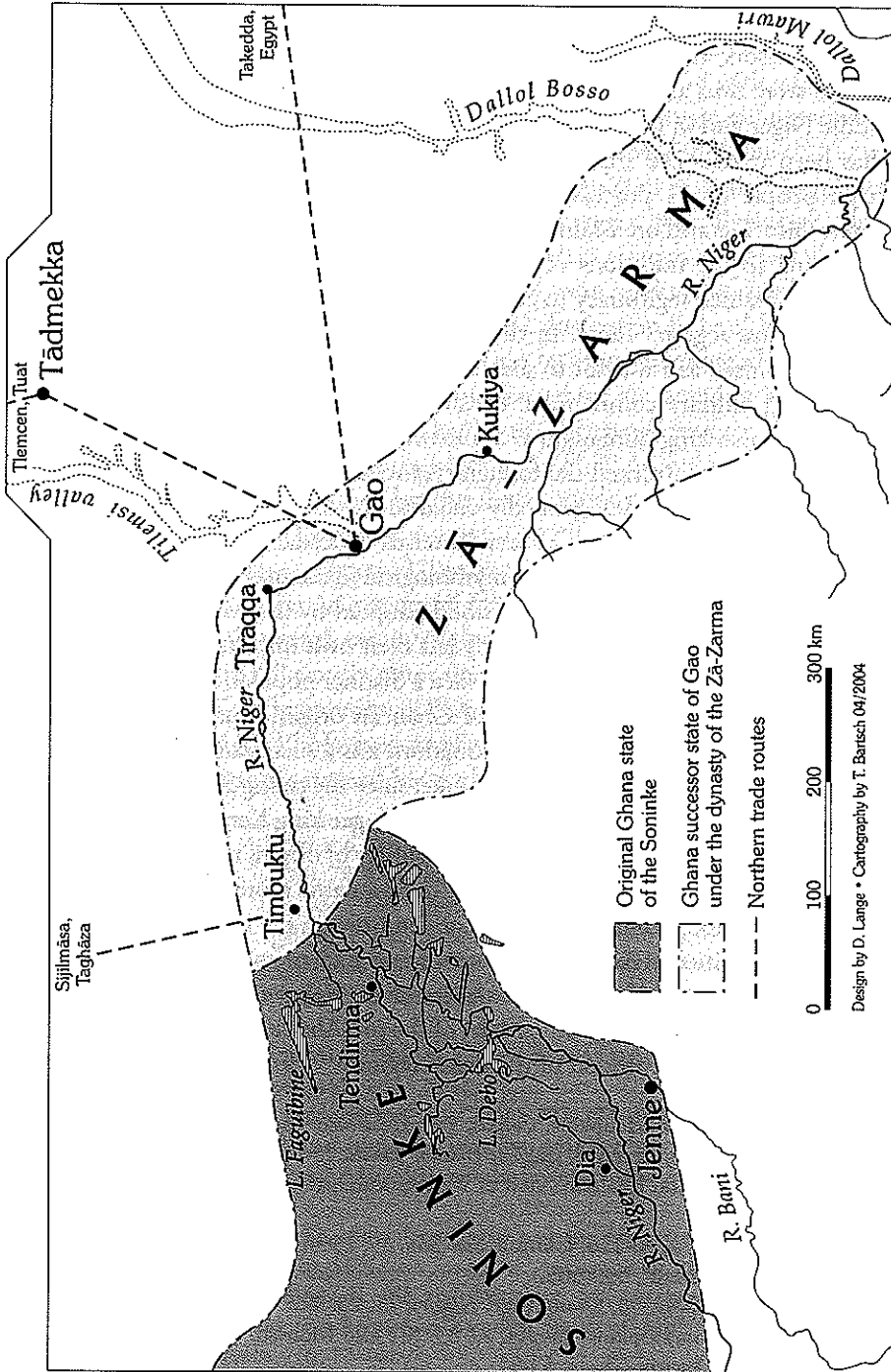


3. The Domination of Mali and the Emergence of the Songhay

Three related aspects of historical developments on the Middle Niger between the thirteenth and the fifteenth Century are distinguishable: the political, the dynastic and the ethnic. Beginning with the political, this period saw the expansion of Mali from the upper Niger to the eastern Niger bend. Up to now, the rise of Mali and the inclusion of the Gao kingdom into this empire have mostly been described with the presumption of an ethnically homogeneous and stable situa-



Map 10: The two states of Ghana: the Soninke and the Zā-Zarma states, 12th – 13th centuries

tion on the Middle Niger: under the newly established leadership of Sundjata and his Keita successors, the Malinke of Mali grew stronger than the neighbouring peoples and were thus able to subdue vast regions of the Sahelian belt including the Middle Niger and in particular Gao and the Songhay people.¹¹⁴

It has been overlooked that the rise of Mali did not involve the conquest of foreign people but a process of integrating Mande or Mande-dominated neighbours into a common Islamic dominion on the basis of Ghanaian heritage. According to the traditions of the Malinke, Sundjata, the founder of the Mali empire, obtained legitimacy to rule by going into exile in Mema, a country close to the Lakes region. There, in the remnant of Ghana, he is said to have distinguished himself as a warrior to such an extent that the Sisse king appointed him the leading military commander. Meanwhile, the Malinke were subject to the oppressive Sosso king Sumanguru. Some time later, Sundjata followed a call back to his country, confronted the foreign tyrant, and defeated him in the Battle of Kirina.¹¹⁵ These episodes, generally dated to the first half of the thirteenth century, should not necessarily all be seen in terms of actual events. For example the Mema exile, probably patterned on mythological ideas, may just be indicative of a powerful Ghanaian tradition of statehood adopted by the Malinke from the Soninke and onto which they subsequently left their own imprint.¹¹⁶

