

CHAPTER 3

The scholars as a learned elite

It has already been indicated in Chapter 2 that the origins of Muslim learning in Timbuktu have been lost to us. The reasons for this may possibly lie in the disruption caused by the Mossi conquest. Notwithstanding the ambiguity of our sources, we believe that this event took place around 1400 A.D. Our evidence on the transmission of learning begins with Muaddab Muhammad al-Kāburi and al-Qāḍi al-Hājj. The latter is specifically associated with a crisis in Banku caused by the Mossi threat.¹ Quite probably, some demographic dislocation took place at the time comparable to that which was later occasioned by the rise of Sunni 'Alī. This may have led to the dispersal of some groups among the earliest scholars and resulted in a break in Timbuktu traditions. Indeed, excepting the associate of Mansa Mūsā, 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Tamimi, tradition did not preserve the name of any of the scholars who flourished in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.²

The memory of the earliest scholars may perhaps have been lost to fifteenth-century traditionists amidst conflicting claims concerning the first introduction of Māliki Islamic studies. Evidence from elsewhere in the Sūdān suggests the existence of an early Kharijite strain, especially of the Ibadi sect, which gradually gave way to Malikism.³ As Islamic learning achieved more and more uniformity in the area, Māliki traditions came to be superimposed over others. In the Hausa city-state of Kano in Northern Nigeria, for example, disagreement arose concerning the first introduction of the basic *al-Mudawwana al-Kubra*. One set of traditions credited the first teaching of that work to the Wangara scholar, 'Abd al-Rahmān Zaghaiti, while another credited it to a certain Shehu Tunus.⁴ It is peculiar, indeed, that the first scholar in Timbuktu who is specifically associated with the teaching of *al-Mudawwana*, al-Hājj Ahmad b. 'Umar Aqīt, travelled to Hausaland and actually taught in Kano.⁵ Yet, while he is not mentioned there, it appears probable that the major Māliki juristic works formed part of Timbuktu scholarship since at least the fourteenth century. By and large, the sources confront us with a tradition of learning already in a mature state during the fifteenth century.

Attempts to link the Timbuktu tradition with its precursors in the Western Sudan are fraught with difficulty. The genealogical connection between the Aqīts and the Almoravids, suggested by Norris, might indicate survival of eleventh-century Sahelo-Sudanic scholarship among descendants of this family or its kinsmen, at least in Massina, but the evidence is not clear-cut.⁶ In the case of Tuareg scholars, the traditions which link them with the early prominence of Tadmekka are surrounded by legends of eighth-century Islamization.⁷ We encounter in seventeenth-century Timbuktu a scholar belonging to the Zaghaiti Wangara clan whose grandfather, al-Khaṭīb Muḥammad Zaghaiti, was associated with events leading to the evacuation of Gao at the time of the Moroccan conquest.⁸ It has been suggested elsewhere that the name of this clan may reflect a *nisba* to a place of origin in Zāgha or Dia. But while the movements of the Wangara, like those of other Muslim mercantile groups, covered extensive territory, it is impossible to determine the strict flow of Islamic influences which gave rise to Māliki scholarship in Timbuktu.⁹

One set of traditions which probably has some relevance to our subject is reflected in the *isnāds* carried by Dyula scholars up to recent times. These trace the chains (*silsilas*) of successive teachers back to mediaeval times. In his study of a large number of *isnāds* (from the Ivory Coast, Ghana and Upper Volta), Ivor Wilks pointed to their convergence upon scholars of the Saghanughu clan dating to the eighteenth century.¹⁰ Precursors in Muslim scholarship belonging to this clan were encountered by Ibn Baṭūṭa during the fourteenth century in the town of Zaghari, upstream from Zāgha along or near the Niger floodplain.¹¹ There, the group, which probably emerged out of Soninke descent, was identified as belonging to the Ibadi sect. Moreover, it was closely associated with black traders referred to as Wanjarata, presumably predecessors of the Malinke Wangara.¹² Their presence in Timbuktu is not specifically recorded, but al-Qāḍi Maḥmūd b. 'Umar Aqīt is remembered to have secured the appointment of one of their descendants, Muḥammad Sānu (Saghanughu?) al-Wangari, as Judge of Jenne.¹³

The *isnāds* are also of interest in the sense that they are the only sources which drive back the Sahelo-Sudanic tradition of learning to an origin pre-dating the fifteenth century. A central figure in the chains is al-Hājj Sālim al-Suwāri, a scholar whose *floruit* is assigned by tradition to the twelfth century and whom Ivor Wilks, and more recently Thomas Hunter, on genealogical grounds, assign to the fifteenth century.¹⁴ The chain goes backwards through him to the Malinke scholar al-'Abbās Mandawiyu, then successively to the Soninke scholars Turi Kuri and Sissi Kuri. The latter two would seem to have been the last prominent representatives of a long-lived school which flourished in Dia during and before the fourteenth century.¹⁵ Whether through its influence on Kāburans who ultimately migrated northwards, or directly through the dispersal of scholars from

Dia itself, Timbuktu would seem to have received its earliest influences in Islamic learning from this school.¹⁶

The section which follows will be devoted to tracing the transmission of learning in Timbuktu itself beginning with the figure of Muḥammad al-Kāburi. The tradition which describes him as contemporary of 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Tamimi, when in fact he lived to the days of his grandson Ḥabīb, may indicate that he studied under the erudite scholars whom 'Abd al-Raḥmān found established in the city when he settled there in the mid-fourteenth century.¹⁷ After the Mossi conquest, he was probably the most prominent scholar remaining in the city and, accordingly, he overshadowed his predecessors. He may conceivably have exerted an organizational impact comparable to that of al-Suwāri further south in Dia and Diakha.¹⁸ For although Kātib Mūsa and al-Qāḍi al-Ḥajj were probably his equals in learning, he alone is remembered for teaching the outstanding scholars of the succeeding generation. Indeed, al-Qāḍi al-Ḥajj is associated with an influential school referred to as Alfa Gungu (House of Learning), but Muḥammad al-Kāburi alone is credited with the title of Shaikh al-Shuyukh (Master of Masters).¹⁹ In the absence of evidence on other chains of transmission, Muḥammad al-Kāburi stands out as the major link between the unknown scholars of the fourteenth century and the better-documented ones from the fifteenth century onwards.

Transmission of learning

Timbuktu scholarship is distinguished from the tradition of the Dyula *isnāds* by a few factors which stem from the exigencies of a relatively extensive urban milieu. First, the Timbuktu tradition continually received input from the outside, both from local sources and through contact with North Africa and Egypt. This meant that the local *silsilas*, or chains of transmission, were always liable to be overshadowed by newer and more prestigious ones. Secondly, the curricula for acquiring the status of scholar were never strictly defined in terms of the completion of a specified set of works or commentaries which were studied by all aspiring scholars. Rather, they involved basic acquisition of Arabic grammar, along with such knowledge of Muslim doctrine and jurisprudence as could be acquired in any number of works.²⁰ Thirdly, the relative extensiveness of the body of scholars, at least in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, allowed for a degree of specialization and a corresponding tendency on the part of students to study under more than one master. Accordingly, the lines of transmission from one generation to another did not branch out in mutually exclusive directions, but rather crossed each other in complex patterns (see Appendices 12, 13, 14).

The acquisition of advanced learning (past the elementary stage of Qur'anic literacy to be discussed further on in this chapter) was usually approached in a combination of two ways. First the student began by

attaching himself to the school (*madrasa*) of an established scholar who held his classes usually at his home. Data on the number of such schools and their enrolment are essentially lacking except for the late nineteenth century. At the time of the French conquest, it is recorded that one school had an average of 75 pupils studying Qur'anic interpretation (*tafsīr*), grammar, law and doctrinal theology. Two other schools of the same period, whose masters were descendants of Ahmad Maghia and Muḥammad Zakanu, enrolled an average of 20-30 students each.²¹ Closely related to the education offered in such schools were the more specialized lessons (*durūs*) occasionally instituted for advanced students. These either formed the last stage in the curriculum of a *madrasa* or, alternatively, they were offered by an established scholar at his home or at one of the mosques.²² They were usually concerned with specific branches of Muslim learning and often focused upon a single theological or legal work. If the master was a very prestigious one, they could be attended by established scholars as well.²³ Similarly, but for a much wider audience, there were recitations and expositions (*iqra'* and *tasrīd*) of individual commentaries, such as the exposition of *Kutāb al-Shi'fa*, a function which achieved permanency and high honour at the Sankore Mosque.²⁴

Secondly, there coexisted with the above a system of tutorialships, essentially an extension of the *durūs*, whereby the relationship between the master and a few of his select students evolved on an individual basis. The student was admitted into such a relationship already in adulthood and often as late as the age of 30 or 40.²⁵ He was considered to be literally taking knowledge from his master and at the end he would be accredited to that effect in a certificate (*ijāza*, theoretically a teaching permit) which specified the works completed as well as the level at which they were studied.²⁶ The sources do not always distinguish between this type of transmission and that involved in the more open *madrasas* and *durūs*. Nonetheless, we may assume that in all recorded cases of transmission where the evidence is not otherwise specified tutorialships were involved. For, as one would expect, a student normally sought out as tutors scholars whose *madrasas* or *durūs* he attended. Sometimes, he did so while attending the more advanced courses or, more commonly, after having completed them and proved his long-term commitment to further education or his exceptional abilities as the case may be.

The tutorial system, on which the following discussion is primarily based, provided the context in which the student was gradually admitted under the patronage of his master into the ranks of scholars. Seeking out a prestigious tutor and, ultimately, a widely respected *ijāza*, was a complex process in which familial, kinship and economic ties played a role. Under this system, a student could more readily find a willing tutor in his own father, an older brother or some other close relative. But unless the relative in question was exceptionally reputed for erudition, the tutorial-

ship was liable to go unnoticed both in the society at large as well as in the chronicles. This, in itself, encouraged many students to study under more than one master and, thereby, gain wide recognition of their learned abilities. In all cases, there was the concept of *mulāzama* whereby the student not only attended the lectures and lessons of his master but acted as his assistant and secretary and was present at his audiences at all times.²⁷ In this way, the abilities of the candidate became gradually known among the circles of scholars and this, over and beyond his *ijāzas*, secured his acceptance as scholar in the society at large.

The pedagogical system was ideal for the development of distinct schools differentiated from each other in their curricula depending on the preferences of their masters.²⁸ This tendency, however, was fully counterbalanced by the integrative role of the mosques, and especially Sankore, where the courses of study offered were essentially open to all students who could qualify. The combined result was the emergence of loose associations of scholars where kinship, intermarriage and neighbourhood ties were important factors. Each association was essentially made up of a few outstanding masters surrounded by their colleagues, their ex-students and their students. Though they never amounted to schools of learning as such, these associations may nonetheless be described as schools so far as the tutorial process of transmission is concerned.

