

CHAPTER 7

Summary and conclusions

of the city – a base which was relatively stable and constant. This base is to be found in the elaborate structure and affiliations of the learned hierarchy.

A second finding which amplified the need for detailed social structural analysis was also introduced at the beginning of this study when we described Timbuktu as a 'city of scholars'. This proposition was not merely an hypothesis which could be verified or otherwise rejected. Instead, it was a proposition which we encountered in the sources. Indeed, it pertained to Timbuktu's own conception of its experience. The scholars simply occupied a pronounced role – not only at Timbuktu, but in other Muslim communities in the Western Sudan which came to be viewed as 'communities of clerics'. Insofar as Timbuktu gained a reputation as the 'city of scholars' *par excellence* in the Sudan, its internal organization and social structure was especially interesting. In other respects Timbuktu exemplified a social tradition which is encountered elsewhere in the region: namely, a tradition whereby a whole society came to be characterized by the status and role of its scholars.

Basically, the project which confronted us was to find a syncretical framework for examining (and eventually describing) the significance and meaning of this phenomenon. This could not be done through exclusive examination of the role and status of scholars. Such an approach would presuppose, in itself, total differentiation of scholars from the rest of society. Instead, it was necessary to examine the internal criteria of status and prerogative which made for close identification between scholars and society. In the administrative sphere, these criteria gave the city some of the characteristics of an autonomous 'polity'. Nonetheless, the factor of autonomy was only a part (though an important part) of this phenomenon. Another part was the accessibility of learned status to at least the leading sectors of society. But this in itself would not have been sufficiently significant had it not been for the diffusion of literacy (and more modest levels of learning) to the rest of the urban population. The parochial and religious aspects of Muslim learning were also important – especially as they pertained to subtle criteria of moral, legal and social order which were subject to adaptation in different societies. In the end, the factors involved were as much 'historical' as they were embodied in 'academic' (or pedagogical), administrative and status criteria. Indeed, the relevant factors were sufficiently varied as to be encompassed only by the concept of a *social tradition*.

Regrettably, the idea of a social tradition is not as familiar as it should be. More frequently, we speak of an 'intellectual tradition' or a 'religious tradition', or otherwise of 'traditional societies'. In so doing, we essentially overlook the fact that in every society traditions tend to have their own history. The intellectual, religious, sociological and other facets interact with each other rather than strictly being separate. Indeed, it is the

It may perhaps be said that any historical study is shaped (and should be shaped) by the nature of the existing evidence. This is particularly true in research on the history of cities because in the absence of any established methodologies, the approach which might be adopted in any one case must rest upon substantive findings which are derivable from the available data. This means that some of the findings – in practice the most important findings – have to be presented from the beginning either in the format of an hypothesis or as part of a broad framework of analysis. In this case, we were confronted with two central findings which were closely related to each other and which, therefore, provided the basic syncretical framework of analysis in this study. Both of these findings had to do with the prominent position occupied by scholars, first in the sources and ultimately, in the history of Timbuktu.

One finding pertained to the factor of autonomy as a recurrent though variable theme in the history of Timbuktu. Even the barest outline of the city's political history (as presented in our introduction) suggested a certain primacy for the theme of autonomy and autonomous urban leadership by scholars. Nonetheless, the autonomous status of Timbuktu could not in itself be the central focus of attention in this study. Indeed, it would be misleading if we said that the autonomy of Timbuktu under its scholars and notables is the major conclusion which derives from our study; rather the role and status of scholars and notables, in relation to the rest of Timbuktu society, was the main subject of investigation. Regrettably, it is not possible to offer any single conclusion on this theme without running the risk of overstatement or oversimplification. More specifically, we cannot say that the scholastic establishment occupied a position of 'predominance' throughout the history of the city. The very concept of autonomy is itself relative in any context and, in this case, it is a variable rather than a constant or unchanging factor. Historically, the autonomy of Timbuktu was subject to external factors in each period. Hence, it had to be viewed within the framework of the broader history of the region. Nonetheless, the phenomenon of autonomy did have a base in the internal organization

interaction between various facets of tradition which tends to characterize each society. In theory, it should be possible to speak for example of an urban tradition (or a tradition of urbanism) or a 'mercantile tradition' (or a tradition of mercantilism) in the sociological sphere. In other words, the concept of 'a tradition' need not be exclusive to the intellectual or religious spheres; nor should we view it as a 'residue' from the past which characterizes a 'traditional society'. Quite to the contrary, traditions have a dynamism and history of their own whereby they supply the framework for development and change, besides stability.

