed by al-Suyūṭī to the kings of Agades and Katsina in the Central Sudan.¹⁴³ Al-Suyūṭī's student and biographer, 'Abd al-Qāḍir al-Shādhilī mentions a correspondence with yet another unknown monarch of the Sudan. He says:

It happened that great strife broke out in the land of Takrur and a tyrant oppressed their sulṭān and they were unable to repel him. So they came and complained about this to the Shaikh, may God have mercy on him, and he ordered me to write a letter to the tyrant. When it reached him and was read to him, he turned back in retreat and withdrew. This was because of his (al-Suyūṭī's) prestige, his command of their respect, the greatness of their faith in him and their fear of opposing him.¹⁴⁴

It is possible that the investiture obtained by al-Suyūṭī from the Caliph was in favour of a monarch other than Askia Muhammad, though the latter's pilgrimage was the most celebrated of its time.¹⁴⁵ What is certain is that Askia Muhammad met al-Suyūṭī during his passage through Cairo. This is confirmed in a commentary on one of al-Suyūṭī's works by the celebrated Timbuktu scholar, Muhammad Bāba b. Muhammad al-Amin. This scholar died in 1014 A.H. (c. 1605/6 A.D.) at the age of 82 and was therefore a near-contemporary of Askia Muhammad.¹⁴⁶ The author suggests an extended association between Askia Muhammad and al-Suyūṭī in Cairo; he

indicates that al-Suyūṭī dedicated to the Songhai monarch a composition on rulership entitled *al-Aḥādīth al-Mutqana fī Fadl al-Saltana*, which unfortunately is no longer extant.¹⁴⁷

The difficulty surrounding Askia Muhammad's relations with al-Suyūṭī is largely the product of a controversy among Timbuktu traditionalists of the succeeding generations. One would expect that one scholar from Timbuktu, at least, and probably the *Qāḍī Ḥabīb* himself, accompanied Askia Muhammad on the pilgrimage. Yet none of the scholars among the hundreds who made up the caravan, with the exception of the Soninke *Mūr Ṣāliḥ Jūr*, are identifiable.¹⁴⁸ We have two copies of *Tārīkh al-Fatāsh* which, though lacking their first parts, appear quite accurate. There the scholars named in the company of Askia Muhammad are all obscure.¹⁴⁹ Al-Sa'di, on the other hand, betrays a marked reluctance to commit himself on this clearly controversial subject. He says: 'There made the pilgrimage with him those whom God destined to do so among that generation'.¹⁵⁰

Our sources are in agreement on the fact that the Sharīf of Mecca, at least, formally invested Askia Muhammad with the rulership of the Western Sudan.¹⁵¹ This act may have been of great significance in legitimizing the Askia dynasty among the long-established inhabitants of Gao. As early as the eleventh century, al-Bakrī observed that a sword allegedly sent by the Abbasid caliph had been used in the coronation ceremonies of the kings of Gao.¹⁵² For his part Askia Muhammad received one such sword from the Sharīf of Mecca and this remained an important symbol of sovereignty till the demise of the Songhai empire.¹⁵³ Returning as a pilgrim, the Askia secured recognition of his sovereignty throughout the southern Saharan areas from Walāta to Tadmekka without, it seems, campaigning in those parts. The Maghsharen submitted peacefully and supported the empire with thousands of mounted forces under the sons and nephews of Akil.¹⁵⁴ Elsewhere, Askia Muhammad's campaigns, being even more extensive than those of his predecessor, reduced the northern Mossi of Yatenga as well as most of Mali while extending the influence of the empire as far as Hausaland.¹⁵⁵ In the new political unit the position of Timbuktu became so important that Leo Africanus, the author of an otherwise accurate description of the Sudan in the early sixteenth century, mistook the city for the capital of the empire and thought it to be the centre from which Muhammad waged his campaigns.¹⁵⁶ The misinformation of the author may have resulted from the fact that Muhammad's brother, 'Umar Kumzā'u, who acted as his deputy during his pilgrimage, established himself in the newly built city of Tindirma as governor of the eastern provinces adjoining Timbuktu. A son of the latter, Muhammad Bankānu, who became Askia during 937-943 A.H. (1530-1536 A.D.), actually resided in Timbuktu during his youth and studied under its scholars in the Sankore quarter.¹⁵⁷