Of the schools of transmission we may, partly for the lack of a better framework of reference, identify the most important ones during the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries as represented by the scholars of the three major families and their associates. The Aqits and their circles, among whom the Baghayughus later became paramount, were by far the most influential. The main chain of transmission in this school passes from Muhammad al-Kāburi to 'Umar b. Muhammad Aqit and then to his son al-Hājj Ahmad. Henceforth, the chain branches out from Hājj Ahmad's younger brother, al-Qādi Maḥmūd, simultaneously to Ahmad b. Muhammad Sa'īd and Ahmad b. al-Hājj Ahmad.²⁹ Both taught a large number of scholars, including their common student Muhammad Baghayughu, who inherited their prestige. Ultimately, he must be viewed as the founder of a new school centring in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries upon descendants of his brother Ahmad. However, his most outstanding student was Ahmad Bāba b. Ahmad b. al-Hājj Ahmad, who achieved widespread fame in exile after the Moroccan conquest and was the last of the outstanding Aqits. Naturally, this brief outline omits a large number of scholars, some documented and others unknown, who attached themselves to the school. Besides the Baghayughus, the families of Maghia and Zankanu carried on the traditions of this school down to recent times.³⁰

The other two main schools, identifiable with the And-Agh-Muhammad and al-Qādi al-Hājj families, respectively, also contributed to the diffusion of learning, though perhaps on a smaller scale. The impact of the former

was great during the lives of And-Agh-Muhammad al-Kabir and his son al-Mukhtār al-Nahawī. And-Agh-Muhammad might have been a student of Muhammad al-Kāburi; his son is remembered only for having studied under al-Imām al-Zammūrī while in refuge from Sunni 'Alī in Walāta.³¹ Both contributed to the education of al-Hājj Ahmad b. 'Umar Aqit, but their descendants came to be relegated to a secondary position during the Songhai period. A member of the family identified as 'Abdullāh Boryo (also 'Abdullāh b. Ahmad Boryo) taught Muhammad Bāba b. Muhammad al-Amin and apparently revived the influence of the family shortly before the Moroccan conquest.³² At this time the family produced an important book collector in the person of Ahmad b. And-Agh-Muhammad b. Maḥmūd b. And-Agh-Muhammad who clearly owned a great library.³³ The author al-Sa'di may perhaps be a product of this school; for while he gives priority to the And-Agh-Muhammads over the Aqits, his main teacher seems to have been Muhammad Sān b. al-Mukhtār b. Muhammad b. al-Mukhtār al-Nahawī. Al-Sa'di suggests that the And-Agh-Muhammads imparted their prestige to various in-laws besides the Aqits.³⁴ They re-emerged in force during the seventeenth century, under the Ruma, in the person of Sayyid Ahmad b. And-Agh-Muhammad b. Ahmad Boryo, who attained the judgeship, and Muhammad b. Muhammad Kara, a relative of the family through his mother, whose son Muhammad also became Judge.³⁵ Al-Qādi Ahmad b. And-Agh-Muhammad taught some influential persons and his name appears in the *sanads* of much later scholars from outside Timbuktu.³⁶

The school associated with the al-Hājj family had exercised a great though ill-documented influence before the rise of Sunni 'Alī. The Songhai monarch persecuted and killed some of the scholars from this family, including a number among them who lived, as we are told, at the Alfa Gungu.³⁷ However, the family seems to have maintained wide Sahelian connections, much like the Kunta of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Al-Qādi al-Hājj, and his brother Ibrāhīm, are associated at once with Walāta and Banku, besides Timbuktu. Their sons and relatives fled Sunni 'Alī both to Walāta and Tagedda, while Ibrāhīm b. 'Umar, reputed to be a *walī*, became a judge at Jenje during the reign of Askia Muhammad.³⁸ Today there exists an *ijāza* in the possession of al-Shaikh 'Isa wuld Muhammad Mawūd, of the Keltina al-Hājj, which traces a long chain of transmission backwards to al-Amin b. Abu Bakr b. al-Qādi al-Hājj.³⁹ The latter studied under al-Suyūfī and, although he may have been the first to study under the illustrious Egyptian, he is not mentioned in the Timbuktu chronicles any more than his son Ahmad and his nephew Muhammad Šālih. It may be that the activities of these scholars during the Songhai period were distributed over a wide area and left little impact on Timbuktu. Indeed, excepting the possibility that al-Amin b. Ahmad and 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Muftahid were products of their school, their impact

on Timbuktu was not revived until after the Moroccan conquest when Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Raḥmān became Judge. He taught some influential scholars and thereby kept alive the *sanad* going back to his great-uncle, Muḥammad al-Amin.⁴⁰ It is possible that his family later migrated from Timbuktu, much as happened to the And-Agh-Muḥammads. Alternatively, both families may have continued to contribute to the transmission of learning among the limited circles of their immediate relatives. This certainly appears to be the case among the Maghās and Gīdādos who monopolized the judgeship and imamate. During the eighteenth century, the diffusion of learning on a wider scale devolved primarily on the descendants of Muḥammad Gurdū.⁴¹

The coexistence of several schools of transmission is suggested by the occasional emergence of prominent scholars whose teachers are not known. Of these we know several who flourished just before and after the Moroccan conquest, including Muḥammad al-Amin b. Ḥabīb, Aḥmad Maghīa, 'Abd al-Mawla al-Jalālī and 'Uthmān al-Filālī.⁴² The presumption is that these scholars belonged to chains of transmission other than the main ones documented in the chronicles. These chains might conceivably lead us a few generations backwards to Sīdī Yahya al-Tādūlsī, the most prominent student of Muḥammad al-Kāburī.⁴³ Alternatively, they may have branched out in Askia Muḥammad's time from the teaching activities of al-'Aqīb al-Ansamūni and Makhlūf al-Balbālī. In his biographical dictionary, Aḥmad Bāba devotes the same amount of attention to the latter two scholars as to his own kinsmen among the Aqīts, but he neglects to mention any of their students.⁴⁴ Similar omissions by al-Sa'dī, and more especially by later chroniclers, make it impossible to arrive at a full reconstruction of the complex patterns of transmission.

The selectivity of the evidence was largely forced upon the chroniclers by the records and traditions most accessible to them. These, being preserved among descendants of the scholars in question, were liable to overemphasize long tutorial relationships which were fortified by kinship and intermarriage ties. In the process, the teaching activities of outstanding masters who flourished outside the orbit of tutorial and familial ties were largely neglected. This would seem to apply to al-'Aqīb al-Ansamūni and Makhlūf al-Balbālī, as partly also to their precursor Muḥammad al-Kāburī. On the assertion of al-Sa'dī, we have it that the passage of every month was occasion for the completion of a course of study under Muḥammad al-Kāburī in *Tahdhib al-Barādī*. Yet only his tutorial relationships with Sīdī Yahya and 'Umar Aqīt are specifically remembered.⁴⁵ Similarly, Muḥammad b. Muḥammad Kara, of several generations later, became *Imām* of Sankore and, presumably after instituting many courses of study there, came to be honoured as Master of Masters. But of those with whom he established a tutorial relationship only three are named, including Muḥammad Bāba b. Muḥammad al-Amin, al-Muḥṣafa b. Aḥmad

Baghayughu and al-Imām Muḥammad Gurdū al-Fulānī. The fact that the three belonged to distinct ethnic groups suggests that his influence in the city was universal.⁴⁶

From the obituaries recorded by al-Sa'dī of scholars who died while he was compiling his chronicle in the mid-seventeenth century, it appears that the diffusion of learning was far more multidirectional than is indicated by the evidence of earlier and later times. The education of al-Imām Muḥammad Gurdū cut across all three main schools of transmission and included other teachers as well. Coming to Timbuktu as a youth from Massina, where his family had long subscribed to Mālikī studies, Muḥammad Gurdū settled in the city under the auspices of 'Abdullāh al-Sa'dī, father of our chronicler 'Abd al-Raḥmān.⁴⁷ He began his advanced education, it seems, under Aḥmad Bāba of the Aqīt family and later, after a long interruption until the master returned from exile, he payed him due respect by attending his lessons, though already learned and well advanced in age.⁴⁸ In the meantime, he had studied under Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. al-Qāḍī 'Abd al-Raḥmān, of the al-Hājjī family, and al-Qāḍī Sayyid Aḥmad, of the And-Agh-Muḥammad family. The latter two scholars both attained the judgeship and it was advantageous for Muḥammad Gurdū, like other aspiring scholars, to seek training in the practical application of Mālikī law, besides its theory, under them. In fact, the accession of a scholar to the judgeship automatically expanded the sphere of his 'disciples' though an exception is found in the case of al-'Aqīb b. Maḥmūd Aqīt who lacked either the time or the inclination to establish tutorial relationships.⁴⁹

The one case where the teachers of a particular scholar appear fully documented is that of Muḥammad Bāba b. Muḥammad al-Amin. In writing his obituary, al-Sa'dī would seem almost certainly to have relied on the detail available in the lost chronicle, *al-Durar al-Ḥisān*, written by his son Bāba Gūru.⁵⁰ The scholar had studied under no less than seven masters, besides his own father, and each belonged to a different family.⁵¹ His case is not entirely unique for this period, for al-Muḥṣafa b. Aḥmad Baghayughu enjoyed a succession of six masters while Muḥammad Gurdū studied under seven masters including Muḥammad Bāba himself.⁵² What transpires is that the upheaval caused by the Moroccan conquest resulted in a disruption of the tutorial system and forced students to resume their education under new masters. Of the early teachers of Muḥammad Bāba, for example, Aḥmad Maghīa was killed during an uprising against the conquerors while 'Abd al-Raḥmān Aqīt was exiled to Morocco and died there shortly after.⁵³ By and large, as is indeed suggested by the case of Aḥmad Bāba, it appears that scholars did not normally study under more than three or four masters and, even then, they usually acquired most of their education during an extended tutorialship under a single master.⁵⁴

We have so far excluded from our discussion the input which Timbuktu scholarship received from the outside largely because this input did not

substantially alter the patterns of transmission. We know of at least 15 scholars who travelled to North Africa and the East and associated with outstanding scholars there during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. But of these, only a few actually studied under known masters across the Sahara and their tutorial activities in Timbuktu were not extensive. Particularly interesting is the case of al-'Aqib b. Maḥmūd Aqit whose pilgrimage and residence in the East is not dated though it clearly belongs to the period prior to his accession to the judgeship in 1565 A.D. According to Ahmad Bāba, al-'Aqib studied in Cairo under the well-known grammarian, al-Nāṣir al-Laqqāni, and was accredited by him 'in everything that was creditable to him and through him'.⁵⁵ Yet, besides teaching and accrediting Ahmad Bāba in his youth, al-'Aqib did not much engage in teaching in Timbuktu. Similarly, Makhlūf al-Balbālī studied under Ibn Ghāzi in Morocco while al-'Aqib al-Anṣamuni studied under the influential al-Maghīlī in Tagedda. It is remarkable, in fact, that al-Anṣamuni acquired some learning under al-Suyūṭī as well, the subject of later Timbuktu legend. Yet he and al-Balbālī, as already indicated, are not assigned any students whom they taught in Timbuktu.⁵⁶ One suspects a reticence on the part of local traditionists to admit the full contribution of external influences, especially since al-Maghīlī's visit to the Sudan, which registered a lasting impact on Hausaland, is barely mentioned in the Timbuktu sources.⁵⁷ It may well be, however, that the local scholars of that particular generation recognized the erudition of the trans-Saharan masters, without holding them to be their superiors.

Al-Sa'di especially shows no particular interest in the credentials acquired by the Timbuktu scholars during their pilgrimages. Ahmad Bāba, on the other hand, pays great attention to scholars who were widely travelled and who had associated with famous masters in the East. His *Nayl al-Ibtihāj* was intended for a wide Muslim audience to cover the biographies of prominent Mālikī scholars throughout Islam. The sections he devoted to Timbuktu covered mainly the scholars of his own family, the Aqīts, and their immediate associates. Had he set aside more space for his compatriots, erudite though they were, that would have been considered in ill-taste. As it is, the fame which *Nayl al-Ibtihāj* achieved in North Africa and the East placed Timbuktu permanently among the ranks of the major centres of learning in Islam.