The social tradition which characterized Timbuktu was a legacy of older cities in the area and, to an extent, it was a legacy of the earliest periods of Islamization in the Western Sudan. Inasmuch as Islam first diffused to mercantile communities and market-towns, the legacy (and the social tradition) had a 'mercantile' along with an 'urban' dimension. Its origins are to be found in the twin-cities of the Western Sudan which had been mentioned by the mediaeval Arab geographers. Later, the tradition was exemplified by a number of 'clerical towns' and 'clerical communities', but it is only at Timbuktu that the entire history of the tradition is documented in appreciable detail and across a period of several centuries.

Our study has essentially dealt with the history of this tradition, both in narrative form and in terms of an analysis of the social structure. The tradition was one which conditioned the character of Timbuktu while also conditioning the role and status of its scholars. The unifying link between city and scholars, therefore, was at the level of a local tradition of mercantilism and/or urbanism. Insofar as the tradition of autonomous leadership by scholars had roots and influence elsewhere, our study also had to follow the broader outlines of the history of the Western Sudan. Indeed, the relative stability of Timbuktu as an 'urban' entity supplied us with a framework for surveying the history of its region generally at a time when no complete history of the area had been written.

Regrettably, there was no scope in this study to compare Timbuktu adequately to other Muslim cities outside West Africa. At most, it was possible to refer to common themes, especially in the spheres of administration, law and jurisprudence. At other times, however, the very topics which arose in connection with the traditions of Timbuktu and its region had not been raised in the existing Islamicist literature outside West Africa. Indeed, the central theme of adaptation (change within tradition) has rarely been the subject of adequate discussion in the North African or Middle Eastern context. We do possess some interesting generalizations about the 'Islamic city', but no study which justifies recourse to a specific 'tradition of Muslim urbanism' which could embrace the West African Sudan equally as it could embrace the cities of Indian Islam or those of Indonesia. Hence, it appeared quite hazardous to present any definitive view concerning either the distinctions or parallels between Timbuktu and

other Muslim cities outside West Africa. At most, as indicated in the introduction, the role of scholars in Timbuktu and its region presents itself as a more pronounced feature than in the Middle Eastern and North African cities.

Our study of Timbuktu yielded an important finding which may conceivably be encountered in the sources on other Muslim cities. The finding has to do with the existence of a 'patriciate' which was relatively stable over several centuries. The 'patrician' dimension has certainly been encountered in other cities, both Muslim and non-Muslim. For the most part, however, this has been the subject of theorization rather than the subject of both narrative and social-structural analysis over an extended period. The patrician dimension was most significant in the history of Timbuktu for supplying a modicum of stability. Elsewhere, a similar dimension was encountered by Bulliet in mediaeval Nishapur (itself a 'Muslim city') but during a restricted period. In other instances, however, the patrician factor has remained merely a subject of restricted conjecture, largely on the basis of the views of Max Weber.

In the case of Timbuktu, the chronicles laid bare sufficient detail so as to show the existence of a small patriciate which dominated the affairs of the city, beginning from at least around 1400 onwards. The evidence on later periods pertained, to a large extent in fact, to the persistence of this patriciate down to the late nineteenth century. Hence, the narrative sections of this study (Chapters 2 and 6) may be seen as a history of the patriciate of Timbuktu. At times, most especially in the earliest periods, the centrality of the patriciate gave it an autonomous position of authority in the city. Later, following the Moroccan conquest, the city (and its patriciate) virtually had to conquer its conquerors. In subsequent periods, on the other hand, the city had to contend with pressure from the nearby pastoralists – much as it had done in earliest periods of its history.

If we were to subject our evidence to the full rigours of socio-economic analysis, we might perhaps say that Timbuktu was a city of large-scale merchants rather than a city of scholars. Indeed, we might go further and speak of the dominant class in Timbuktu as a 'mercantile bourgeoisie' in the conventional sense of these terms. But the factors of familial status and kinship affiliation were always important. In the earliest periods, Timbuktu must have been made up principally of an aggregate of 'patrimonial estates', each represented by a major merchant family with its own dependants and clients. With the passage of time, however, large fortunes tended to be diluted through inheritance and, hence, the patterns of class and status differentiation became more complex. Over the long run, the large mercantile fortunes were repeatedly transformed into stable patrimonies shared on familial basis by many heirs. Accordingly, the factor of long establishment in the city, along with evolving notions of prestigious descent, supplemented the factor of wealth as a major determinant of

status and prerogative. Indeed, it is the combination of wealth with established prestige which accounts, in the socio-economic sphere, for the 'patrician' character of Timbuktu.