The role of the Askias in the administration of Timbuktu became largely restricted to the confirmation of the *qāḍī* agreed upon by the scholars. Thus in 904 A.H. (1498 A.D.), when al-Qāḍī Ḥabīb died, there were three candidates, it seems, including Mahmūd Aqīt, 'Abd al-Rahmān b. Abu Bakr b. al-Qāḍī al-Ḥājī and, finally, al-Mukhtār al-Nahāwī b. And-Agh-Muhammad. Disagreement between the families of the latter two caused Abu Bakr, apparently at a very advanced age, to forego the interest of his son and he pointed out Mahmūd Aqīt to Askia Muhammad as legitimate successor to Ḥabīb.¹⁵⁸ The man, thereby, combined the judgeship with the imamate of Sankore and came to wield unprecedented power. Traditions recall a disagreement between him and Askia Muhammad caused by his refusal to allow the monarch's emissaries a say in the affairs of the city. Allegedly, the disagreement was settled in his favour when the monarch acknowledged his superior knowledge of Muslim law and precepts.¹⁵⁹ Whatever the case may be, it seems that Mahmūd opted to leave the city in 915 A.H. (1509 A.D.) and embarked on the pilgrimage.

During his absence 'Abd al-Rahmān b. Abu Bakr held the judgeship while al-Mukhtār al-Nahāwī held the imamate of Sankore. The latter held himself to be his deputy and, accordingly, he stepped aside in his favour upon his return. By this gracious act, it seems, he ensured that his own son, And-Agh-Muhammad II, attained the post during Mahmūd's old age. 'Abd al-Rahmān, on the other hand, refused to accommodate the returning pilgrim, despite his prestige, and he acted as judge for 10 full years. Ultimately, around 1520, a difficult legal case came before him on which he passed a judgement which was contested by Mahmūd. The body of scholars reached consensus on the superiority of Mahmūd's judgement and word was sent to Askia Muhammad which secured 'Abd al-Rahmān's deposition.¹⁶⁰

We have already indicated that the early chronicle partly incorporated in the defective section of *Tārīkh al-Fatāsh* was written c. 1519, around the time of this incident. This might explain why our sources gave so much attention to its details. In reality, however, the deposition of 'Abd al-Rahmān became a *cause célèbre* which interfered with the politics of Timbuktu during the Moroccan conquest 70 years later. The judgeship at stake at this time amounted to full rulership of the city. This was so much the case that the chronicles in recording the death of the Timbuktu-Koy 'Umar b. Naḍ in 922 A.H. (1516 A.D.) do not even bother to name his successor.¹⁶¹ Ultimately, towards the end of the Songhai regime, we find the post occupied by Naḍ al-Mustafa Kara, a grandson of a scholar named as al-Shaikh Ahmad Bayukun who had been instrumental in informing Askia Muhammad of 'Abd al-Rahmān's inadequacy as Judge. The latter's grandsons opposed this Timbuktu-Koy while their kinsmen in Banku never quite reconciled themselves to the Aqīt family.¹⁶² In Timbuktu, at least, they were the first family to cooperate with the conquering Ruma.

During his tenure of the judgeship, up to 955 A.H. (1548 A.D.) Maḥmūd Aqīt acted as some sort of moderator between the warring sons and nephews of Askia Muḥammad.¹⁶³ He managed to pass the post to his eldest son Muḥammad, who occupied it up to his death in 973 A.H. (1565 A.D.) during a good portion of the long and peaceful reign of Askia Daūd (c. 1549–1582 A.D.). Born of a Songhai mother wedded to Maḥmūd at the instance of Askia Muḥammad, the latter is remembered mainly for his wealth partly bestowed upon him by his godfather.¹⁶⁴ His brother al-ʿAqīb, however, whom he nominated to the imamate of Sankore at the death of al-Mukhtār al-Naḥawīy, acquired a widespread reputation as a brilliant judge and administrator during a long tenure of the *qaḍāʾ* from 1565 to 1583. He commanded sufficient funds, it seems, from sources other than the state revenues, to enlarge and embellish the Sankore Mosque and Jingerebir.¹⁶⁵ In one instance in 1569, when disagreement arose concerning the imamate of the latter mosque, he acted largely on his own in appointing Muḥammad Gidādu (Kīdādu), the first Fulāni to hold the post.¹⁶⁶ Ahmad Bāba, an Aqīt of the subsequent generation, mentions that many disagreements arose between him and the Askias, but he provides no detail except to say that al-ʿAqīb withdrew from the public view in such instances until his opinions prevailed.¹⁶⁷