Ahmad Bāba sought consciously during his exile in Morocco to demonstrate that the tradition of learning which he left behind in Timbuktu had strong pedagogical links with the mainstream of Muslim Mālikism. He took pains to record the prestigious *sanads* which he, his masters and their masters, acquired through contact with Egypt. As already indicated, these *sanads* had only a minor influence upon the lines of transmission in Timbuktu. For example, Ahmad Bāba records that he received an *ijāza* by correspondence from Yahya b. Muḥammad al-Khaṭṭāb of Mecca.⁵⁸ This *ijāza* hardly added anything to Ahmad Bāba's credentials, especially since his father Ahmad, as

well as his kinsman al-Qāḍi al-'Aqib, had been accredited by Yahya's father, a famous commentator on *Khaṭīl*, during their pilgrimage. However, the variety of prestigious *sanads* which accrued to Ahmad Bāba, over and beyond his erudition, made him widely sought after as a teacher in Morocco. Eventually he counted among his students some of the most influential men of the day, including the Tilmisani historian and jurist, Ahmad al-Maqari, and the Qāḍi of Fez, Abu'l-Qāsim al-Ghassāni.⁵⁹ Even after his return to Timbuktu, his *ijāza* was sought through correspondence by 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Jazūli. The latter treasured the brief *ijāza*, which reached him, though written at the master's dictation in old age by his son Muḥammad.⁶⁰

For the most part, Ahmad Bāba traced his *sanads* in the study of the major juristic works to Muḥammad (sometimes And-Agh-Muḥammad) b. Ahmad b. Abu Muḥammad al-Tazikhi (Ayd Ahmad). This scholar had been a student of Ahmad Bāba's grandfather, al-Hājj Ahmad, and he taught Ahmad Bāba's main master, Muḥammad Baghayughu, besides others. Ayd Ahmad had travelled from Timbuktu to Tagedda, where he studied under al-Maghīlī, and in the east he was certified by al-Qalqashandī, al-Sunbātī and others of equal stature. We do not know how long he remained in Timbuktu on his return to the Sudan; he subsequently travelled to Hausaland and settled in Katsina where he became judge.⁶¹ But his *sanads* left a lasting influence in the Sahel where they were eventually passed on to numerous scholars from Walāta, Shingit and Tishit.⁶² Ahmad Bāba himself did not contribute to the diffusion of these *sanads* except in Morocco. The biography of Sidi al-Mukhtār al-Kabir al-Kunti (of the late eighteenth century) features Ahmad Bāba, besides Muḥammad Baghayughu, in the *siṣīlas* of the Kunta.⁶³ But these *siṣīlas* are almost certainly in error; they seem to confuse Muḥammad Baghayughu al-Wangari, Ahmad Bāba's main teacher, with Muḥammad Baghayughu b. Muḥammad Gurdu al-Fulāni, of two generations later.⁶⁴

Locally, the *sanads* of Ayd Ahmad al-Tazikhi were transmitted by Ahmad Bāba's father, Ahmad, or alternatively, by Ahmad b. And-Agh-Muḥammad. The former passed them on to Ahmad al-Fazazi al-Ya'qūbi, a teacher of Abu'l-Qāsim al-Hājj al-Waddāni who transmitted them to the scholars of Shingit and Tishit. Ahmad b. And-Agh-Muḥammad, on the other hand, who received the *sanads* indirectly through Abu Hafs 'Umar, passed them on to Muḥammad Gurdu. The latter combined them with the *sanads* of the al-Hājj family traced backwards to al-Suyūṭī. He transmitted them both to his son Muḥammad Baghayughu, a highly venerated master, who occupies a central position in later chains of transmission.⁶⁵

One of the consequences of the early contact with North Africa, and especially with Egypt, was the fact that *siṣīlas* such as those of Ayd Ahmad al-Tazikhi, fully overshadowed the previous local lines of transmission.

Table 1. *Scholars and the tutorialships given by them*

	Scholars	Tutorialships
Scholars whose masters and students are both known	28	60
Scholars whose masters alone are known (no students mentioned)	14	0
Subtotal (masters known)	42	60
Scholars whose students alone are known (masters unknown)	18	25
Total	60	85

Ivor Wilks suggests, for example, that Muhammad and Ahmad Baghayughu may ultimately belong to a Wangara chain of learning which goes back through their father Maḥmūd, a *qāḍī* of Jenne, to the tradition which had taken shape after the pilgrimages of al-Ḥājj Salīm al-Suwāri.⁶⁶ In adult life, just before settling in Timbuktu, the two scholars travelled on the pilgrimage and resided in Cairo where they met and 'benefited from' some of the most prestigious scholars of the time, including al-Nāṣir al-Laḳānī, al-Sharīf Yūsif al-Awmayūnī and the mystic scholar al-Imān Muḥammad al-Bakrī.⁶⁷ In Timbuktu, their teachers, Muḥammad b. Ahmad Sa'īd and Ahmad b. al-Ḥājj Ahmad, were of such prestige as might have overshadowed the original chain of scholars to which they belonged. Their careers recall that of al-Siddīq b. Muḥammad Ta'alla, a scholar originally from Kabūra who might conceivably also belong to the Zaghāi tradition. While established at Jenje, he is alleged to have discovered that one of his ex-students who had travelled and studied in Timbuktu already surpassed him in juristic erudition. 'We have wasted our life in vain' he exclaimed, and set out to the city, as tradition recalls. However, we may in this case, once again, be faced with the reticence of traditionalists to admit learned influence and contribution from further south. The man proved sufficiently erudite to be chosen for the imamate of the Main Mosque not long after his arrival.⁶⁸ Nonetheless, the reputation of his associates in Timbuktu, and especially of those whom he later encountered while on the pilgrimage in the East, surpassed that of his original master or masters.

The period c. 1450-1650, being relatively well documented by Ahmad Bāba, al-Sa'di and the evidence of later *sanads*, affords some scope for systematization of the data. The known cases of transmission during the two centuries in question (up to the death of al-Sa'di) involve a total of 60 scholars to the exclusion of their trans-Saharan teachers and students. These scholars are hardly representative of the whole body of learned individuals since, by virtue of the attention accorded them in the sources,

Table 2. *Tutorialships*

	Relatives	Non-relatives	Totals
Under relatives only	12	0	12
Under relatives and others	15	27	42
Under non-relatives only	0	31	31
Total	27	58	85

they appear to have been among the most outstanding of their time. They include only those whose teachers and/or students are sufficiently known as to enable us to place them, without resort to inference, in the patterns of transmission. The relative uniformity of the group may be evidenced indirectly from its activities as represented in Table 1. There, we observe that scholars whose masters are not recorded (largely because no specific biographies are devoted to them) were equally as active in educating noteworthy scholars as those whose masters are duly mentioned. This suggests that the omissions of the sources, whatever else their significance, are largely haphazard as far as the lines of transmission of learning are concerned. Generally, we are dealing with a situation in which the masters of the earlier scholars tend to be unknown while the students of the later scholars (seventeenth century) are not recorded. The most striking example among the latter is Muḥammad Bāba b. Muḥammad al-Amin. Having studied under a sequence of eight masters, one would expect that he taught others besides Muḥammad Gurdu. Indeed, the same applies to al-Muṣṭafa b. Ahmad Baghayughu; no students are assigned him though he studied under six masters. He died at the age of 53, some 40 years before al-Sa'di (our main source of information), while Muḥammad Bāba died at the age of 83, ten years earlier still. By the time al-Sa'di embarked on his work, scholars taught by these two had probably left a great many students behind them.⁶⁹

Of the 42 scholars whose masters are known, we find that 12 are associated with more than one teacher while, more significantly, all but one of these had three teachers or more. The total number of tutorialships under relatives, including in-laws, account for slightly over 30% (27 of 85) of the cases (see Table 2). The significance of this figure, which might in itself appear too low, is not necessarily diluted by the fact that many of the scholars involved studied under non-relatives as well. In a few important cases, for example, the role of family exhibited itself indirectly when the scholar studied under a non-relative who had been his father's student. Muḥammad Baghayughu studied under Ahmad b. al-Ḥājj Ahmad and, in return, taught the latter's son, Ahmad Bāba. Baghayughu himself had no sons, but Ahmad Bāba reciprocated by teaching his

nephew, al-Muṣṭafa b. Aḥmad Baghayughu. The exchange of students between closely associated families minimized the need for remunerating the master in a society where the Islamic ethic looked upon teaching as an obligation besides an honour.⁷⁰ It cemented the ties between the families in question, sometimes resulting in (rather than from) inter-marriage and often facilitated joint ventures in commerce. Moreover, it insured for the scholar that recognition of his learned status would rest on the testimony, and often the certification or *ijāza*, of masters other than his immediate relatives.

The above observations drawn from evidence on the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries would seem to apply also, with even greater emphasis, to the role of family during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It appears certain, at least, that the basic features of tutorial relationships remained the same. While participating in the family business, its commerce or the management of its property, the student also acquired certain skills which he could place at the service of his master. We believe that the terms of the tutorialship, much like those of an apprenticeship in a particular craft, were implicitly known from the outset with the general understanding that a student would assist his master in whatever may have been his source of income. If the master was of modest means, as in the case of many known to us only by name, the student could be employed in manual labour at his master's farm or in conducting petty transactions at his retail business. In these and other cases, the master could take responsibility for his students' maintenance and, especially if several students were recruited, he could honourably seek funds for that purpose from rich merchants and rulers alike.⁷¹ Some students could readily support themselves from their own private business or that of their family, and could supplement their income from notarial services as witnesses of legal deeds or from scribal activities as copyists of manuscript books.⁷² The most distinctive feature of this system was a certain ambivalence which placed the student throughout a good portion of his early adulthood somewhere in the middle between his father's household, where he continued to dwell, and that of his master, where he formed enduring friendships and often sought a wife. In mediaeval and up to early Ruma times, the ambivalence could easily stimulate intellectual fermentation, on a modest scale at least, since a good proportion of the students sought the city from a number of directions and enlivened its quarters without being encumbered by close family ties.

Since the chronicles of the eighteenth century do not supply any information on the transmission of learning, our evidence for the period comes mainly from a few later *sanads* still extant at Timbuktu and others which were recorded in the late-eighteenth-century biographical dictionary from Walāta, the *Faṭḥ al-Shukūr*. Most of these *sanads* converge backwards on Muḥammad Gurdu through his sons Aḥmad and Muḥammad

Baghayughu.⁷³ The latter is honoured as 'the unique of his age', much like Aḥmad Bāba, but his teaching activities are not well documented. He accredited his son Muḥammad in an *ijāza* dated 1079 A.H. (1668/9 A.D.) which apparently achieved widespread fame.⁷⁴ The son (sometimes also identified as Muḥammad Baghayughu) passed on the *sanad* to some of the most influential scholars of the time. His student al-Wāfi b. Ṭālibna raised the town of Arwān, previously an unimportant village in the Sahara north of Timbuktu, to the rank of a centre of learning.⁷⁵ Another student, more influential yet, was Aḥmad Ag al-Shaikh al-Sūqī. The activities of this scholar fortified the reputation of his people, the Kel al-Sūq, as a clan of jurists (*fuguhā*).⁷⁶ He taught Sīdī 'Alī b. al-Najīb who, in turn, was the main teacher of Sīdī al-Mukhtār al-Kabīr al-Kuntī, pontiff of the Sahara in the late eighteenth century.⁷⁷ The influential Sān Sirfī, who played an important role in the history of Timbuktu in the mid-nineteenth century, also traced his *sanads* to Aḥmad Ag al-Shaikh and, through him, to our illustrious Muḥammad b. Baghayughu b. Gurdu.⁷⁸ Finally, Muḥammad b. Baghayughu taught the celebrated Muḥammad b. Mūsā b. Ijl al-Zaidī. This scholar and his son Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Mūsā contributed to a school of learning which had great influence throughout the southern Sahara and counted among its students the author of *Faṭḥ al-Shukūr*, Muḥammad 'Abdullāh al-Bartilī.⁷⁹