In the Gao kingdom the Keita did not face a distinct population with its own dynasty but a closely related ruling elite of Ghanaian origin. During the twelfth and the thirteenth century the Zā/Zāghē kingdom was a successor state of Ghana in the same sense as the kingdom of the Soninke, since the ruling Zarma had originated from Ghana together with the Sisse/Zāghē refugee king Kema-Magha/Yāmā b. Kimā. By referring to Melle or Mali as their country of origin, the Zarma simply replaced a name associated with divine kingship by a name more compatible with Islam. In fact, their home country of Dirma or Tendirma in the Lakes region of the Niger was precisely situated in the central province of ancient and medieval Ghana. A similar case can be made for the Mali empire of the Keita, since their historical antecedents link them to the Islamic Malal of the pre-Almoravid period, situated somewhere in the neighbourhood of the Lakes region.¹¹⁷ Here again Malal seems

¹¹⁴ Ibn Khaldūn in: Levtzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 333. Delafosse, *Haut-Sénégal*, II, 173-191; Trimmingham, *History*, 60-68; Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana*, 53-66, 73-80; Cuoq, *Histoire*, 69-75. For a critical assessment of Ibn Khaldūn's view of West African history see Lange, "Altes Mali", 588-592, 621-623.

¹¹⁵ Niane, *Sundiata*, 62-72, 90-126; Johnson, *Son-Jara*, 39, 155-167, 191; Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana*, 58; Lange, "Altes Mali", 599-605.

¹¹⁶ Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana*, 50, 58-60, Fage, *History*, 71, 75-76.

¹¹⁷ Al-Bakrī in: Levtzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 82-83. See also Monteil, "Empires du Mali", 323-329, and Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana*, 53-55.

to be the Muslim pendant of the pagan Ghana. Hence we may assume that the name of Ghana – perhaps derived from the name of the Gani royal festival, well-known in the Central Sudan – which was associated abroad with gold, riches and power, carried for the people directly concerned some pagan connotations which the Muslim Zarma were as eager to eliminate as the Muslim Keita.¹¹⁸

We do not know precisely under which ruler Mali extended its influence to the eastern and the western Niger bend. However, the pilgrimage custom of Malian kings is hardly conceivable without direct access to desert trade routes. Therefore Barmandāna, the first pilgrim king, who might have ruled in the twelfth century, must already have controlled the Lakes region to be able to perform the pilgrimage without having to cross foreign territory before reaching the Saharan routes.¹¹⁹ Among the successors of Sundjata three are noted to have travelled to Mecca: Mansa Walī in the second half of the thirteenth century, the usurper king Sākūra towards 1300 and Mansa Mūsā in 1324.¹²⁰ According to later traditions, Mansa Mūsā travelled either by the desert route north of Timbuktu crossing Taghāza and Tuat, or he passed through Gao.¹²¹

In the post-Almoravid period Gao remained independent of any neighbouring kingdom for more than a century.¹²² When it became subject to Mali in the second half of the thirteenth century this was not necessarily by conquest as is often supposed.¹²³ Al-Sa'dī simply notes that Songhay “submitted to the authority” of Mali, and dates the integration of Gao into the Mali empire to the reign of Mansa Mūsā (1312-1337).¹²⁴ He even implies that this submission was voluntary since it occurred during the time of Mansa Mūsā's absence on pilgrimage. Similarly the

¹¹⁸ According to al-Bakrī and to the author of *K. al-Istibṣār* Ghāna was the title of the king (Levtzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 79, 146). For the importance of the *tabaski* or *'id al-kabīr* feast in Ghana see Monteil, “Légende”, 378. Similarly Portuguese authors refer to the king of a powerful state – either the Igala kingdom, Bornu or Ife – to whom the Oba of Benin owed some kind of allegiance, as Ogane (Hodgkin, *Nigerian Perspectives*, 122, 124). In each state the king was involved in an important New Year festival which in Igalaland is called Oganī, in Bornu Gani, and in Ife Itapa.

¹¹⁹ Ibn Khaldūn in: Levtzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 322, 333. Al-Bakrī mentions a Muslim king of Malal before the Almoravid period (*ibid.*, 82).

¹²⁰ Ibn Khaldūn in: Levtzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 322-323, 333-335.

¹²¹ Both al-Sa'dī and Ibn al-Mukhtār claim that Mansa Musa took the route of Tuat (*T. al-Sūdān*, 7/tr. 13; *T. al-Fattāsh*, 34/tr. 59), but the “Notice historique” has him passing through Gao (*T. al-Fattāsh*, 335).

¹²² According to al-Idrīsī, the ruler of Gao had the *khutba* delivered in his own name (Levtzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 113).

¹²³ Delafosse, *Haut-Sénégal*, II, 188-189; Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana*, 75; Cuoq, *Histoire*, 74.

¹²⁴ Houdas translates *malaka sughay* “he ruled Songhay” misleadingly as “il s'empara du Songhai” (*T. al-Sūdān*, 7/tr. 13-14).