The patrician factor in the history of Timbuktu presented itself, from the beginning, in terms of subscription (and access) to the social, legal and administrative dimensions of Muslim learning and jurisprudence. The humanistic and literary facets of Muslim learning could not be ignored any more than could the religious and parochial aspects. They helped cement the communal texture of a highly diversified society while supplying, at all levels of literacy and learning, a common universe of cultured discourse. The social dimension – and the impact of literacy and learning on status and prerogative – is a theme which admits greater scope for investigation and analysis however. It pertains more closely to the self-perception of Timbuktu as a city of scholars and it also has to do with the theme of urban autonomy.

In a sense, we had to ask why it is that the wealthy merchant families of Timbuktu, its notables and patricians, found it advantageous to subscribe to the tradition of Muslim learning or else patronize it. At a broader level of analysis, the question applies equally to the city as a whole as to the patricians. After all, even the most modest citizens, among the stable population at least, sought and acquired a minimum of Qur'anic literacy. Timbuktu was a city of modest *alfas* besides being a city of accomplished jurists. Especially, during the Songhai period, Timbuktu was 'a place of kindness and support to students'. Nonetheless, the initiative of the leading families could not be ignored. We had to ask at least why it was that the merchant classes of Timbuktu, itself a merchant-city, gave a leadership position to the scholars among their ranks. In practice, this was equivalent to asking why it is that the topmost ranks of the notables gave themselves (and their sons) the rigorous religio-legal education which raised them to the status of scholars and jurists.

Perhaps the above questions may be posed more advantageously to the much more detailed sources of the larger Muslim cities in the Middle East and North Africa. Nonetheless, it would be useless to pretend that the answers would be the same or that they pertain solely to 'city' or urbanism. In all cases, the answer must be sought in historical factors of evolution and adaptation rather than solely in terms of the bearing of jurisprudence or ideology upon questions of social structure. In Timbuktu, at least, the concerns of scholars can be related partly to the interests of the leading classes, while in another part they pertain to questions of integration in the city as a whole. The historical background to the rise of 'scholar-notables' in the Western Sudan differs substantially from its equivalent in the Middle East and North Africa. In essence, we must not be misled by reference to 'classical Islam'. The phenomenon of an extensive body of 'scholar-notables' belongs far more visibly to the 'post-classical' period (or 'middle

period') of Islam. Its development in the Western Sudan was therefore *parallel* to its development in the Middle East and North Africa.

Basically, we have focused upon historical factors which are primarily relevant to the Western Sudan. Indeed, the main theoretical factor which is applicable elsewhere in Islam – namely the contingency of status upon learning – is also applicable in other non-Muslim societies and civilizations. At Timbuktu, shared subscription to a learned tradition essentially supplied a common means for the assignment and sharing of status and prerogative. Naturally, the wealthy and established families enjoyed greater access to the higher levels of learning. By the same token, they also had a greater access to an elusive *de jure* sort of participation in the legal and administrative affairs of the city. But insofar as learning itself was a matter of status, it could serve on its own as an avenue to influence, an avenue which was available in various gradations to various sectors of the population.

In the relatively small world of West African Islam, the status of Muslim scholars, clerics and literati (*alfas*, *marabouts*, *tulba*, *fugahā*, etc.) presents us with as much variety as any other Muslim region. Nonetheless, a measure of commonality is evidenced by the designation of whole clans in the southern Sahara as 'clerical clans'. Similarly, a clerical feature characterized entire merchant communities, especially in the Dyula market-towns in the Sudan. In the small kingdoms or 'city-states' of Hausaland, the scholars were perhaps drawn from a sort of 'middle class', principally mercantile. Indeed, perhaps an erosion of the status of scholars there, along with a decline in the mercantile interests of their class, may lie at the background of the nineteenth-century *jihāds*. In Futa Toro, a militant scholastic tradition had earlier roots, while in Massina this was a feature of the early to mid-nineteenth century. In Timbuktu, the dominant position of scholars was a legacy and feature of much earlier periods – a feature which was a matter of resurgence and reaffirmation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In essence, the prominence of scholars and scholar-notables was a more constant and stable feature at Timbuktu than elsewhere in the Muslim regions of West Africa.