What is apparent is that Timbuktu scholarship in the eighteenth century became closely bound with a wide expanse of interrelationships spanning the areas from Arwān and Boujbeïha to Walāta, Tishīt and Shingit. The area of Tuāt, across the Sahara, which like Ghadāmis, had always enjoyed strong commercial links with the Sūdān, was also part of the same complex of interrelationships. The migrations of scholars between these towns, coupled with the scarcity of the evidence, makes it difficult to distinguish scholars of Timbuktu from others. Sulaimān b. Daud b. Muḥammad al-Husni al-Tunbukti, for example, is clearly a Timbuktu scholar. Yet nothing is known about him besides the fact that he was a logician and a *mufti* who had numerous disputations with the masters of al-Bartilī, presumably residents of Walāta.⁸⁰ The case of al-Mukhtār al-Kabīr al-Kuntī is particularly problematical. He studied in Timbuktu as a youth and his later teachers were largely the product of the Timbuktu tradition of learning. Moreover, in later life he exerted considerable influence on the affairs of the city. Yet, unlike his grandson Aḥmad al-Bakkā'i, who spent most of his active career in and around Timbuktu, he defies categorization as a Timbuktu scholar.⁸¹ Muḥammad b. Mūsā b. Ijl al-Zaidī and his son Aḥmad, though not as influential in the Sahara, are equally as problematical. Their provenance is in doubt and we simply do not know when nor for how long they resided in Timbuktu. Muḥammad studied under Muḥammad b. Muḥammad Baghayughu and was, seemingly at a later time, accredited by him in an *ijāza* dated 1136 A.H. (1723/4 A.D.).⁸²

The Baghayughu Wangara *imāms* of the Sidi Yahya Mosque continue to this day to trace their *sanads* back to Muḥammad b. Mūsā.⁸³ His son Aḥmad taught Bāba Sa'īd b. al-Ḥājj 'Abd al-Rahmān b. Isma'īl Yoro b. Muḥammad Gurdu. Descendants of Isma'īl Yoro eventually replaced the Gidādos as *imāms* of Jingerebir. In the meantime, Bāba Sa'īd's student and kinsman, al-Muṣṭafa b. Aḥmad, became teacher of 'Abd al-Qādir b. Muḥammad al-Sanūsī, Judge and Governor of Timbuktu under the Caliphate of Massina in the early nineteenth century.⁸⁴

If inference on the basis of limited evidence is permissible, it seems that the scholars of Timbuktu who interacted with the growing world of Saharan scholarship gained the ascendancy in the eighteenth century. The Maghās, in control of the judgeship, like the Gidādo *imāms* of Jingerebir, did not perhaps contribute to the cause of learning beyond their immediate familial circles and eventually they gave way to others in the leadership of Timbuktu. It is not clear whether the scholars of Jenne continued to sustain their traditionally close ties with Timbuktu. It seems almost certain, however, that the Fulāni scholars of Massina continued to interact with Timbuktu and Saharan scholarship. The expansion of Aḥmadu Lobbo's jihādī state northwards was facilitated by earlier links and did not, in any case, result in an upheaval. The name of Fulāni scholars, other than the Timbuktu Gurdus, appears occasionally among the masters of Saharan scholars.⁸⁵ More importantly, perhaps, Muḥammad al-Tāhir, one of the main ideologues of the Massina *jihād*, was a student of al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī.⁸⁶ His famous manifesto, which made Aḥmadu Lobbo the spiritual successor of Askia Muḥammad, was sufficiently accepted in and around Timbuktu so that no complete copy of *Tārīkh al-Futūsh* has survived which does not incorporate the manifesto.⁸⁷ The convergence subsequently of Saharan and Futa scholars on the region of Massina made it a radiating centre of learned influence. Even late in the nineteenth century we find that Aḥmad Bāba, Qāḍī of Timbuktu at the time of the French conquest, had resided for some time in Massina and presumably studied there.⁸⁸ Jenne likewise contributed its share of influence on Timbuktu in the person of Muḥammad b. Fadigh b. Aḥmad Zarrūq, one of the principal propagators of the Tijāniyya around the turn of the century.⁸⁹

The traditional lines of transmission of juridical studies are overshadowed throughout the nineteenth century by the superior organizational impact of the Sufi *ṭarīqas* ('mystic' orders or confraternities). The Qāḍiriyya *ṭarīqa* must have made its first appearance in Timbuktu during the sixteenth century when a number of scholars established links with the rather eccentric Muḥammad al-Bakri in Cairo.⁹⁰ Indeed, Timbuktu itself apparently produced a devoted Sufi in the person of Abu Bakr b. al-Ḥājj Aḥmad b. 'Umar. However, while this scholar transferred his family to Mecca and settled there permanently, the influence of Sufism

remained very limited.⁹¹ We find it occasionally in certain poetical forms and especially in a seventeenth-century versification of al-Sanūsī's *Um al-Barāhin* by Muḥammad b. Aḥmad Baghayughu al-Wangari.⁹² Judging from Aḥmad Bāba's views, it seems that the classical juridical orientation remained paramount. This prolific author has left us a composition purportedly on the virtues of scholars which, in fact, is more concerned with comparing (and implicitly contrasting) the conventional acquisition of learning ('ilm al-zāhir) with the gnostic approach ('ilm al-bātin). As in other compositions, Aḥmad Bāba surveys the whole spectrum of traditions and views on the subject but does not quite commit himself. The overall effect of his treatise, however, is to show a marked preference for the accomplished scholar. Learning leads to the benefit of the community as a whole, as Aḥmad Bāba saw it, while gnostic knowledge, even when it amounts to saintliness (*al-wilāya*), benefits only the seeker.⁹³ Though the evidence is not conclusive, it seems that this basic approach to Sufism remained prevalent until the propagation of the Qāḍiriyya in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by the Kunta. From then on, the *sanads* of the *ṭarīqa* took precedence over those of the juridical sciences. Ultimately, most Qāḍiri scholars traced their *sanads* back to Sidi al-Mukhtār (sometimes through his grandson Aḥmad al-Bakkā'i) while others traced them back to al-Mukhtār's teacher Sidi 'Alī b. al-Najīb.⁹⁴

At roughly the same time as the Qāḍiriyya became important in Timbuktu, the Tijāniyya made its first appearance in the area. It subsequently became a major force following the *jihād* of Ḥājj 'Umar which overthrew the Massina Caliphate of Hamdullāhi. The Bakka'i-led struggle against Ḥājj 'Umar, which had repercussions until later in the nineteenth century, tended to minimize the influence of the Tijāniyya in Timbuktu. But by the time of the French conquest, or shortly thereafter, the new *ṭarīqa* became equally as important as the Qāḍiriyya.⁹⁵ Interestingly enough, few scholars from the area of Timbuktu traced their *sanads* in the Tijāni *wird* to the associates of Ḥājj 'Umar. Rather, the transmission and diffusion of the *wird* north of the Niger bend devolved primarily on Muḥammad b. Fadigh b. Aḥmad Zarrūq. This scholar from Jenne, sometimes known simply as Aḥmad Zarrūq, achieved considerable fame locally, and in the East he came to be associated with Sulṭān 'Abd al-Ḥamid's pan-Islamicism.⁹⁶ His career however, little known as it is, falls beyond the scope of our study. The Tijāniyya, like the Qāḍiriyya, did not substantially alter the pedagogical process beyond the addition of their respective litanies to the curricula of study. They did provide added organizational power to the scholars at first, when they were more closely knit; but ultimately, their organization became almost as fluid as that of the schools of transmission of learning described above.

Academic pursuits of scholars

The Muslim sciences which lay at the core of the educational process in Timbuktu may be divided broadly into two categories. The first and most important was made up of four branches closely related in their subject matter, though varying in their source materials and methodology. They included Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*), traditions of the Prophet Muḥammad (*ḥadīth*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and the sources of the law (*uṣūl*). These branches all shared in common a preoccupation with the governance of society and the conduct of individuals along ideal Muslim lines. Their domains ranged from ethical standards and direct prescriptions to legal principles and precise laws. The first three of these sciences were required of all candidates of scholarship, while the fourth, which may be perhaps described as the methodology of Muslim jurisprudence, was reserved for the most learned and ambitious.

The second category of Muslim sciences included the fields of grammar (*naḥw*), literary style and rhetoric (*balāgha*), logic (*manṭiq*) and doctrinal theology (*ʿaṭḥid*). Of these, only the study of grammar formed an essential part of a scholar's education, the rest being designed to refine his learned capabilities or else earn him more versatility in juristic deductions and in Muslim doctrine. To these fields, we should perhaps also add the science of astronomy and history, along with an occasional interest in mathematics and medicine.⁹⁷ Finally, in cases where the scholar embraced the Qādiri or Tijāni order, study of the literature of that order and its body of doctrine often took the place of training in *taḥdīd* or else complemented it.

Although it was not uncommon to engage in several fields of study at the same time, candidates to scholarship usually began their higher education in grammar, then in *tafsīr*. In Qur'anic literacy schools (*mak-tabs*), these two fields at an elementary level were treated as one and the same; the instructor (*mu'allim*) introduced his students to Arabic grammar while teaching and dictating the text of the Qur'ān itself. At more advanced levels, the two fields were likewise studied simultaneously, though sometimes under different masters. The main distinction lay in the fact that the students were introduced to grammatical commentaries as such, while in *tafsīr*, the works of a wide range of authorities were used as textbooks.

The chronicles have not left us much information concerning the works studied in grammar, but copies which have survived since the sixteenth century suggest that a large number of commentaries, of foreign and local authorship, were utilized as textbooks.⁹⁸ It is quite apparent that versatility in the Arabic language was highly desirable in the circles of scholars. This much is suggested by the fact that the first Timbuktu scholar whose travels are recorded in detail, namely al-Ḥājj Aḥmad b. 'Umar Aqīt, made a point

of associating with Khālīd al-Waqqād al-Azhari, the master grammarian of his time (*Imām al-Naḥw*) in Cairo.⁹⁹ It is noteworthy, in fact, that al-Ḥājj Aḥmad's teacher in Timbuktu, al-Mukhtār b. And-Agh-Muḥammad, is known principally as al-Mukhtār al-Naḥwī (the Grammarian). Emphasis on grammar seems to have remained strong in the school of transmission centring around the And-Agh-Muḥammad family. For while Aḥmad b. And-Agh-Muḥammad b. Maḥmūd b. And-Agh-Muḥammad al-Kabīr is known to have excelled in grammar besides poetry, his distant cousin, 'Abdullāh b. Aḥmad Boryo, combined the 'vocation' of *mufti* (jurisconsult) with that of grammarian and philologist.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, 'Abdullāh's nephew, Sayyid Aḥmad b. And-Agh-Muḥammad, was author of a commentary upon the famous grammatical work, the *Ajerrūmiyya*, by Abu 'Abdullāh Muḥammad b. Daūd al-Sanhāji (d. 1324). The conciseness of the latter work had since the early fourteenth century made it the subject for classroom elaboration and commentary throughout the Muslim world. Indeed, Sayyid Aḥmad's commentary on it, *al-Futūḥ al-Qayūmiyya fi Sharḥ al-Ajerrūmiyya*, may have come into wide use in North Africa and Egypt, judging by the fact that copies of it have been preserved in Cairo and in Morocco.¹⁰¹ Locally, in the Sudan, the commentary continued to be widely used up to the late nineteenth century when several copies existed in the Umarian library at Segu.¹⁰² For a reason which is not fully known, the Timbuktu chroniclers neglected to mention the compositions of Sayyid Aḥmad. This, however, is compensated for in a laudatory biography by the Moroccan scholar Muḥammad al-Qādiri. The latter composed a biographical addendum to Aḥmad Bāba's *Kifāyat al-Muḥājir* on the prominent scholars of the Māliki school. He indicated that Sayyid Aḥmad's commentary came into great use as a textbook in Fez, on account of its clarity, and that the Timbuktu Qādi also authored certain *ta'aliq* (appendices) on *al-Murādi* before his death in 1045 A.H. (c. 1635 A.D.).¹⁰³

Though more detailed commentaries often accompanied the teaching of the *Ajerrūmiyya*, the latter work, whose Sanhāja author may conceivably have been of southern Saharan origin, has remained the basic text throughout the Sudan.¹⁰⁴ Other important works in the field included *al-Kāfiya al-Shāfiya*, by Ibn Mālik al-Dimashqi (d. 672 A.H., 1273 A.D.), a work whose abridgement, known as *al-Khulāsa* (Alfiyyat Ibn Mālik) became the subject of advanced classroom exposition in which Sayyid Aḥmad is known to have excelled.¹⁰⁵ Similarly, Sayyid Aḥmad taught *Tashīl al-Fawā'id al-Naḥwiyya*, also by Ibn Mālik which offered the advantage of surveying the views of the early linguists. This work was studied by Aḥmad Bāba under Muḥammad Baghayughu and no doubt contributed to his own compositions on the relation between verbs and nominal clauses.¹⁰⁶

The science of *tafsīr* represented only a gradual departure from the

Qur'anic studies offered in elementary schools. For although it introduced the student to the body of Muslim doctrine and to the primary source of legislation, it was among most scholars approached from the point of view of philological exegesis. Considerable variation existed in the degree of interpretation offered by various commentators in this field with the result that students had to study a number of works in succession. However, the *Tafsir al-Jalālain*, begun by al-Mahallī and completed by al-Suyūṭī, became the most widely studied from the sixteenth century onwards.¹⁰⁷ Occasionally we find reference to a more interpretative text (properly speaking in the field of *ta'wīl*), such as *Madārik al-Tanzīl* of al-Nasafī and *Lubāb Ta'wīl Ibn Khāzin*, but such studies were reserved for the most outstanding scholars.¹⁰⁸ By and large, scholars acquired versatility in the theological aspects of Islam in the last stages of their education. At that time, if they so chose, they could undertake some study in one or another of the works of al-Sanūsī (d. 1486), or some other commentary in the field of *tawhīd*. This field acquired some vogue in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries judging by the fact that Ahmad b. al-Hājj Ahmad and his son Ahmad Bāba both wrote commentaries on *Sughra al-Sanūsī*.¹⁰⁹ By the nineteenth century, however, such studies were increasingly superseded by Sufi approaches to religious experience.