T. al-Fattāsh records the passing of Mansa Mūsā through Gao without any hint of a prior conquest.¹²⁵ However, trying to present a coherent picture of the historical developments of the Western Sudan from the eleventh to the fourteenth century, Ibn Khaldūn associates the expansion of Mali with military exploits. He claims that either Mansa Sākūra or Saghamanja, a general of Mansa Mūsā, conquered Gao.¹²⁶ Disregarding this statement as being based on a preconception, it appears to be more appropriate to consider the extension of Mali's influence on Gao in terms of a process of self-engendered aggrandisement. On the basis of common heritage with Ghana, the bonds of Mande ethnicity, and unifying Islamic solidarity, the ruling class of Gao under the leadership of the Zā appears to have consented to enter into an alliance with Mali as a junior partner.

The concrete implications of Mali's rule in Gao are difficult to determine. Al-'Umarī counts Gao and other countries among the provinces of Mali, but he provides no details on the administration of the empire. Ibn Baṭṭūta stayed in Gao for one month in 1353, but he fails to refer to the political leadership of the town. Having earlier mentioned the governor of Mali in Timbuktu and a *farba* (Malian governor) in a village on the way to Gao, his silence seems to indicate that Gao lay within the sphere of influence of Mali. More clearly, the evidence provided by Ibn Khaldūn on the integration of Takedda into the Mali empire implies that Gao was firmly in the hands of the Keita.¹²⁷ These external sources suggest that Gao was a peaceful province of imperial Mali during the fourteenth century.

The geographical extension of Mali's influence beyond Gao can likewise be determined on the basis of information provided by Arabic writers.¹²⁸ According to al-'Umarī, the empire of Mali extended from Ṭūra on the Atlantic ocean in the west to the longitude of Mūlī in the east or, following another text, to Bornū.¹²⁹ Ibn Baṭṭūta mentions a locality called Mūlī downstream of Gao but he describes it as a village of the Līmiyyūn forming the last district of Mali. Beyond it there lay the powerful kingdom of Nupe which no white man could enter.¹³⁰ Mūlī, situated somewhere between Gao on one side and Bornu and Nupe on the

¹²⁵ Ibn al-Mukhtār, *T. al-Fattāsh*, (NH), 335. The reluctance of internal sources to admit foreign conquest is, in view of the later rise of the Songhay, in this case irrelevant.

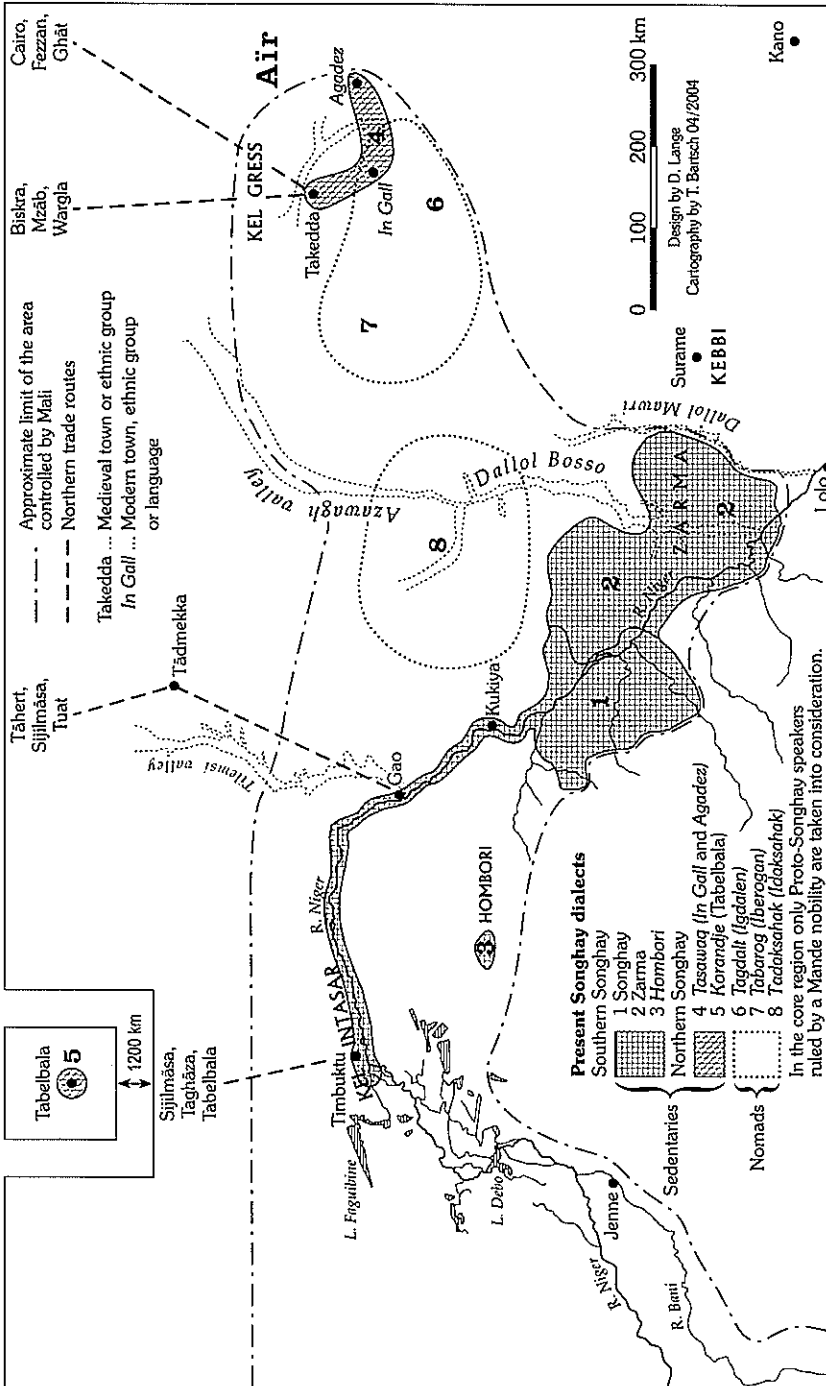
¹²⁶ Levztzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 334.