One factor which distinguished Timbuktu from other cities and communities in the Western Sudan was the existence of a stratified hierarchy of learned status. At the top of the hierarchy, the scholars conceded precedence to a few individuals who were seen as exceptionally learned and erudite in each generation. Indeed, in many cases of succession, the Judge and the main parochial leaders or *imāms* were drawn from the ranks of these highly venerated scholars. Secondly, there appeared to be a distinction between the full-fledged jurists (*fugahā*) and between the rest of the body of scholars. Thirdly, there was a distinction between the body of scholars as a whole and a much wider stratum of lesser *alfas* or literati led by the tailor-*alfas* and the *muddāh*. Finally, the evidence on the

enrolment and number of literacy schools, along with other indications, suggested that the whole stable and respectable citizenry of Timbuktu, including the client status Ghabibi and sometimes even the slaves, enjoyed one level of literacy or another, depending on their means and their affiliations. Hence, it was clear that leadership by scholars rested on a widely based subscription to the criteria of respectability, status and prestige which attached to literacy, learning and erudition.

Indeed, just as the existence of a patriciate made it possible for us to present the 'internal' history of the city in narrative form, so the existence of an elaborate hierarchy of learned status provided us with a framework for arriving at an adequate analysis of the social and status structure of the city. Admittedly, the data on the structure of the hierarchy pertained primarily to the turn of the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries, the best documented in the entire history of the city. Moreover, the evidence correlating learned status to wealth was often indirect. At the lowest levels of the social or status stratum, this was largely a matter of inference. Judging by the available evidence on the topmost ranks, it appeared quite probable that the lesser *alfas* (including tailor-*alfas*, lesser *kātibs*, *mu'adhdhins*, etc.) were drawn from a more modest stratum of small merchants and craftsmen. Similarly, the middle rank of scholars appears to have been drawn from the comfortable merchant families, but not from among the wealthiest families. The sons of the latter were sometimes non-learned while at times they joined the *mudārah* or else participated in the tradition of learning by either patronizing needy students or associating with the circles of scholars on the basis of fluid familial and other affiliations. Nonetheless, it was quite clear that the topmost ranks of scholars were drawn from the wealthiest strata in the city. Indeed, a single outstanding scholar often represented the interests of his entire merchant family (and even his clan) among the ranks of the learned. In fewer cases, a single nuclear family among the exceptionally wealthy and prestigious contributed a few or several scholars to the middle and topmost ranks.

Insofar as our study was concerned with both change and stability, it is not possible to project all our findings upon all periods of Timbuktu history. At times when the scholars enjoyed a position of definitive predominance, as during the sixteenth century, they appear to have been the leaders of the class of merchant-notables *par excellence*. Later, following the Moroccan conquest, there was unquestionably an erosion of the status of scholars, coupled with the admission of some non-learned notables (from among the propertied *musabbibūn*) into the ranks of civilian urban leadership. At that time, the civilian leadership stood in sharp distinction from the military leadership represented by a few Ruma and Songhai families. Later, with the integration of Ruma and Songhai into the civilian population, the leading families of both groups joined the ranks of notables. Nonetheless, and even as late as the time of the French conquest,

the core of the leadership was still represented by scholars who were descended from the ancient families of Timbuktu.

Despite our emphasis on stability, we cannot present one single picture which could account for the organization of Timbuktu in all periods. Indeed, it is possible even to say that every phenomenon or institution in Timbuktu had its own history. In the earlier periods, for example, the institution of the judgeship was paramount. Though not necessarily the most learned himself, the judge was always drawn from the ranks of the most learned. He combined executive and judiciary authority with a quasi-legislative authority which was represented by the interpretation and adaptation of law or, more formally, the *fiyya*. During the Songhai period, and in earlier times, the judge came close to being the actual ruler of the city. Following the Moroccan conquest, the judgeship lost some of its authority, but judging by a number of indications, it remained the main 'urban institution' in the city. At all times the judge also shared his position of leadership with a few outstanding scholars as well as the *imāms*, and especially the *imām* of the Main Mosque, Jingerebir.