The field of *ḥadīth*, on the other hand, blended rather closely with the legalistic aspects of *tafsir* and formed the basic source material for jurisprudence. Naturally, the abilities of a jurist came to be measured by his familiarity with the precedents set by the Prophet. The scholars took upon themselves to study as many *ḥadīths* as possible, to the extent that Sidi al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī is recorded to have studied all six authoritative collections (*ṣaḥīḥs*).¹¹⁰ Ahmad Bāba, on the other hand, adopted the more representative approach of studying only *al-Bukhārī* and *Muslim*, and in his teaching activities he preferred to use abridgements by al-Qurṭubī of these two venerated collections alongside a redaction of the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of al-Turmudhī.¹¹¹ *Ḥadīth* compendia being organized according to their legal subject matter, it was quite common for a student to study only selections from them, and especially those pertaining to marriage, inheritance and market laws, besides prescriptions for individual conduct. However, in most cases there was a tendency to study only a short collection, the most popular being *Jāmi' al-Sagḥir*, of al-Suyūṭī. This, like the highly interpretative composition on the Prophet, the *Kitāb al-Shifa'* of al-Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ, became a basic textbook throughout the Sūdān.¹¹²

Kitāb al-Shifa' owed its popularity in North Africa and the Sūdān to the theoretical premises laid out by its theologically inclined author (d. 1149) concerning the mission of the Prophet and its implications for Muslim prescriptions and laws. It is surprising, nonetheless, that the exposition (*taṣrīf*) of this work became a permanent function at the Sankore Mosque. Al-Mukhtār al-Naḥawī may have been the first to institute that tradition

after having studied the *Kitāb* under al-Imām al-Zammūrī in Walāta. In any case, we know that his son And-Agh-Muhammad and his grandson Muhammad both discharged the honorific function though the latter declined the imamate of Sankore when offered him at his father's death. Subsequently, it seems, the function remained distinct from the imamate and there exists some evidence that it persisted up to the late eighteenth century.¹¹³

In the field of jurisprudence as such (*fiqh*) there was considerable variety in the textbooks studied though these overlapped to a great extent in their subject matter. It seems that repeated study of the same legal principles in several works served as an alternative for studying the same book several times. The *Risāla of Ibn Abū Zaid*, studied by nearly all scholars, was concerned mainly with personal prescriptions ranging from proper observance of prayer to ethical aspects of individual conduct. Its deficiency, or brevity, in the field of civic law, was compensated for by study of *Tuhfat al-Hakkām*, by Ibn 'Asim, a thoroughgoing summary in verse of court procedure, contracts, partnerships, market and land laws.¹¹⁴

By far the most important legal textbook, required of all scholars, was *Mukhtasar Khalil*, by the Egyptian jurist Khalil b. Ishaq al-Jundi (d. 1374). The popularity of this work is perplexing because, in view of its brevity, it lends itself to varying interpretations on numerous points in Mālikī law. It seems almost certain that its use in Timbuktu dates back to the fifteenth century, but at that time it was overshadowed by the more detailed *al-Mudawwana al-Kubra*.¹¹⁵ Subsequently, however, it became the single most important work in the entire educational system. Ahmad Bāba is reported by a much later scholar to have declared: 'We are Khalilis, if he erred we err'.¹¹⁶ According to Ahmad Bāba in his biography of its author, no less than 60 commentaries were written upon the *Mukhtasar* in various parts of the Muslim world. Timbuktu, for its part, contributed an appreciable share. Of a total of 12 scholars whose compositions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are specified in the chronicles, no less than seven contributed commentaries on parts or on the complete text of *Khalil*.¹¹⁷

The earliest commentary, it seems, was in the form of notes (*taqāyid*) in two volumes taken down by his students from the teachings of Mahmūd b. 'Umar. This commentary came into some use in North Africa and came to be confused with a similar two-volume commentary on the difficult passages of *Khalil*, which was edited by Ahmad Bāba from the notes of his teacher, Muhammad Baghayughu.¹¹⁸ Mahmūd b. 'Umar (d. 955 A.H.) is credited with having popularized the use of *Khalil* as a textbook during a long teaching career which spanned the entire first half of the sixteenth century. He studied the work under a certain al-Shaik 'Uthmān al-Maghribi (also referred to as Ahmad b. 'Uthmān) who may be related to al-Sayyid Ahmad b. Muhammad b. 'Uthmān b. 'Abdallāh b. Abi Ya'kūb,

a mysterious scholar whose erudition is highly praised by al-Sa'di. The teacher of Maḥmūd b. 'Umar, namely al-Shaikh 'Uthmān, traced a *sanad* in the study of this work, through al-Nūr al-Sanhūrī, to al-Shams al-Bisāṭī, a pupil of Khalīl in Cairo.¹¹⁹

Aḥmad Bāba, it seems, consciously sought to bring the works of the Timbuktu commentators to the attention of North African scholars during his exile in Morocco. For besides editing his master's work, he also abridged a commentary by al-'Aqīb b. 'Abdallāh al-Anṣamūnī on an important passage in *Khalīl*. The passage concerns the emphasis on intention, as distinct from action, a feature which distinguished Mālikism from the more formalistic attitude of other schools.¹²⁰ Other Timbuktu commentators included Ṣāliḥ b. Muḥammad and 'Umar (above-mentioned as Ṣāliḥ Takūn), a descendant of an ancient family in Timbuktu whose brother, Aḥmad Biru b. Muḥammad al-Mukhtār b. Aḥmad, was killed during the uprising against the Moroccan conquerors in 1591. The connections between this family and the Aqīs suggest that the most dynamic legal commentators belonged to the schools of transmissions centreing upon the Aqīt-Baghayughu axis.¹²¹

Mukhtasar Khalīl combined with the far more detailed *Muwatta'* of Mālik b. Anas, reputedly the first legal compendium in Islam to occupy the attention of would-be scholars during several years of their educational training.¹²² In most cases, the study of these works was followed by training in the field of *usūl*, the philosophy or theory of Muslim jurisprudence, which was the culmination of the educational process. Being concerned with the interrelationship between revelation and *ḥadīth* as sources of law, along with the function of *ijmā'* (consensus) and *qiyās* (analogy) in the classical legislative process, this field opened considerable scope for integration of the various sciences. Its methodology touched upon the science of *kalām* (philosophy) and the principles of philology, while dealing also with the classification and evaluation of the religious precepts (*ahkām*). Several textbooks were utilized in this field, including the *Jāmi' al-Jawāmi'* of al-Subkī, a Shāfi'i jurist, but the main source was the *Jāmi' al-Ummahāt* (also *Mukhtasar al-Furū'*) of Ibn al-Hājib (d. 1249).¹²³ We are inclined to believe that the title of *faqīh* (jurist) was reserved only to those scholars ('*ulamā'*) who acquired ample training in the *usūl* (sources) as well as the *furū'* (branches) of the law. However, we should point out that most scholars mentioned in the sources, obviously the most outstanding ones, are identified as jurists. At a higher level of erudition yet, the title of *mufti*, jurisconsult, attached only to those whose learning qualified them to give formal legal opinions (*fatwa*) on difficult questions in the law.

In revolving around the concept of *fiqh* (jurisprudence in the wider Roman concept of the word), the curricula of study in Timbuktu were designed to give the scholars as wide a humanistic training as was in vogue

in the Middle East at the time. Indeed, the prolific Egyptian scholar al-Suyūṭī, whose works in many branches were very popular, became something of a model to the literati of Timbuktu.¹²⁴ The writings of Aḥmad Bāba, which acquired widespread fame during his exile in Morocco and have been principally preserved north of the Sahara, are perhaps exemplary of this trend. Of a total of 56 compositions written by this scholar, 32 are still extant while the others are known only by their titles.¹²⁵ In most cases, the subject matter is known and it seems that fully a quarter are on theological themes, mainly divinity and devotion.¹²⁶ The bulk of Aḥmad Bāba's work, to a total of some 20–25 known compositions, falls more strictly in the legalistic aspects of jurisprudence. These include three general commentaries, among them a classification (*tarīf*) of the voluminous work known as *Jāmi' al-Mi'yār* by al-Wansharīshī (d. 1507).¹²⁷ Most of the legal compositions, however, were concerned with specific sections of Shari'a law, ranging from the marriage and divorce laws to market laws, in addition to three treatises hinging on the prerogatives of rulership.¹²⁸ Additionally, Aḥmad Bāba wrote some four compositions in grammar and a similar number in historical biography.¹²⁹ No doubt the learned interests of Aḥmad Bāba are representative of Timbuktu scholarship. For, although his fame overshadowed his predecessors and successors, he is reported to have testified that previous literati, from his own family at least, were equally as prolific.¹³⁰

A key to the integration of Timbuktu into the wider mould of Islamic scholarship lies in the availability of manuscript books. Aḥmad b. Agh-Muḥammad's *al-Furūḥ al-Qayūmiyya*, for example, quotes directly from a bibliography of no less than 40 grammatical works listed at the end of one of the copies.¹³¹ Likewise, Aḥmad Bāba's *Kifāyat al-Muhtāj*, a major historical source on Mālikī Islam, drew upon a bibliography of 23 biographical sources, besides numerous oral testimonies.¹³² There exists no evidence so far that a public library was kept at Sankore or one of the other mosques.¹³³ However, extensive private libraries are known to have existed from an early date and these were often open to consultation and borrowing by interested scholars. One such library was left behind after a long teaching career by al-Hājj Aḥmad b. 'Umar. It boasted 700 volumes, including many which were copied and copiously annotated by the owner himself, at a time in the early fifteenth century when the importation and copying of books was fast gaining pace.¹³⁴ It was probably inherited by Aḥmad, son of al-Hājj Aḥmad, who is specifically remembered as a collector of books. According to his son Aḥmad Bāba, his library 'combined everything that was valuable and rare'.¹³⁵ At the time of the Moroccan conquest, the library must have been partly seized and sold, for Aḥmad Bāba is reported in Morocco to have lost as many as 1600 volumes.¹³⁶

Leo Africanus suggests that books were the most valued among the various articles of trade which abounded during the sixteenth century in Timbuktu.¹³⁷ This, in turn, is fully borne out by the high praise accruing to Muḥammad