¹²⁷ Al-'Umarī, Ibn Baṭṭūta, Ibn Khaldūn in: Levztzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 261, 300-301, 336.

¹²⁸ For earlier attempts to delimit the borders of Mali, see Delafosse, *Haut-Sénégal*, II, 191, 221; Mauny, *Tableau*, 511-514; Levztzion, *Ancient Ghana*, 75-80.

¹²⁹ Al-'Umarī, *Masālik* and *Ta'rif*, in: Levztzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 262, 276. Ṭūra could correspond to Futa Toro situated south of the Senegal and close to the Atlantic ocean.

¹³⁰ The translation of Levztzion and Hopkins is here misleading because according to the text *baldat Mūlī*, situated in the land of the Līmiyyūn, was the last district of Mali (*Corpus*, 287).



Map 11: The eastward expansion of Mali in the 14th century in relation to Proto-Songhay speakers

other, seems to be equivalent to the Dallol Mawri stretching from the north to the south and therefore constituting a longitudinal delimitation. At present, this dry valley corresponds to the eastern limit of Zarma territory and could therefore be considered the eastern most extension of Mali's authority. Furthermore, Mūli seems to refer to the related ethnic name Mawri which designates Zarma-speaking groups belonging to the Mande tradition and Hausa-speaking groups of the Bornu tradition inhabiting the northern reaches of the Dallol Mawri.¹³¹ In the south, the Tienga living on both sides of the Niger at the confluence of the Dallol Mawri and beyond could correspond to Ibn Baṭṭūta's Līmiyyūn.¹³²

In the north, the hegemony of Mali extended to Walāta, and in the northwest to the trading town of Takedda, where it included the Tuareg tribes of Kel Intasar and Kel Gress or Kel Gharus.¹³³ It is disputed whether Takedda, located near Aïr, was controlled by Mali or not. Al-'Umarī mentions that the copper-producing town of Zkrī, Dkrī or Nkwī, probably Takedda, belonged to Mali during the reign of Mansa Mūsā.¹³⁴ Having visited Takedda himself, Ibn Baṭṭūta reports that the town was under the rule of a Berber sultan and that its copper was exported to Gobir and Bornu.¹³⁵ During his stay in Biskra, Ibn Khaldūn heard of Takedda, in the south of Wargla. Founded by the Ṣanhāja, the town was, according to him, subject to Mali. From there, a huge caravan and many black African pilgrims annually went to Cairo, whence the pilgrims continued to Mecca. Despite his dependence on Mali, the Berber sultan of the town entertained diplomatic relations with Mzāb and with Wargla.¹³⁶ On the basis of a supposed confusion of copper for salt and in view of the localization of the town "south of Wargla, slightly to the west", it has been argued that Ibn Khaldūn mistakenly wrote Takedda instead of Tādmekka.¹³⁷ However, such a mistake is unlikely for a number of reasons. First, a rich copper mine has been discovered close to Takedda/Azelik and therefore Takedda did undoubtedly export copper.¹³⁸ Second, al-'Umarī's reference to

¹³¹ Karimou, *Tradition orale*, 18-40, 68-78; Piault, *Histoire*, 91-95.

¹³² Līmiyyūn is a generic name applied like Lamlam and Niamiam to southern people considered to be barbarian (see Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana*, 54).

¹³³ Al-'Umarī, Ibn Baṭṭūta, Ibn Khaldūn *in*: Levtzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 262, 284, 331, 336, 338-339. According to al-'Umarī, the Berbers Yantaṣar and Tīn Gharās were under the rule of Mali, while those of Aïr and Tademekka were independent (*ibid.*, 262, 274). On the Kel Intasar/Igellād see Marty, *Études*, I, 251-327.

¹³⁴ Levtzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 272. In Arabic the name can easily be emended to Takedda.

¹³⁵ Al-'Umarī and Ibn Baṭṭūta *in*: Levtzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 272, 302.

¹³⁶ Ibn Khaldūn *in*: Levtzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 336, 338.

¹³⁷ Lhote, "Contribution à l'étude des Touarègs", 359-369; Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana*, 77-78.

¹³⁸ Mauny, *Tableau*, 139-141; Poncet, "Région d'In Gall", 65; Bucaille, "Takedda", 736-752.

the copper-producing Zkri/Takedda subject to Mali, confirms the validity of Ibn Khaldūn's information. Third, for geographical reasons close diplomatic relations are more likely to have existed between Takedda and Biskra, Mzāb, and Wargla, than between Tādmekka and these three northern towns, since the trade route from Tādmekka led directly to Tuat, Sijilmāsa, and Tāhert further to the west. Fourth, on account of better travelling conditions Takedda was a more suitable meeting place for large caravans heading to the east than Tādmekka. Fifth, being situated nearly due south of Wargla, Takedda could easily be mistaken as lying "slightly to the west of south" on account of the north-south desert routes skirting the Hoggar mountains to the west.¹³⁹ Sixth, the Berbers Tin Gharās mentioned by al-'Umarī as being subject to Mali could be either the Kel Gress or the Kel Gharus, both groups of the eastern Tuareg. At that time the Kel Gress inhabited the region west of Aïr including Takedda/Azelik, where the Kel Gharus live at present.¹⁴⁰ Seventh, the black African sedentary population of Takedda/Azelik consisted of speakers of Tasawaq, a dialect of Northern Songhay, who nowadays are mainly found in the region of In Gall, 80 km south of the ancient town. Therefore, the expansion of the Mali empire far to the east did not only involve Berbers but also black Africans speaking a language of Proto-Songhay.¹⁴¹ Finally, since al-'Umarī refers, in the middle of the fourteenth century, to the Berber sultan of Tādmekka as an independent ruler,¹⁴² we can discard the idea that Ibn Khaldūn intended to point out that this ruler was dependent on Mali by the end of the fourteenth century. The textual and geographical evidence therefore suggests that, in fact, medieval Mali controlled Takedda at the foot of the Aïr mountains, 730 km east of Gao. In this region, Malian domination may have been preceded by the large territorial expansion of the Gao kingdom in the tenth century.¹⁴³ It was certainly succeeded by the Songhay conquest of western Aïr at the beginning of the sixteenth century.¹⁴⁴ In each case the Proto-Songhay-speakers must have provided the ethnic foundation of the territorial expansion towards the east.