Though the Aqīts virtually constituted a ruling dynasty during most of the century, the prosperity of the city and its continuing population growth left ample scope for the influence of other scholars and families. We may mention, for example, Abu'l-ʿAbbas Ahmad b. Muḥammad Saʿīd who, though he died at a relatively young age in 976 A.H. (1568/9 A.D.), left a lasting imprint by teaching some of the most prominent scholars of the time, including ʿUmar b. Maḥmūd Aqīt. Muḥammad Baghayughu and Maḥmūd b. al-Mutawakkil Kaʿt.¹⁶⁸ Muḥammad Baghayughu himself migrated with his brother Ahmad from Jenne, after undertaking the pilgrimage and studying in the East under prominent Egyptian scholars. Their father occupied the judgeship of Jenne for some time while they founded one of the most influential families in Timbuktu.¹⁶⁹ In 1566 A.D. both Muḥammad Baghayughu and his teacher Abu'l-ʿAbbās Ahmad had a hand in the appointment of Muḥammad Kab b. Jabir Kab, a scholar from Jenne, to the post of Khatīb of Gao, an office in the Songhai empire which combined judicial with parochial functions and exerted some influence during the ensuing succession disputes.¹⁷⁰

The Soninke Kaʿt family, strongly associated with the chronicling of events in Timbuktu, was partially based in the city of Tindirma where Maḥmūd Kaʿt became Judge. He was succeeded to the judgeship of that town by his son Ismaʿīl who apparently produced a first revision of *Tārīkh al-Fattāsh*.¹⁷¹ The authorship of this chronicle is also associated with a son of Ismaʿīl's sister, believed to be Ibn al-Mukhtār Qunbulu.¹⁷² The Qunbulu family, represented later by Muḥammad Qunbulu and his son al-Mukhtār,

took over the judgeship of Tindirma in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.¹⁷³ In Timbuktu, the Kaʿt family was equalled in influence by that of ʿAmir al-Saʿdī, whose descendant ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, has left us our most important source.¹⁷⁴ Of comparable status also was the family of al-Amin Kānu (Ganu) whose grandson Baba Gūru b. al-Ḥājj Muḥammad was the author of a chronicle entitled *al-Durar al-Ḥisān fī Akhbār Mulūk al-Sūdān* which has been lost to us.¹⁷⁵ Finally, so far as historiography is concerned, we may mention the prominent scholar al-Amin b. Ahmad whose authority is often quoted on the virtues of certain scholars from the family of al-Qāḍī al-Ḥājj. If he was a descendant of that family, traditions have suppressed the fact, for he is only described as the half-brother of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Ahmad al-Mujtahid.¹⁷⁶ The latter's descendants assumed a measure of importance in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The Aqīt family maintained its ascendent position in Timbuktu by virtue of a complex network of interrelationships. Its members taught the Baghayughu while its sons studied under them. Tutor-pupil relationships had a strong ritual significance and were sometimes accompanied by the marriage of the student to his master's daughter. Maḥmūd Aqīt's mother, as already indicated, was daughter of And-Agh-Muḥammad. One of his daughters, in fact, came to be the mother of the influential and erudite Ahmad b. Muḥammad Saʿīd. Likewise, al-ʿAqīb married one of his daughters to Muḥammad Zankanu b. Abkar al-Maddāh whose descendants, allied by intermarriage to the prestigious Maghia family, remained important up to the nineteenth century.¹⁷⁷ The high incidence of intermarriage among the major families tended to reduce the instances of tension between them. At the same time, it secured a measure of cohesion which was sufficient to discourage undue intervention from the outside.