Baghayughu for his liberality in lending and giving away books to scholars who sought them.¹³⁸ The *Tārīkh al-Fatāsh* indicates that a copy of the *Qārius* (presumably of al-Firuzabādi) was once sold in Timbuktu for 80 *mithqāls*. This was an enormous sum which at the time in the sixteenth century exceeded the average price of a slave.¹³⁹ Unfortunately, we do not know how many volumes were involved; perhaps the copy was exceptionally well vowelled and ornamented. However, we do know that Ahmad b. And-Agh-Muhammad b. Mahmūd b. And-Agh-Muhammad owned a copy of Ibn Sida's *Muḥkam fi'l-Lughā*, in 28 volumes, which almost certainly cost as much. The last several volumes of this copy, which at one point came into the possession of Ahmad Bāba, are now preserved in Rabat. We learn from the colophons there that the copying of each volume was commissioned by Ahmad b. And-Agh-Muhammad for a sum of one *mithqāl* even though he supplied the paper to the scribe. An additional half a *mithqāl* had to be expended for remunerating a literatus, usually acquainted with the subject matter, who would proof-read the manuscript and correct its errors.¹⁴⁰ Since paper was imported from North Africa and Egypt, its cost must have been great, and we are inclined to believe that any large volume cost five *mithqāls* or more. Indeed, we learn that a volume of *Sharḥ al-Aḥkām* (a legal work thought to be by the Andalusian Muhammad al-Ishbīlī) was purchased in 983 A.H. (1575/6 A.D.) by the same Ahmad b. And-Agh-Muhammad for slightly over four *mithqāls* even though the copy was seemingly worn.¹⁴¹ The demand for Arabic books remained strong in Timbuktu up to the mid-nineteenth century. At that time Ahmad al-Bakkā'i even approached the European traveller, Henry Barth, on the possibility of importing such books through trade with England.¹⁴² What is remarkable is that the books in demand included the rarest and most voluminous besides the more basic texts used in the pedagogical process.¹⁴³

The intensity of contact with North Africa and Egypt gave the scholars a wide span of subjects, both religious and secular, to choose from in their educational pursuits. It is interesting, for example, that the Egyptian al-Suyūṭī was opposed to the study of logic and is known to have had a correspondence with the North African al-Maghīlī who championed it.¹⁴⁴ In this controversy, the scholars of Timbuktu clearly took the side of al-Maghīlī to the extent that two among them from the Aqī family wrote commentaries in the field of logic during the sixteenth century.¹⁴⁵

Other secular sciences which were studied included mathematics and astronomy. The former was pursued only at the most basic levels of arithmetic; it formed such a secondary part of the educational process that the sources do not mention any commentary used as a textbook in this field. Astronomical treatises, on the other hand, are more frequently mentioned, and it appears that this field of learning, much like history, was a subject of popular interest as well as of training.¹⁴⁶ In some cases, as that of al-Hājj Muhammad al-'Irāqī, whose descendants several generations later were

paramount at the time of the French conquest, interest in astronomical phenomena was strongly tinged by astrological conventions.¹⁴⁷ What is apparent is that the scholars gained some training in meteorology: the chronicles often record unusually high floodings of the Niger, as well as heavy rains and winds, according to the solar as well as the lunar calendar.¹⁴⁸

Finally, mention may be made of the sciences of rhetoric and prosody (*arūd*) which formed a basic part of the education of all full-fledged scholars. In the former field, the famous *Uqūd al-Jumān* was widely studied, but the *Alfiyya* of al-Suyūṭī became the basic text. It seems that Timbuktu produced an eminent scholar in this field in the person of Muhammad Bāba b. Muhammad al-Amin, already mentioned as commentator on the *Alfiyya* and as having enjoyed the tutelage of eight prominent masters.¹⁴⁹ He seems to have enjoyed wide interests in *belles lettres*, judging by the fact that he wrote a treatise on *Maqāmāt al-Hariri*. It is perhaps testimony to the tendency of specialization in Timbuktu that one of his other compositions was a commentary on the *Khazrajīyya*, the most widely utilized textbook in prosody.¹⁵⁰ He, along with many other scholars, distinguished himself in his poetical output, through the conventional theme of *madīh*, praise of the Prophet.¹⁵¹ Our earliest example of Timbuktu poetry is a work written in the mid-sixteenth century by Sidi Yahya al-Tadulsi in commemoration of his master Muhammad al-Kāburi.¹⁵² This poetical form was also bound by conventions but it afforded ample scope for self-expression and imagery. The chroniclers have perhaps greatly overemphasized the pious themes in literature in their attempt to impart an aura of sanctity on the history of their city. The author of *Tārīkh al-Fatāsh*, for example, mentions the forty-eighth and fiftieth chapters of *Maqāmāt al-Hariri* in such a casual way as to give the impression that all his local readers would be familiar with them.¹⁵³ Nonetheless, there is no doubt whatsoever that the learning process, whatever its practical implications for the social standing of the literati among the elite of the city, was built around religious rather than secular themes.

Hierarchy of learned status

A key to understanding the position of scholars in Timbuktu lies in the existence of a pyramidal socio-educational order in which the criteria of respectability and status ranged from mere command of literacy at the base to full erudition at the pinnacle. To begin with, there were great distinctions in prestige among the learned themselves including the possibility already mentioned that full-fledged jurists (*fuqahā'*) were more highly honoured than the main body of scholars (*'ulamā'*). Secondly, there was another socio-educational stratum comprising elementary school teachers (*mu'allims*), mosque functionaries (especially *mu'adhdhins*), scribes and

governmental secretaries (*kātib*s) besides a horde of *Alfas* whose livelihood was partly enhanced by their education. These all enjoyed a level of learning approaching and sometimes equalling that of the scholars. Thirdly, it seems that the entire body of comfortable craftsmen and retail traders, forming a 'respectable stratum' in society, gave their sons one degree of literacy or another in the Qur'anic schools (*maktabs*). By virtue of its aspirations to the advancement of its sons through education, this stratum naturally looked to the scholars for leadership and patronage.

Among the scholars themselves it is nearly impossible to reconstruct fully the hierarchy of prestige, even in the most richly documented periods, because of the selectivity of the sources. Ahmad Bāba's biographical dictionary, for example, was intended for a wide Muslim audience to cover the most prominent scholars of the Māliki school in North Africa and Egypt, besides the Sūdān. Accordingly, the sections on Timbuktu are concerned strictly with the most erudite and, even then, the omission of Ahmad Maghia, not to mention others, is remarkable. Similarly, al-Sa'di records the obituaries of some 50 scholars, along with some 20 notables who must have included a substantial proportion of scholars, for the period beginning with the Moroccan conquest in 1592 up to the completion of his chronicle in 1655. But a considerable proportion of these were relatives, friends and neighbours of al-Sa'di and his father. Accordingly, they contribute only in the most indirect way to assessing the number of those who fully qualify to the title of scholar. His genealogical evidence on the major families supplements the picture, but it remains a fact that many of the scholars whose testimony is cited on Songhai times in *Tārīkh al-Fattāsh* are not identifiable in any other source.

At the risk of a considerable margin of error we may perhaps estimate the leadership of the class of literati in Timbuktu, comprising fully qualified scholars, at some 200–300 in the sixteenth century. As much as half of the scholars, however, may have been drawn from a limited number of families, though the rest represented a wider spectrum of kinship groups. Thus, in the second half of the sixteenth century, the Aqit and And-Agh-Muhammad families contributed together some 15–20 prominent scholars, all belonging roughly to the same generation. A century later, or rather shortly after 1700 A.D., the Kidādu (Gidādo), Baghayughu and Maghia families contributed a yet larger number of prominent scholars. The latter detail is particularly interesting since by that time the body of scholars may have declined, along with the general fortunes of the city, to half of what it used to be. Despite the continued decline, the evidence of Caillié and Barth, coupled with that of a brief chronicle dating to around 1800 A.D., suggests that the influx of Kunta, Fulāni and other scholars from neighbouring clans, or at least their yearly residence in Timbuktu at the time of the caravan season in fall and winter, sustained the body of scholars at an appreciable numerical strength.¹⁵⁴

The group usually gave recognition to a single individual as the most erudite of his time, but not necessarily to one of the holders of the major posts. For even during Maḥmūd b. 'Umar's long tenure in the judgeship (up to 1548 A.D.), when he was virtual ruler of the city, he may have been overshadowed in learning by the Tuareg Masūfa scholar al-'Aqib b. 'Abdullāh al-Anṣamuni. Ahmad Bāba attributes to the latter the composition of a *risāla* entitled *al-Jawāb al-Majdūd 'ala As'ilat al-Qādi Muḥammad b. Maḥmūd*. This, as its title implies, was an answer to queries on the application of the law made to Anṣamuni by al-Qādi Muḥammad, Judge of Timbuktu from 955 to 972 A.H. Quite possibly, however, the treatise was addressed to Maḥmūd b. 'Umar himself, rather than to his son Muḥammad, for al-Anṣamuni appears to have died around 950 A.H. (1543/4 A.D.) while al-Qādi Maḥmūd was still alive.¹⁵⁵ Somewhere before that time, during Askia Muḥammad's reign, al-Anṣamuni's *fatwas* (formal legal opinions) were sought out by the Songhai ruler and led to the composition of a treatise entitled *Ajwibat al-Faqir 'an As'ilat al-Amir*.¹⁵⁶ It is not unreasonable to assume that this scholar influenced Askia Muḥammad in his organization of the Songhai empire. For, while al-Anṣamuni took some interest in parochial organization of towns and larger villages, as we shall see in the following chapter, Askia Muḥammad was remembered for having first introduced the institution of the judgeship in Jenne and 'other towns which deserved it'.¹⁵⁷ Al-Anṣamuni found equals in erudition in travelled scholars who taught in Hausaland besides studying in North Africa and the east. Ahmad Bāba recalls live disputations in Timbuktu in which al-Anṣamuni, combining the influence of al-Suyūṭi and al-Maghili, appears to have held the opinions most valued.¹⁵⁸ However, neither he nor any of the scholars of his generation left an imprint on Timbuktu equal to that of Maḥmūd b. 'Umar. The latter, living to the venerable age of 85 after a long teaching and juridical career, acquired the image of a saint (*walī*) after his death and his tomb remained a place of pilgrimage venerated in Timbuktu and throughout the area.

The period towards the very end of the sixteenth century affords us the best picture of the hierarchy of prestige among scholars because the upheaval caused by the Moroccan conquest brought to the fore scholars of the second and third rank whose identity would otherwise not be fully known. At that time, leadership was in the hands of a 'triumvirate' consisting of 'Abu Ḥafs 'Umar Aqit, Muḥammad Baghayughu and Ahmad Maghia. 'Umar, being the eldest living son of Maḥmūd b. 'Umar, stood to inherit the 'temporal' leadership of Timbuktu, while Muḥammad Baghayughu was certainly accorded higher recognition for the wide scope of his learning. Ahmad Maghia, on the other hand, overshadowed them both in terms of the influence he commanded throughout the area, judging by the fact that he, like Maḥmūd b. 'Umar, was accorded the status of *walī* after

his death. The court of his tomb (*rawda*) became a place of refuge and immunity from persecution throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁵⁹ His memory may have been accorded this honour because he fell a 'martyr' at the hands of the Moroccans following the uprising against them; however it is remarkable that he alone among the three so far mentioned is accorded the title of Mufti.¹⁶⁰ This may suggest that his legal opinions were widely sought, especially, it seems, in the areas stretching westwards towards his original home of Walāta.