¹³⁹ H. Lhote and N. Levtzion situate Takedda southeast of Wargla ("Contribution à l'étude des Touarègs", 361; *Ancient Ghana*, 77). In fact, Takedda/Azelik (6° 42' E) lies less than 2° east of the longitude of Wargla (4° 54' E).

¹⁴⁰ Al-'Umarī in: Levtzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 262. Cuoq reads Shagharāsan (*Recueil*, 265). For the history and localization of the Kel Gress and the Kel Gharus, see Bernus, *Touaregs nigériens*, 57-60; 319-320.

¹⁴¹ Bernus/Bernus, *Du sel*, 12-29; Norris, *Tuaregs*, 35-40; Nicolai, *Dialectes*, 14-25, 262; Hamani, *Sultanat touareg*, 95-109.

¹⁴² Levtzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 274.

¹⁴³ Al-Ya'qūbī in: Levtzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 21.

¹⁴⁴ Al-Sa'dī, *T. al-Sūdān*, 75, 78/tr. 124, 129; Ibn al-Mukhtār, *T. al-Fattāsh*, 70/tr. 135, 339; Hamani, *Sultanat touareg*, 205-210.

The cessation of Mali's authority over Gao can be dated to the beginning of the fifteenth century, some time before Timbuktu's independence in 1433.¹⁴⁵ It was, in one way or another, connected to the emergence of the Sonni, which both chroniclers associate with the flight of 'Alī Kolon from Mali towards the end of the thirteenth century. Al-Sa'dī describes the escape of the dynastic founder from the court of Mali as an heroic act of liberation which "severed his people's ties of subordination to the sultan of Mali".¹⁴⁶ The author of the *T. al-Fattāsh* does not present 'Alī Kolon as a national hero but as somebody who was born in Mali and served the ruler, but broke with him for reasons too complex to explain.¹⁴⁷ Accordingly, historians are divided. While some depict the hero as a hostage who was kept by force at the court of Mali,¹⁴⁸ others consider him a Malian adventurer or a governor who rebelled.¹⁴⁹ Besides the tradition of origin, the latter base their argument on the *Sonni* and *Shy* title of the new kings, which means "representative" or "confidant of the ruler" indicating a position of dependency on a supreme ruler.¹⁵⁰ These elements convey the impression that 'Alī Kolon might have been one of the numerous officials at the court of Mali recruited from among the subordinate dynasties all over the empire. Notwithstanding the prospects of advancement and lustre at the imperial court, he would appear to have decided to no longer exert himself in the interests of Mali, but to return to his country instead in order to organize a rebellion. It needed the efforts of a long line of Sonni petty rulers before this plan came to fruition.¹⁵¹ However, this image conveyed

¹⁴⁵ Al-Sa'dī, *T. al-Sūdān*, 9, 22/tr. 17, 37-38. Levtzion thinks that Malian hegemony over Gao ceased by the end of the fourteenth century (*Ancient Ghana*, 84), while Hunwick believes that it continued well into the fifteenth century (*Timbuktu*, XXXVII).

¹⁴⁶ Al-Sa'dī, *T. al-Sūdān*, 6/tr. 11-12; Hunwick, *Timbuktu*, 8. De Moraes Farias casts doubt on the historicity of 'Alī Kolon by pointing out the similarity of this figure with the culture hero Aligurrān of Tuareg legends (*Inscriptions*, §§ 165-184, 228-239).

¹⁴⁷ Ibn al-Mukhtār, *T. al-Fattāsh* (NH), 334. Following Monteil ("Empires du Mali", 165-166), most historians suppose that Songhay was a rebellious province which was conquered and liberated more than once (Rouch, *Contribution*, 180; Trimmingham, *History*, 91-92; Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana*, 75-76).

¹⁴⁸ Delafosse, *Haut-Sénégal*, II, 73; Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana*, 75; Cuoq, *Histoire*, 74, 141, 143.

¹⁴⁹ Trimmingham, *History*, 66; Cuoq, *Histoire*, 142; Hunwick, *Timbuktu*, XXXVII.

¹⁵⁰ On the authority of Maḥmūd Ka'ti, Ibn al-Mukhtār writes that *Shy* (= Sonni) means *koy benendi* "representative or substitute of the sultan" (*T. al-Fattāsh*, 43/tr. 82). According to Delafosse *sōñyi* (Sonni) has in Malinke the similar meaning of "subordinate or confidant of the ruler" (cf. Hunwick, *Timbuktu*, 333-334).