It is possible to see a tendency towards polarization of power between Gao and Timbuktu in the late Songhai period. Particularly instructive are a few details available on a crisis which ensued when al-Qāḍī al-ʿAqīb renovated and enlarged the Main Mosque of Timbuktu. Al-Saʿdī's *Tārīkh al-Sūdān*, whose author had a distinct aversion to controversy, mentions the episode incidentally, offering what appears to be a reconciliation of various accounts current in the seventeenth century. According to him, Askia Daūd was returning from a campaign in Mali in 978 A.H. (1570/71 A.D.) when he heard that work on the Main Mosque was in progress:

He headed to Timbuktu and stopped at the backside of the mosque, in its courtyard, until al-Qāḍī al-ʿAqīb along with the jurists of the town and its notables came to greet him. He found that the building of the mosque had not yet been completed. He therefore said to the Qāḍī: 'The expenses of the remaining part are my share by way of cooperation on this pious project'. He gave him for that purpose what God willed to be given at his hands and, later when he reached

his city, he sent him four hundred pieces of timber of the Kunku tree so that the work was completed in that year.¹⁷⁸

However, *Tārīkh al-Fattāsh*, which is also quite reticent, suggests that a major disagreement arose between the *qāḍī* and the monarch in which they said of each other 'things which should not be said'.¹⁷⁹ When Daūd came to Timbuktu on his return from Mali, he went directly to the house of al-'Aqib, apparently in anger. Strange as that might seem, the Judge refused him admittance until the jurists and notables interceded on the monarch's behalf. According to this version, the crisis was resolved with the monarch declaring that 'he had no objection to all of that (i.e. the rebuilding of the main mosque) except that no share had been allotted to him and no part [of the mosque] had been left for him to build'. Daūd had to satisfy himself with patronizing the rebuilding of the tombs in the back courtyard, entrusting the Timbuktu-Mundhu, his representative at Timbuktu, with overseeing the remaining portion of the work, though the funds were given to al-'Aqib.¹⁸⁰ It is quite apparent that the Songhai monarchs (and certainly the long-reigning Daūd) were sensitive to the political advantages of patronizing the construction of pious foundations and, accordingly, mutual jealousy between them and the Aqīts is not to be ruled out. The building of mosques had historically afforded Muslim monarchs in North Africa and the East, as indeed in the case of Mansa Mūsā of Mali, a means for enhancing their prestige. This was particularly true of the main mosques in each city where the sermon delivered at the Friday congregation ritually reaffirmed the sovereignty of the ruler. In classical Islam, authorizing the building of such mosques was the sole prerogative of the caliphs, great political significance being attached to this privilege.¹⁸¹ It is tempting to conjecture that similar political considerations went into the crisis between Daūd and al-'Aqib, the former fearing a tendency towards full independence on the part of Timbuktu. But the bulk of the evidence, even in the more troubled times to follow, suggests that the Timbuktu scholars sought no more than securing the interests and internal autonomy of their city, besides enhancing as much as possible its prestige within the empire.

The death of al-'Aqib in 991 A.H. (1583 A.D.) shortly preceded by the death of Askia Daūd, gave rise to a more serious crisis which delayed the succession of Abu Ḥafs 'Umar, the eldest surviving brother of the deceased judge, for a full year and half. By this time, as we shall see below, Timbuktu began to be embroiled in the succession struggles of the Songhai ruling family. Al-Sa'di's *Tārīkh al-Sūdān*, the official history of Timbuktu as it were, maintains that 'Umar declined the judgeship when offered him by Askia al-Hājj, successor of Daūd. *Tārīkh al-Fattāsh*, on the other hand, claims that it was the Askia who refused to authorize the appointment of 'Umar. The two sources appear to disagree dramatically on this point, but

the net impressions created by both are quite similar. Askia al-Hājj could not simply nominate his own candidate probably because no scholar of sufficient rank would accept the appointment at this juncture. This is perhaps what al-Sa'di tries to communicate to us in his account of how the crisis was eventually resolved: the Askia allegedly threatened to assign the judgeship to a non-learned person (a *jāhil*) unless 'Umar complied. This effective threat—really a conciliatory gesture—was made at the instance of Šāliḥ Takun, a scholar whose family's relations with the Aqīts pre-date Songhai times.¹⁸² According to *Tārīkh al-Fattāsh*, Muhammad Baghayughu, who discharged most of the judicial functions in the meantime, was the one who successfully interceded between 'Umar and Askia al-Hājj. When he finally dispatched the authorization in favour of 'Umar to Timbuktu, the Askia allegedly declared: 'If it was not for the intercession of Muhammad Baghayughu we would not appoint al-Qāḍī 'Umar nor would we bring anyone from among them (the Aqīts) to the judgeship.' Since the crisis lasted over a year, it seems probable that the initial rejection of the post by 'Umar gave rise to an equally vehement anti-Aqīt attitude on the part of the Askia.¹⁸³