Second in rank after the above three, we count several scholars, beginning with Abu Muḥammad 'Abdullāh b. Aḥmad Boryo who, besides being a grammarian and a linguist, is also accorded the title of Mufti.¹⁶¹ The same generation boasted of two outstanding scholars in al-Amin b. Aḥmad, whose testimonies the study of *ṣaḥāba* (the Prophet's companions on al-Rahmān b. Aḥmad al-Mujtahid whose honorific nickname invokes the memory of the earliest jurists in Islam and may suggest that he favoured independent reasoning (*jihād*), as distinct from *taqlīd* or emulation) for elaboration and interpretation of revelation.¹⁶² Naturally, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. 'Abd al-Rahmān, of the al-Ḥājj family, who was raised to the judgeship by the Moroccan conquerors, ranked high in the hierarchy of prestige. The same was true of Ḥabīb b. Muḥammad Bāba who declined the judgeship when offered him by the Moroccans though that entailed the payment of a full 400 *mithqāls* simply to be relieved of the responsibility.¹⁶³ The latter, it seems, was the son of the erudite Muḥammad Bāba b. Muḥammad al-Amin who was approaching the age of 70 at this juncture and no doubt also occupied a leading position in the hierarchy. His age-grade included Ṣāliḥ Takun, a Soninke scholar and author of a commentary on *Mukhtasar Khalīl*, whose intercession on behalf of citizens at the Songhai court is reported to have always been rewarded with success. Similar influence, even to the extent of being acknowledged *walī* in his lifetime, was commanded by Mūsā 'Aryān al-Ra's, especially it seems in the wake of the Moroccan conquest, when he dissipated a considerable fortune purchasing slaves to grant them their freedom.¹⁶⁴ Finally, Muḥammad Zankanu b. Abkar al-Maddāh, whose son al-Faqīh al-Mukhtār patronized the *Muddāḥ* and procured yearly shipments for the purpose from Jenne, probably enjoyed equal ranking to Maḥmūd Ka't, highly influential in Gao, to Muḥammad Gidādu al-Fulāni, *imām* of the Main Mosque at the time of the conquest, and to Sīdīq b. Muḥammad Ta'alla al-Kāburi, who shortly succeeded him.¹⁶⁵ To these we need only add Muḥammad b. Muḥammad Kara who attained the imamate of Sankore and paved the way for the emergence of his son, al-Qāḍi Muḥammad, as a major figure in the succeeding generation.

Leaving aside those scholars who were brothers, cousins and distant cousins of individuals already mentioned above, the third and the widest rank in the pyramidal hierarchy was comprised of fully qualified scholars covered

only incidentally in the sources. Thus, the *imām* of the Market Mosque (*jami' al-Suq*) is not even named, though his presence was probably required at all major meetings of the body of scholars. The *imām* of the mosque of the Tuātis, on the other hand, is referred to as Maḥmūd b. Muḥammad al-Zagharāni, his *nisba* suggesting Songhai descent.¹⁶⁶ Al-Sa'di mentions among his own relatives and in-laws certain scholars who probably did not attain the rank which he himself enjoyed half a century later. They include his father, 'Abdullāh b. 'Amir, whose *sanad* was apparently traced backwards to al-Imām Ibrāhīm al-Zalafi, al-Shaikh Tamat al-Wankari, whose Wangara family of scholars seems distinct from the Baghayughu, and al-Sayyid 'Abd al-Rahmān b. al-Imām al-Qāḍi Sayyid 'Ali al-Anṣārī, whose father may have discharged the religious and legal affairs of the Tuareg Kel Antasar while resident in Timbuktu.¹⁶⁷ Al-Sa'di's family also enjoyed intermarriage links with the grandsons of al-Sharīf Aḥmad al-Ṣaqali, among whom al-Shaikh Muḥammad b. 'Uthmān and Bāba b. 'Umar played a leading role in the resistance to the Moroccans and fell 'martyrs' in the process.¹⁶⁸ Otherwise, we have reference in the pedigrees of their sons and grandsons to al-Mukhtār, Shaikh of the *muddāḥ*, 'Abdullāh Sirī b. al-Imām Sayyid 'Ali al-Jazūli, al-Faqīh Abu Bakr al-Ghadāmsi and al-Faqīh Ṣāliḥ Wankara. These, it should be emphasized, were not equal in stature to such educators as 'Abd al-Mawla al-Jalāli, 'Uthmān al-Filāli and Muḥammad Kab b. Jābir Kab who were made famous by the erudition of their students. Nor were they equal to Muṣṭafa b. Misir And-'Umar, Muḥammad Bāba Misir al-Dalimi, 'Uthmān b. Muḥammad b. Muḥammad Danbu Sili al-Fulāni and 'Ali Sili b. Abu Bakr b. Shihāb al-Walāti, who are mentioned in their own right. Nonetheless, they and all the above-mentioned are to be differentiated from such lesser literati as Alfa Muḥammad Wuld Adidar and Alfa Kunba'ali who formed part of a delegation sent to the Moroccan Sultān.¹⁶⁹ Those referred to in the seventeenth-century chronicles as Alfa, it seems, belonged to an intermediate rank between fully qualified scholars and the whole range of literate persons in the city.

Focusing above on the hierarchy of prestige which pertained at the time of the Moroccan conquest in 1591, our discussion has rested so far on the assumption that this highly documented period is illustrative of later times. In the mid-seventeenth century, for example, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Maḥmūd Baghayughu al-Wangari, occupied such a pre-eminent position that his death in 1666 A.H. (1655 A.D.) was construed as symbolizing the very extinction of that procession of erudition which gave Timbuktu its fame in its classical period.¹⁷⁰ Yet, while his brother's sons and grandsons achieved highly venerated positions in their own times, he himself was equalled in stature by Muḥammad Gurdū, 'Abd al-Rahmān b. Aḥmad Maghia and Muḥammad al-Wadī'a b. Sa'īd b. Muḥammad Gidādu al-Fulāni. A century later, around 1750 A.D., Abu 'Abdullāh Bābir b. Aḥmad

b. Ibrāhīm b. 'Abdullāh b. Ahmad Maghia earned the praise in *Tadhkirat al-Nasyān* of being 'the unique of his age', an honorific previously accorded only to Ahmad Bāba and Muhammad Baghayughu b. Muhammad Gudu.¹⁷¹ Yet, a series of obituaries recorded around 1800 under the title of *Dhikr al-Wafayāt*, shows him only to have been one among equals, his main distinction being his assumption of the judgeship.¹⁷² Even in the early twentieth century, Paul Marty recorded biographical notes on several prominent scholars in Timbuktu which showed that gradations of prestige and influence continued to be subtle and multi-faceted.¹⁷³ In the meantime, the pyramidal stratification of the literati remained strong, though the distinction between full-fledged scholars and other Alfas became less clear-cut.¹⁷⁴

The rank and file of the literati comprised an extensive and heterogeneous group widely varying in its educational attainments. On the one hand they included well-to-do merchants who earned prestige, despite their limited education, by their attendance in the circles of scholars and their patronage of needy students and Alfas. On the other hand, the main body of the group was made up of retailers and craftsmen, especially members of the tailoring craft, whose means did not allow them to devote their full energies towards a complete education. From the sixteenth century on, a substantial portion of the latter came to be identified, by virtue of their specialization in laudatory poetry on the Prophet Muhammad, as 'Praise Singers' or *Muddāh*. In that capacity they were entitled to some support made through alms at the mosques by wealthy scholars and notables as well as to gifts made on the occasion of Ramadan by state officials. The title 'Shaikh al-Maddāhīn' seems to refer to an acknowledged notable among the group, a literatus often drawn from one of the leading families.¹⁷⁵

The corporation of tailors, if it was at all organized along corporative lines, occupied a unique position in the status stratification of society. For, whether by design or custom, or a combination of both, it was historically open only to alfas and would-be alfas. In a sense, this trade acted as a safety valve for those students with modest means who devoted themselves to study over several years without having a secure source of livelihood. In some cases, they were apprenticed to a master-tailor, himself a literatus, who provided them with a Muslim education besides a skill in the craft. In adulthood, tailoring, along with some commerce in textiles, could become the main means of income for an Alfa or, failing that, it could supplement his income from alms besides scribal and notarial activities.¹⁷⁶

In view of their special position, it is not surprising that *Tārīkh al-Fattāsh* has left us some quantitative evidence concerning the tailors. It states that in the late sixteenth century Timbuktu boasted of 26 tailoring houses (*iindi*), each having an average of 50 apprentices serving under its master, while some of them had as many as 70 or 100. This piece of information,

cited on the authority of a certain Muhammad b. Mawlūd, was intended to emphasize the high value placed on learning in pre-Ruma times. It seems rather doubtful that the tailoring houses supported a full 1300 apprentices. The master in these houses is described at once as a Shaikh, Ra'īs (chief) and Mu'allim.¹⁷⁷ This suggests that his 'apprentices' included adults among the literati who, well beyond the stage of training, attached themselves to his establishment in order to secure their supply of textiles.¹⁷⁸ No doubt also, the tailoring establishments provided shelter and sustenance for students who came to the city from elsewhere until such time as they completed their studies or secured an independent source of income. Otherwise, the extensiveness of the tailoring craft is not surprising, though by the first two decades of the present century the city could boast of no more than five or six tailoring houses.¹⁷⁹ Textiles of various sorts accounted for a substantial percentage of the value of all commodities imported to West Africa through the trans-Saharan trade. Local manufactures were not unknown, judging by the importation of cotton and the general availability of wool in the area. But while most manufactures originated in Morocco and the east in the early periods, European and Hausa products from Kano increasingly found their way to Timbuktu in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁸⁰

The tailor-alfas undoubtedly enjoyed a higher level of education than the members of other trades. They belonged to the same status stratum, in terms of socio-educational criteria, as elementary school teachers (*mu'allims*), mosque functionaries (*mu'adhdhins*) and scribes and lesser secretaries (*kātib*s). Of the status of *mu'allims*, hardly anything is known besides the reference to the exceptionally prestigious Mu'allim 'Alī Takiyya. Additionally, the anonymous author of *Tadhkirat al-Nasyān* in the eighteenth century refers to his grandfather, Alfa al-Amin b. Muhammad Mūdu, who died in 1657, as an 'instructor of youths' (*mu'allim al-sibyān*).¹⁸¹ It is rather interesting that none of the earlier chroniclers devotes a biography or an obituary to his elementary school teacher; indeed, in the case of none of the prominent scholars is the name of a *mu'allim* listed among his teachers. This could either mean that the prominent scholars received their earliest training in their homes or else that the status of *mu'allims* was not sufficiently high to earn them attention in the chronicles. Towards the nineteenth century, however, and especially at its end, common adherence to the same Sufi confraternity (Tijāniyya or Qādiriyya) may have reduced the distinction between *mu'allims* and full-fledged scholars.

It would be hazardous to estimate the numerical strength of the rank-and-file literati beyond what is known about the tailoring houses. The group was broadly defined in terms of its acquisition of some learning in *tafsir* and *hadīth* beyond the level of elementary schools. Some who received such training went on, often past their middle years, to become

scholars. Others fully devoted their energies to tailoring or became mosque functionaries or scribes. Based on his participation in the life of Timbuktu around the turn of the century, Dupuis-Yakouba observed that, by virtue of the frequency of commercial correspondence, scribes could readily find employment.¹⁸² Sometimes they served as assistants to the judge or one of the *imāms*, though most often the latter 'employed' the most promising among their students. Another avenue of deriving an income was to seek employment as secretary (*kātib*) to one of the state officials. Secretaries to the Songhai monarchs, and later to the Pashas of Timbuktu, were sometimes drawn from among the ranks of accomplished scholars. But provincial governors and the chiefs of the quarters and of neighbouring clans (if the latter were not themselves scholars enjoying the services of their students) had to satisfy themselves with the less qualified literati to assist them in their correspondence.