¹⁵¹ 'Alī Kolon would then have been a hero comparable to Ya'qūb Nabame, the leader of the Kebbi movement of independence from Sokoto in the nineteenth century (cf. Last, *Sokoto Caliphate*, 84-85).

by the Songhay traditions is partly contradicted by the legendary nature of the 'Alī Kolon figure established in reference to the parallel Aligurran narratives of the Tuareg.¹⁵² Still, there are strong reasons to believe that the descendants of the Zāghē were deeply affected by the extension of Malian rule over the Niger bend. In the light of this major event of Gao history, the 'Alī Kolon episode reads like an attempt to explain the split-off of the Sonni from the Zā.

In fact, the political position of the Sonni needs to be seen in the context of the ethnic situation of the eastern Niger bend. Up to the fourteenth century, we do not find any indication that there was a Songhay population living in the region of the Middle Niger. In the eleventh century, the inhabitants of Gao are called Bazarkāniyyīn, in the twelfth Barbara, and in the fourteenth Yartān.¹⁵³ Also, on the dynastic level none of the ruling houses of Gao can be identified as Songhay. The first dynasty, the Qanda, may have been Proto-Songhay, but their real ethnic identity remains unknown.¹⁵⁴ The Mande influence on the eastern Niger bend seems to have resulted from the expansion of the Ghana empire to the east in the eleventh century. Later traditions associate the spread of a Soninke elite among the Proto-Songhay – which led to the ethnogenesis of the Zarma – specifically with the flight of the Sisse/Zā from Ghana to Gao towards the end of the eleventh century.¹⁵⁵ Various indications show that the Sonni themselves belonged to this group of Mande immigrants. According to al-Maghīlī, the ancestors of Sonni 'Alī more than thirty kings before him – a number apparently including at the beginning the Muslim kings of the Zā¹⁵⁶ – rose up against the pre-Almoravid rulers of Gao. The same genealogical claims probably also involving the Zā were made by Askiya Muḥammad.¹⁵⁷ The author of the *T. al-Fattāsh* goes one step further when he links the ancestors of Sonni 'Alī and those of Askiya Muḥammad and adds that they were both of Wangara and Soninke origin.¹⁵⁸ Present-day traditions about the descendants of the Sonni, the Sohance, confirm a Wangara and hence

¹⁵² For these comparisons see de Moraes Farias, *Inscriptions*, §§ 165-184. However, the reference to the “Moses motif” as an indication of a foreign conquest neglects the local origin of the Sonni going back to the Almoravid period (*idem.*, §§ 190, 448; al-Maghīlī *in*: Hunwick, *Shari'a*, 13/tr. 69).

¹⁵³ Al-Bakrī, al-Zuhri, al-Umarī *in*: Levtzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 87, 99, 261. Trimmingham thinks that the members of the ruling class of Gao in the twelfth century were either Zāghāwa or Baghāma (*History*, 89).

¹⁵⁴ In view of the wide distribution of Songhay languages, it is very likely that they spoke Proto-Songhay and not a Mande or a Voltaic language.

¹⁵⁵ Lange, “Chute”, 169-173; *id.*, “Almoravid expansion”, 341-342.

¹⁵⁶ Cf. Hunwick, *Shari'a*, 69 n. 1; Lange, “From Mande”, 294.

¹⁵⁷ Al-Maghīlī *in*: Hunwick, *Shari'a*, 13, 17/tr. 69, 72.

¹⁵⁸ Literally Wangara and Wa'kuriyyūn, i.e. Soninke (Ibn al-Mukhtār, *T. al-Fattāsh*, 48/tr. 93-94).

a Soninke origin of the dynastic ancestors.¹⁵⁹ Furthermore, the dynastic title of Sonni may have been derived from a royal Ghanean title which, by the addition of the ethnic marker *-nke*, gave rise among the northern Mande to the ethnonym Soninke.¹⁶⁰ Therefore, the Sonni were very likely part of the Mande, or more precisely Soninke, ruling class of medieval Gao.

Who were the Songhay and when did they arrive in their present location? Although the language later called Songhay was established on the eastern Niger bend in ancient times, the Songhay properly speaking did not emerge before the fourteenth century. None of the Arab authors before al-Maghilī mentions them by this or a similar ethnic name.¹⁶¹ Only the appellation Zaghāy applied by Ibn Baṭṭūṭa and Ibn Khaldūn to people living between the Middle Niger and Hausaland bears some resemblance to the name Songhay.¹⁶² Evidence for the former settlement of Songhay people in a region later integrated into the Hausa world, comes from a Hausa tradition from the beginning of the nineteenth century according to which the people of Kebbi descend from a Songhay father and a Katsina mother.¹⁶³ Likewise, linguistic and mythological survivals bear testimony to the presence of culture traits in Kebbi later associated with the Songhay.¹⁶⁴ However, these indications do not suffice to establish the emergence of a specific Songhay identity in Kebbi, and a fourteenth or fifteenth century migration of some of these people to the eastern Niger bend as I thought before.¹⁶⁵

According to a more plausible interpretation, the Zaghāy of western Hausaland and beyond owed their appellation to their common cultural heritage with the Zaghāy of Kanem-Bornu. The eastern Zaghāy were descendants of the Zaghāwa, the first ruling group of the Chadic state.¹⁶⁶ This implies that they must have spoken Kanuri, while the western Zaghāy must have used Hausa and perhaps Songhay. Such a linguistic diversity undermines the argument that the common features of the western and eastern Zaghāy can be conceived in terms of modern ethnicity. Presently, two peoples of western Hausaland are considered to be closely related to the inhabitants of Zamfara and of Kebbi. Barth specifically

¹⁵⁹ Olivier de Sardan, *Concepts*, 336.