The religio-legal establishment witnessed a variety of leadership forms over the centuries. This makes it difficult to generalize about the 'organization' of Timbuktu (much as about the 'Muslim city'). At most, it is possible to say that the nature of the leadership revolved around the three criteria of parochial, judiciary and 'jurisprudential' authority. At times, an exceptionally erudite *mufī* (even when not specifically assigned this title) enjoyed the highest position of initiative and he shared it, in varying degrees, with other scholars who did not necessarily occupy any specific post. Despite this, the judiciary post was always important and often the forum for city-side leadership, shared by the *imām* of the Main Mosque. Other *imāms*, at Sankore, Sidi Yahya and elsewhere, also stood in the topmost ranks of the '*Jamā'a*' (collective leadership) of Timbuktu.

The fluidity of the patterns of leadership and authority may seem somewhat confusing, but in fact this highlights the primacy of learned status over and above any administrative criteria of order. The hierarchy was given a strong institutional base in the judgeship and imamate, but ultimately its texture and structure was 'pedagogical'. The pedagogical links tended to correspond to familial and inter-familial affiliations—a factor which supplied an added basis for cohesion. The pedagogical links themselves amounted to the 'schools of learning' in the city and, indeed, they were themselves the 'schools of law'. Insofar as the pedagogical links extended in various ways from the highest levels of learning to the modest levels of literacy, they gave the learned hierarchy a strong and wide base in the city's social and status structure. In fact, they linked the hierarchy to a number of urban institutions ranging from the corporation of masons to the age-set organizations.

Perhaps the distinction between military and learned elites is a general theme in the history of Muslim urbanism elsewhere. We have alluded (in

Chapter 1) to Albert Hourani's view that Muslim civilization was characterized by a delicate sort of balance between military elites and 'bourgeoisie'. In the Sudan, this idea of a balance is quite relevant, though here as elsewhere, the factors which went into the making of the balance (and sometimes imbalance) are infinitely complex and varied. Our evidence, for example, suggests that the merchant classes of Timbuktu enjoyed economic and even fiscal resources which were comparable to those of the Songhai state, at least on the eve of the Moroccan conquest. Later, in the eighteenth century, the 'upper bourgeoisie' in Timbuktu appears to have had greater access to economic patronage than the Ruma leadership. Indeed, and except in the period immediately following the Ruma conquest, the Ruma had no monopoly of access to military action or firearms. Naturally, our evidence pertains to exceptional events since at all other times the economic and military facets of the balance are not covered by our sources. Nonetheless, it is possible perhaps to say that the city's power of collective action was contingent both upon the ability of the notables to mobilize the urban population and upon the economic and other resources which they could marshal.

Generalization about the theme of autonomy in the history of Timbuktu is obviously subject to qualifications. At times, the balance shifted in favour of the 'military elites' – or the major power in the area at any given period – while at other times the balance shifted in favour of the city. In some cases, the details of such shifts are infinitesimal, and we have tried to trace them as closely as possible. The theme of military *versus* economic power is only a facet of the balance. Another important facet was the access of scholar-notables to avenues of influence and control which were open to them at the level of law and adaptation of law through jurisprudence. This had an influence not only on the administrative and organizational affairs of the city, but also upon conceptions of legitimacy which affected the status of states and empires in the Sudan. Indeed, the parochial concepts which helped to legitimize the character of the state in Islamic terms were closely bound to the jurisprudential views which helped legitimize an autonomous parochial-type leadership in the city under judges, *imāms* and *mufitis*.

Basically, we have emphasized the jurisprudential aspects of Muslim learning throughout this study. These, in turn, gave a special character to parochial, judiciary and legal facets of organization at Timbuktu. In essence, there was no scope for referring to any uniform body of precepts which might be characterized simply as 'Islamic' and could, therefore, be projected from a Middle Eastern stance (as is conventional) upon the Western Sudan. The very existence of a large body of scholars in Timbuktu had its significance in the sphere of adaptation. Yet, the adaptation of Islam is not solely contingent upon spatial, geographical or cultural differences. Rather, it is also a feature which is contingent upon changes

from one period to another in any region, including the Middle East. Naturally, we must realize that adaptation and change takes place within the stabilizing framework of 'tradition', in this case a 'social tradition'. Nonetheless, traditions themselves do have history and we have for the most part traced the history of a tradition which belongs to Timbuktu and the Western Sudan.