The period of the vacancy of the judgeship is illustrative both of the extent of unity and disunity within the city. At first, following the death of the much feared and venerated al-'Aqib, the absence of a judge encouraged numerous cases of fraud in commercial transactions and some apparently involving the shares of inheritance legally owing to orphans. This caused Muhammad Baghayughu, who occupied the Sidi Yahya imamate in the centre of the city, to step forward into the breach and establish his own court. According to *Tārīkh al-Fattāsh*:

After the morning prayers he would sit at the entrance of the Sidi Yahya mosque, along with some of his students, then declare: 'Whoever has a claim against someone else unwilling to fulfil his obligations, let him bring his case forward.' The people would then bring their cases and he judged between them. He commanded and prohibited, passing prison sentences, while inflicting beatings on those deserving such punishments.¹⁸⁴

As we know from his biography by Aḥmad Bāba, this instance was not the first in which Muhammad Baghayughu settled legal disputes. But while at other times he acted mainly as a counsellor and mediator, in this case he assumed the full prerogatives of judge. This, in turn, caused anonymous complaints directed against him in which people blamed him in writing for assuming a function which he was not formally assigned. Since some of the letters were reportedly by the hands of scholars, Niamkey Georges Kodjo has suggested in a recent article that the agitation against Baghayughu was directed from behind the scenes by the Aqīts. This suggestion is not in keeping with the assertion of the *Fattāsh* that Muhammad Baghayughu repeatedly wrote to Askia al-Hājj in the meantime pressing him to issue the appointment of 'Umar Aqīt.¹⁸⁵ Certainly, there are no grounds for the

thesis by Kodjo of a long-term polarization in Timbuktu between Baghayughus and Aqits. We may perhaps be misled by an accidental feature in the sources, but the relations between the Baghayughus and Aqits are the strongest ever documented between two families in Timbuktu.¹⁸⁶ It appears to us probable that Muhammad Baghayughu discharged the judicial functions in full consultation with the Aqits in order to forestall the appointment of a judge who would not be acceptable to the body of scholars. It is possible that the opponents of Muhammad Baghayughu were elements who were in close touch with the court in Gao, a factor which might explain their anonymity. Another stronger possibility is that the complainants against Baghayughu, led by mediocre literati as *al-Fatāsh* suggests, were residents of the Sankore quarter threatened by the fact that the court was not held at the Sankore Mosque where the Aqits had previously presided. The account of al-Sa'di tends to suggest this, for he indicates that, at a later stage in the crisis it seems, Muhammad Baghayughu sat in judgement over disputes between residents and visiting merchants while Ahmad Maghia, the founder of a very important family, settled cases which arose in the Sankore quarter. In all probability Ahmad Maghia did not pass any sentences and was concerned with cases (and perhaps appeals) on matters of legislative significance. He is assigned the title of Mufti (Supreme Jurisconsult) while, in later sources at least, Muhammad Baghayughu earned the title of Judge.¹⁸⁷