¹⁶⁰ Cf. Binger, *Du Niger*, II, 376, 384; Delafosse, *Haut-Sénégal*, I, 122-123, 177.

¹⁶¹ Al-Maghilī in: Hunwick, *Shari'a*, 14/tr. 70.

¹⁶² Levtzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 302, 333; Lovejoy, "Role of the Wangara", 181.

¹⁶³ Bello, *Infāq*, 46-47; transl. Arnett, *Rise*, 13; Lange, "Frühes Kebbi", 155-157.

¹⁶⁴ The main Bori spirits of the Songhay tradition in Kebbi are Dandu, Dango, Harakoi Dikko, Kirei and Musa Maye (unpubl. field research 1995, 1996). See also Lange, "Frühes Kebbi", 163-164, and "Dimension", 173-178.

¹⁶⁵ Lange, "Rois de Gao-Sané", 254-255; *id.*, "From Mande", 289-290.

¹⁶⁶ Levtzion/Hopkins, *Corpus*, 21, 171, 354; Lange, "Ethnogenesis", 265, 271; *id.*, "From Mande", 290-292.

calls them Azna.¹⁶⁷ In terms of the Hausa legend they belong – together with a number of other societies southwest of Hausaland – to the *Banzā bakwāi* “the seven *Banzā*” states. It has been shown that the distinction between the *Hausā bakwāi* “the seven *Hausā*” and the *Banzā bakwāi* was based in pre-Islamic times on the prevalence of either the clans of upperworld or the clans of netherworld deities.¹⁶⁸ Among the Kanuri the same dichotomy applies to the Duguwa and Sefuwa, the former having been overthrown around 1068 AD by the latter.¹⁶⁹ In view of this structural similarity between the Aznā and the Duguwa, it is not surprising that Arab authors applied to them the same name Zaghāy, related to the appellation Aznā.

Going one step further we have to ask whether the Zāghī or Zāghay rulers of Gao-Saney, the Zāghē, likewise claimed descent from an ancestral deity related to the netherworld.¹⁷⁰ As noted above, the Zāghē originated in all likelihood from Ghana. From the legend of Wagadu it appears that the people of Ghana believed in a primordial snake called Bida. The snake allowed the newcomers to establish themselves in the country, it taught them how to cultivate, it provided them with gold, and it protected the king. The legend further equates the fall of Ghana with the killing of the snake and the shift of the gold to Bure. Descendants of the kings of Ghana continue to practice a specific snake cult up to the present time.¹⁷¹ These elements suggest that the ancestral appellation Zāghē referred to a kingdom in which the primordial snake was highly venerated and in which the rulers practiced some form of snake cult. As the snake was the principal symbol of the netherworld, it would therefore appear that indeed the ancestors of the Zāghē of Gao-Saney belonged, like the Aznā of Hausaland, and like the Duguwa of Kanem-Bornu, to the section of society related by their clan deities to the netherworld.¹⁷²

In contradistinction to the Zāghē and the Zarma, the Songhay – and accordingly the Proto-Songhay – might have been different. In the centre of their

¹⁶⁷ Barth, *Travels*, III, 154 (the whole of Kebbi), 634 (the Zamfara town Tymba).

¹⁶⁸ See above pp. 229-234.

¹⁶⁹ See above pp. 243-248. The name Azgha applied by the Tuareg to the Kanuri (Alojaly, *Lexique*, 211) may therefore refer to the Zaghāwa/Duguwa and Zaghāy periods of Kanem-Bornu history.

¹⁷⁰ Perhaps the widespread occurrence of Yemen in Sudanic traditions of origin corresponds to an Islamizing transposition into legend of the Zaghāwa-Zaghāy reference to the deities and clans of the netherworld (see chart 17 p. 503).

¹⁷¹ Monteil, “Légende”, 377-380, 391-395; Pâques, “Estrade royale”, 1643-1645.

¹⁷² At first sight the hypothesis of an Aznā identity of the Zāghē seems difficult to reconcile with the fall of the Duguwa in Kanem during the process of Islamization (see above pp. 243, 247-248). However, it is quite conceivable that the contrast between two clan-families was in Ghana and Gao less accentuated than in Kanem.

cult-mythological universe stood the thunder and weather-god Dongo.¹⁷³ Even their ethnonym seems to have been derived from Songo, another form of the name of the weather-god, with the additional suffix *-ay* for “people of”.¹⁷⁴ There are two ways of looking at Dongo/Songo, either as a weather-god and in this sense representing the deities of the upperworld, or as the leading deity of foreign invaders and in this sense being on the side of the netherworld.¹⁷⁵ It is on this distinction that our perception of the role of the early Zāghē kings in Gao depends. Were they foreigners who wanted to set themselves apart from the local elite by referring to their own ancestor, or were they flexible newcomers who wanted to integrate themselves as much as possible into the local setting? In view of the Caliphal loan names of the Zā/Zāghē and their association with the Almoravids, it is perhaps more likely that the new kings of Gao intended to highlight their Islamic orientation and their high ancestry in contrast to the more modest claims of the local rulers.¹⁷⁶

With respect to the geographical origin of the Songhay we note that some authors suppose that these enigmatic people were first established in the Niger region downstream of Dendi and east of the Dallol Mawri in Kebbi.¹⁷⁷ Even the chroniclers of Timbuktu, in spite of their intention to present the Gao kingdom as a Songhay state, depict the Songhay in certain instances as not yet fully established in Gao and on the eastern Niger bend.¹⁷⁸ Nevertheless, the available evidence does not support the idea of a late medieval westward migration *en masse*. Also, it is problematic to link Songhay expansion with a probably earlier migration of Sorko fishermen. To arrive at a better understanding of the slow emergence of a new Songhay warrior elite we have to turn our attention once more to the dynastic history of Gao.