The sustenance of an exceptionally large number of literati in Timbuktu was made possible in part by occasional and yearly contributions from the rulers and state officials. The precedent for this may have been set as early as the visit of Mansa Mūsā in the fourteenth century, but it was Askia Muhammad who was long remembered for his patronage of Muslim scholarship. Of his time in the early sixteenth century, Leo Africanus wrote:

Here in Timbuktu there are great stores of doctors, judges, priests and other learned men, bountifully maintained at the king's cost and charges. And hither are brought divers manuscripts or written books out of Barbary, which are sold for more money than any other merchandise.¹⁸³

Traditions dating to the nineteenth century which have been incorporated into the defective copy of *Tārīkh al-Fatāsh* have exaggerated the generosity of Askia Muhammad to the extent of shedding some doubt on his administrative acumen. They claim, for example, that he bestowed the plantations of a whole region (*nāhiya*), including several villages, on the Sharif Ahmad al-Ṣāqalī.¹⁸⁴ Such extravagant claims, however, are unique to the nineteenth century and are not reconcilable with earlier evidence.¹⁸⁵

Nonetheless, it appears probable that the Askias made donations to the most prominent scholars who, in turn, contributed to the sustenance of a large number of needy students and Alfas. At the height of Songhai wealth and power, Askia Daūd set up farms manned by 30 slaves (presumably in each farm) devoted to the maintenance of the poor of Timbuktu.¹⁸⁶ Whether from these farms or additionally, he is recorded to have distributed 4000 measures of grain (*sūniyyas*), on a yearly basis, to be distributed by al-Qāḍi al-ʿAqīb.¹⁸⁷ At that time, in the fifteenth century, the wealth of Timbuktu was such that two scholars were able to make donations of an equal value for the upkeep of the poor.¹⁸⁸ In the eighteenth century, however, the sum involved often exceeded the total taxation extracted from the city's merchants.¹⁸⁹ But despite the decline, a

tradition survived whereby the Pashas made yearly gifts in the form of textiles at the end of Ramaḍān to the body of scholars and especially to the *Muddāh*.¹⁹⁰ Even in the nineteenth century, Ahmad b. Ahmad Lobbo, ruler of Massina and nominal sovereign over Timbuktu, dispatched to the city considerable gifts of grain. Ahmad al-Bakkā'i alone received 800 *sūniyyas* despite the great tension between him and the monarch.¹⁹¹ The contributions of rulers do not seem to have been made in the form of stable endowments, such as *hubūs*, which allotted revenues of a specific estate for the maintenance of the literati. Nonetheless, their rendition on a yearly basis during the month of Ramaḍān enjoyed the full force of custom and secured for the city 'repatriation' of a substantial portion of the taxes collected from its merchants.

Outside the small body of scholars and the much wider stratum of lesser literati, the chronicles have left us a unique piece of evidence concerning the extent of literacy in sixteenth-century Timbuktu. This occurs in *Tārīkh al-Fatāsh*, which reports that Timbuktu housed as many as 150–180 Qur'ānic schools (*makrābs*) in the last years of the Songhai regime.¹⁹² The statement, in the context where it occurs, has certain important implications. First, the extensive number of schools, coupled with the data on the craft of tailors, served the seventeenth-century author as one of the major criteria for measuring the high fortunes attained by Timbuktu in the sixteenth century. This, at once, emphasizes the value placed in society upon literacy as a first step towards learning and erudition. Secondly, since the *Fatāsh* was completed sometime after 1665, its author implicitly indicates that the decline in literacy and learning which was to accompany the slow demographic decline of the city was already apace in the mid-seventeenth century. This fully confirms the evidence known from elsewhere that the Moroccan conquerors (Ar. *al-Rumār*, locally Ruma or Arma), though contributing large numbers to the declining population, took little interest in learning.¹⁹³ Thirdly, the statement concerning the schools is made upon the authority of a certain al-Shaikh Muḥammad b. Ahmad (possibly Muḥammad b. Ahmad Baghayughu) who is said to have 'seen' them.¹⁹⁴ This, and the fact that the Songhai period was still live in the memory of traditionalists who had lived then, lends considerable credibility to the testimony.

The fact, otherwise, that some 150 *mu'allims*, each having his own Qur'ānic school, practised their trade in Timbuktu during the late sixteenth century need not be doubted. The chronicles mention in passing numerous scholars and literati who were not prominent enough to have specific biographies or obituaries devoted to them. The problem, however, lies in the fact that the author of *Tārīkh al-Fatāsh* gives us an inflated impression of the enrolment of these schools, for he suggests that one of these schools, belonging to Mu'allim Takariyya, enrolled as many as 200 students at one time. Al-Shaikh Muḥammad is recorded to have visited

that school on a Wednesday, the day of the week when students brought to the headmaster donations from their parents in lieu of tuition. He later recalled: 'I looked around at the writing boards used by the boys in the court of his house and counted of them one hundred and thirty boards. I guessed that the whole of the Qur'ān might have been transcribed on these boards.'¹⁹⁵ While the text of *al-Fattāsh* suggests that Mu'allim Takariyya's school was exceptionally large, the author does not give us any direct idea concerning the average enrolment of other schools. Accordingly, we may be free to assume that of a total of some 150 schools, each had an average of some 50 students. This would give us a total elementary student population of some 7500. Possibly basing himself on the above data, Cissoko estimated the population of Timbuktu during the late sixteenth century at 75 000.¹⁹⁶

The possibility that the elementary students comprised one-tenth of the population seems acceptable but does not directly help us assess the population of the city as a whole. For we have no information on the age distribution of the inhabitants at any one time nor do we know how long students remained enrolled in primary schools. Many probably enrolled for several years, and thereby secured full command of literacy, but others were able to attend for two or three years only. Their numbers, and especially in the 10-20 age bracket, were considerably augmented by outsiders to the city. These came from neighbouring towns and villages, as well as from the nomadic Barābīsh, Tuareg, Sanhāja and Fulānis who sent their sons for learning to Timbuktu. In practice, though not in theory, the literacy schools were beyond the reach of certain sectors of the population, including the sons of slaves, porters and street vendors, besides the servile agricultural groups living at the outskirts. In the *maktāb* of Mu'allim Takariyya, the voluntary tuition ranged from five to ten cowry shells a week, a modest sum which over several years, however, could impose a financial burden on some of the more modest traders and craftsmen.¹⁹⁷ There is no doubt that some of the lesser schools were subsidized by the wealthy merchants and scholars, but in some cases these need not have served more than 15 students at a time.¹⁹⁸ By and large, we are inclined to believe that the *maktābs* enrolled an average of 25 students each, the total elementary student population never exceeding 4000-5000.

Our own rough estimate of up to 50 000 inhabitants for the population of Timbuktu during the late sixteenth century is based on a wide range of indirect evidence. This includes various indications concerning the size of merchant caravans and armies in the area, along with economic data which lend themselves only with great difficulty to systematization. Particularly significant is the comparative evidence on the size of cities throughout the Sudan which suggests, among other things, that Timbuktu was of equal demographic strength to Jenne, and that both fell short of the size of the Songhai capital, Gao, in the late sixteenth century. The author of *Tārīkh*

al-Fattāsh mentions, for example, on the authority of a certain al-Shaikh Muḥammad b. 'Alī Drāmi, an argument which once took place in Gao at the time of Askia al-Hājj II with youths from Hausaland. The latter claimed that their metropolis of Kano was greater than any of the cities of the Songhai empire. This it seems led their opponents in Gao, including some resident youths from Timbuktu, to count the houses of the Songhai capital to a total of 7626 permanent structures, excluding straw huts on the outskirts of the city. Considering the patriarchal organization of commercial urban centres and the extensiveness of many households, this figure has often been used as evidence that Gao boasted some 75 000 inhabitants.¹⁹⁹ And indeed, when the evacuation of Gao was contemplated as a defensive measure at the time of the Moroccan conquest, it was asserted that 2000 boats, at the least, would be available for the purpose.²⁰⁰ Other particulars from the sources unmistakably lead us to believe that the demographic growth of Timbuktu under the Songhai regime was not comparable to that of Gao, just as its decline after the Moroccan conquest was not as dramatic. Naturally, no definitive statements can be made on this subject, but it seems safe nonetheless to assume that the population of Timbuktu never exceeded 50 000 inhabitants.

Secondly, we have the evidence of the early European explorers and travellers. These visited Timbuktu at a time in the nineteenth century when the city had long been experiencing a process of decline. The most reliable among the early estimates, though conservative in range, was that made by Henry Barth in 1854 of 13 000-23 000 inhabitants. This was essentially confirmed by Lenz in 1877 when he placed the population at 18 000-20 000. Barth learned that the city had been twice as large in the past, presumably during Songhai and early Ruma times.²⁰¹ The topographical evidence which he and others observed shows indeed that a large part of the city had been gradually abandoned over the centuries. According to mid-nineteenth-century informants, the Sankore Mosque which stands at the northwest corner of the city had once been well within the limits of the built-up section. Likewise, the tomb of Mahmūd b. 'Umar Aqīt, which stands half a mile north of the city's limits, had once been within it.²⁰² Remains of previous buildings stretching far to the north of the city are still quite evident though interspersed on account of the accumulating sand. These areas, as we believe, were probably abandoned during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.²⁰³ Even in the nineteenth century, some portions of the city, principally to the south, were abandoned at a time when the trans-Saharan trade, and especially the Arwān-Timbuktu axis, was gradually succumbing to other trade routes.²⁰⁴ Estimates which place the population at some 5000-10 000 at the time of the French conquest may be somewhat haphazard; but they reflect a further downward trend which was slightly reversed in the twentieth century.²⁰⁵

The main implication of the evidence surveyed above is that a minimal command of literacy was universal among all but the poorest sections of the free population. Indeed, Caillié observed after visiting the city in the early nineteenth century that 'all the negroes of Timbuktu are able to read the Koran and even know it by heart'.²⁰⁶ The literate population probably included most of the male retail traders who, along with women active in the market, supported half to two-thirds of the inhabitants at any single time. Unfortunately, we have no detailed breakdown of the craftsman and small-merchant community in precolonial times beyond indications that masons, leather-workers and tanners, tailors, butchers and muleteers, as well as inn-keepers, enjoyed guild-type organizations. These groups, and to a lesser extent silver- and wood-workers (manufacturers of jewellery, tools and utensils), were strongly integrated into the social order dominated by scholars. To them may be added commercial brokers (*teifa*), expert measurers of grain and precious metal, as well as the specialized scribes whose function was to mark the slabs of salt arriving in the seasonal caravans before their export further south.²⁰⁷ In all these cases, command of literacy may have enhanced the individual's capacity in his trade, especially as virtually all craftsmen were merchants in those commodities which became the raw material for their manufactures. However, the main value of a childhood education in the *maktabs*, lacking as it does formal training in arithmetic or book-keeping, was perceived in terms of the pious purpose of securing some knowledge of Muslim precepts as well as a certain level of respectability among the established families of the city.

Given the extent to which the quest for literacy and learning permeated the whole city, the scholars naturally stood in a highly venerated position. Currents of intergenerational mobility, which were persistent though slow over the centuries, acted as a barrier against their differentiation into an upper caste of some sort defined by ethnic criteria. The influence of neighbouring nomadic societies, where differentiation between 'clerical' and other clans took place, tends to complicate the picture, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These factors, the influence of wealth, and the distinction between military and learned elites will be discussed more fully in Chapter 5. Before turning to that subject, however, we will address ourselves to the 'administrative' and related role of scholars in Chapter 4.

At this point, it is possible at least to say that the Songhai sector in the city's population did not contribute to the highest ranks of learning as much as the Soninke, Sanhaja, Tuareg (Masufa) or Malinke (Wangara) sectors. Indeed, even the Fulani – a small minority in the population of the city up to around 1600 – were more prominent among the highest ranks of scholarship in Timbuktu than the Songhai. Perhaps the Songhai themselves were a small minority in the population of Timbuktu up to and including the Songhai period in the sixteenth century. Another possible

explanation is that the Ka't scholars, who are conventionally identified as Soninke, were in fact Songhai. Regrettably, we cannot be certain on this point – nor are we sure about the ethnic identity of many scholars featured early in the sources. What is evident is that the Songhai, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries at least, came to be seen as a 'military elite', much like the Ruma. In all probability, the scholars among them tended to lose their ethnic Songhai identity, but not their language, much as among the Maghsharen Tuareg who settled at Timbuktu.