The cause of the disagreement between Askia al-Hājj and 'Umar Aqīt concerns us particularly at this point because it had ramifications at a shortly later time. The crisis had begun at the death of Askia Daūd when al-'Aqīb was still living in extreme old age. At that time, Muhammad Bankānu, the eldest and most favoured son of Askia Daūd, being away from the capital, lost his bid for the throne in favour of Askia al-Hājj. In order to allay the fears of his reigning brother, who dismissed him from the post of Kurmina Fāri, he fled to Timbuktu to reside there under the auspices of al-Qādi al-'Aqīb. Yet, although he pleaded that he would devote himself to learning, he was nonetheless arrested and exiled to Kanatu. Al-Sa'di describes vividly the storming by veiled persons of the house in Timbuktu in which Bankānu resided. From another source, a fragment of an unidentified chronicle, we learn that the violent arrest actually took place in the house of al-'Aqīb.¹⁸⁸ This outrage probably gave rise to one of those instances mentioned by Ahmad Bāba when al-'Aqīb withdrew from the judgeship. The Askia apparently did not reconcile the old Judge and, at his death, the Judge's brother, Abu Hafis 'Umar, if we may follow the evidence of al-Sa'di, declined to succeed him. The ensuing crisis, as described above, was eventually resolved to the satisfaction of both sides. However, the Askia subsequently opened the old wound by arresting another brother, Kurmina Fāri al-Hādi, in the house of the Khatib at Gao. The royal contender in this case, after an

aborted bid for the throne, had submitted to the intercession of the Khatib, but he too was exiled to Kanatu.¹⁸⁹ Our sources do not provide the details that link these events together, but the sequence suggests that scholars now feared that their prestige was being undermined.

These events reached their climax when Askia al-Hājj was overthrown by his brother Muhammad Bān. The new Askia opened his career by ordering the execution of the two exiles at Kanatu. This, no doubt, was the immediate cause for the dislike which he earned among the rank and file of literati both at Timbuktu and Gao. Writing in retrospect, al-Sa'di in a sense exonerates Askia al-Hājj by indicating that he did not, after all, kill any of his brothers and half-brothers.¹⁹⁰ Muhammad Bān's actions, by contrast, created an intense fratricidal mood which embroiled Timbuktu in the bloodiest dynastic struggle in the history of the Songhai empire. The Moroccan conquest, taking place a few years after the upheaval, virtually found the empire undefended, especially in the Saharan fringes where the Moroccans would have been most vulnerable.

The immediate cause of the upheaval was a minor confrontation between an agent of the Askia who was in charge of the imposts at Kabara, the Kabara Farma 'Alwa, and the royal candidate Muhammad al-Šādiq b. Askia Daūd, the Balma' in charge of the troops, just south of Timbuktu. During a scuffle between the two, 'Alwa was killed, and in the prevailing mood, Muhammad al-Šādiq was left with no choice but to raise the standard of rebellion or risk execution. In a short time, the forces of virtually the entire Western provinces aligned themselves behind him in a march upon Gao. Since 'Alwa had committed extortions from the commercial boats which put in at Kabara, the merchants came readily to Muhammad al-Šādiq's support. As for the scholars, we learn that even at Gao, they were the first to speak against the reigning Askia when they heard of events in the West.¹⁹¹ When the rebels declared Muhammad al-Šādiq lawful Askia, according to *Tārīkh al-Fatāsh*,

The generality of the people of Timbuktu agreed with them on this, along with the merchants and some of the scholars. He was endorsed by officials of the Askia who were in Timbuktu, including the Timbuktu Mundhu and the Tusr Mundhu, while the chiefs of the merchants (*umdat al-rujār*) supported him with funds . . . The tailors of Timbuktu accompanied him, sewing blankets [for the soldiers] and mending shirts and caftans.¹⁹²

The Maghsharen Tuareg also sided with Muhammad al-Šādiq, but the reasons are unknown. The Moroccans had in the meantime, sent a small force which occupied the salt-mines of Taghāza and the Askia reciprocated by prohibiting caravans from going there. This, too, threatened the interests of merchants, though other salt-mines, possibly including Taoudenni, were exploited at this time.¹⁹³ Perhaps we are justified in speculating that the Maghsharen would have preferred a showdown with the Moroccans at Taghāza, had the Askia been so inclined. Indeed, it is

remotely possible that Muḥammad al-Ṣādiq promised such a showdown if his march on Gao should result, as anticipated, in a successful *coup d'état*.

As it turned out, a huge force was assembled to intercept the rebels and, although the ailing Askia died before the confrontation, Askia Ishāq II, who took over after a swift sequence of intrigues, could secure his position only in the imminent battle. This, according to *Tārīkh al-Fatāsh*, at least, proved to be the downfall of Songhai.¹⁹⁴ The rebels, including the choice forces of the Western provinces, were decimated, while the armies of the capital suffered comparable losses. Muḥammad al-Ṣādiq retreated with a few bodyguards to Timbuktu and, after spending a night at the house of Muḥammad Baghayughu, he was apparently advised to spare Timbuktu the risk of retaliation.¹⁹⁵ Another leader of the rebellion, the Baghana Fari Bakar, approached the Qāḍi Abu Ḥafs 'Umar for refuge under his auspices but he was denied the privilege.¹⁹⁶ We simply do not know what was the official position of Timbuktu during the rebellion. The detail in *Tārīkh al-Fatāsh* that Muḥammad al-Ṣādiq was declared sovereign in the Friday *khubbas* seems to pertain to a brief period when rumours reached the city that he emerged victorious.¹⁹⁷ According to the lost chronicle *al-Durar al-Ḥisān*, quoted in *Tārīkh al-Fatāsh*, Timbuktu was spared full retaliation by the fact that Askia Muḥammad Bān had died before the battle. Askia Ishāq proved less vengeful, but he nonetheless executed the chief of the Maghsharen Tuaregs, Tibirt. This, in the judgement of Kodjo, further alienated the Tuaregs at the crucial moment when their mounted Saharan troops would have been needed to intercept the Moroccan expedition.¹⁹⁸

We owe it to Kodjo that he has dramatized in his brief article the interrelation between the weakness of Songhai resulting from the upheaval and the success of the Moroccan conquest shortly thereafter. However, he has burdened us with the thesis that the Aqits, in collusion with the Tuaregs, were the 'architects' of the Moroccan conquest. This extravagant opinion, an extension of the Aqit-Baghayughu polarization thesis, is consistently denied by the evidence at hand. It is quite plausible that the Maghsharen Tuaregs, or at least their allies in the Sahara, facilitated the passage of the Moroccan expedition. However, the Aqits were not the permanent allies of the Tuaregs, any more than the Baghayughu were the natural allies of Gao. We have it on record that the Maghsharen-Koy Awasnu, successor to Tibirt, turned against the Aqits during the resistance to the Moroccans.¹⁹⁹ The Aqits were the leaders of the resistance and, in consequence, they were the main victims of the establishment of the Ruma regime in Timbuktu.

As we will see in the last chapter, the Moroccan conquerors virtually had to destroy the power of the Aqits, Baghayughu and Maghias before they could establish their regime in Timbuktu. The latter found influential allies in the descendants of Ahmad al-Ṣāqali, a Sharīf who had settled in Timbuktu in 925 A.H. (1519/20 A.D.), whose grandsons were among the main victims of the conquest. Ultimately, the tomb of Maḥmūd b. 'Umar Aqit, like that of

Ahmad Maghia, became a place of sanctity and pilgrimage. The Aqits never recovered from the blow of the Moroccan conquest, but the descendants of Ahmad Maghia regained their power to such an extent that for generations the judges were drawn from among them. Other families, both of older and more recent establishment, became increasingly influential as the conquering Ruma were gradually incorporated into the ranks of notables and commoners in the city. It will be argued throughout that the scholars took the initiative in extricating the Ruma from their relationship with the Moroccan state. However, as a military elite, the Ruma incorporated the previous Songhai institutions and intermarried with the Songhai to such an extent that the descendants of the two eventually became indistinguishable.

Basically, the factors which secured for Timbuktu its subsequent stability have been introduced only on a preliminary basis in this chapter. Our narrative has suggested so far that the 'patrician' factor was important. We have also suggested that the collective leadership of the patriciate tended to be centralized to an extent in the judgship. In the following three chapters, we will look at these details more closely, beginning with an analysis of the structure of the learned hierarchy. In essence, the pedagogical links tended to reinforce the patrician dimension in the character of the city. Moreover – as will be seen in Chapter 4 – the institutional base of the learned hierarchy did not exclusively rest upon the power and function of the judgship. Rather, it was strengthened also by parochial criteria of organization, besides factors of wealth, status and prerogative which will be explored more fully in Chapter 5. Eventually, it will be seen in Chapter 6 that these combined factors helped Timbuktu to preserve its essential character in the periods following the Moroccan conquest.