¹⁷³ Rouch, *Religion*, 68-69; Lange, “Ursprung des Wettergottes Schango”, 227-235.

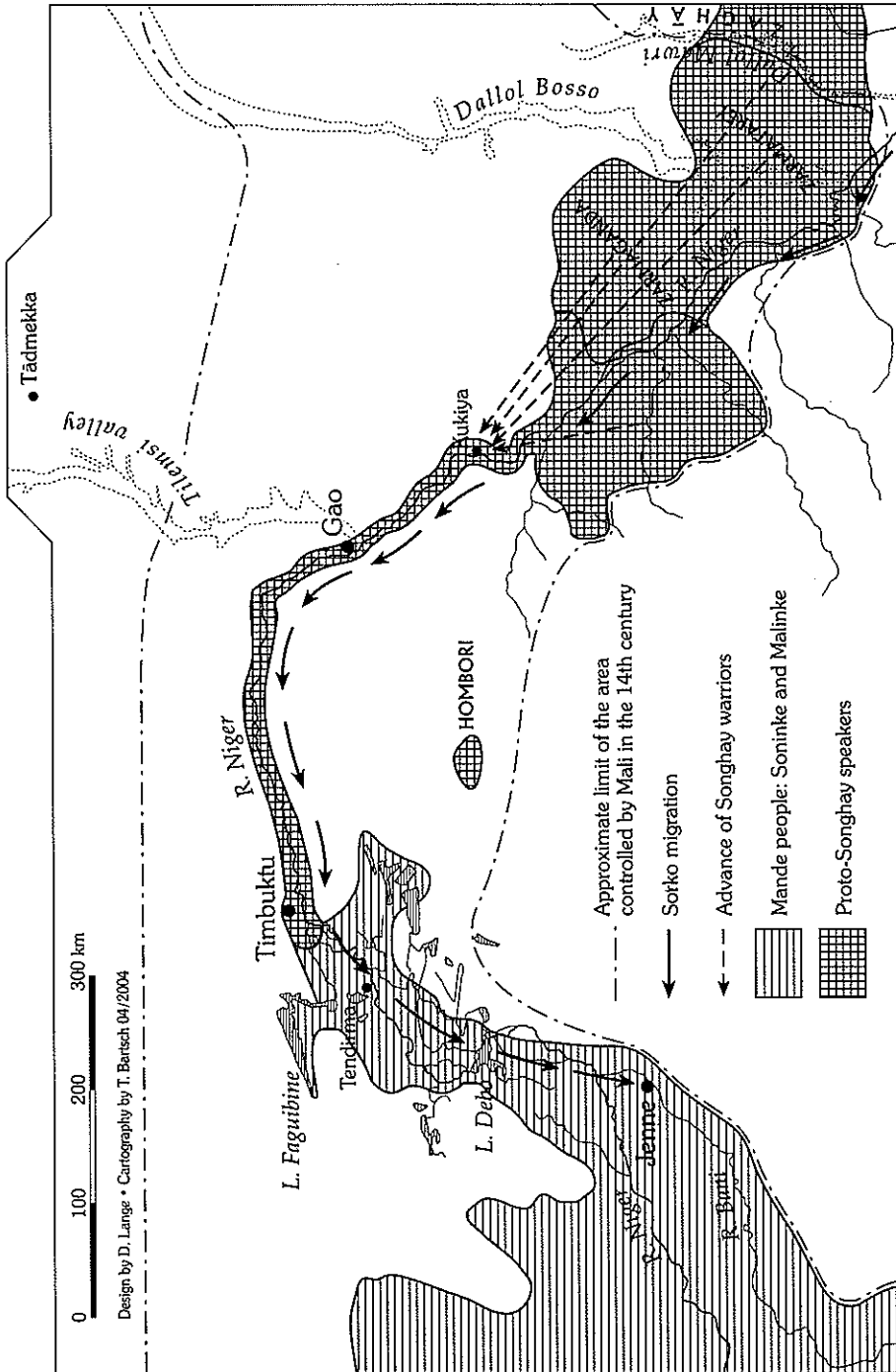
¹⁷⁴ In Songhay the suffix *-ey* indicates plural determination for nouns including professional groups (Prost, *Langue*, 48; Lange, “From Mande”, 290).

¹⁷⁵ The latter is the case for Danko among the Hausa (Besmer, *Horses*, 87-89, 170; FN 96, 14, 23, 28 [all Daura]; FN 97, 8, 26-27, 33, 61 [all Daura]; 29 [Katsina], 84 [Sulleja]). See also above p. 249.

¹⁷⁶ Alternatively various groups might have been brought together under the umbrella of a common ancestor as suggested by de Moraes Farias (*Inscriptions*, § 403).

¹⁷⁷ Delafosse considers the region between Kebbi, the lower Dendi, and the Dallol Dosso as the cradle of the Songhay (*Haut-Sénégal*, I, 239-240). Rouch locates the region of origin of the Sorko in Dendi and of the Songhay in Kukiya (“Sorkawa”, 9-13; *Contribution*, 165-172).

¹⁷⁸ Al-Sa’dī, *T. al-Sūdān*, 292, 310, 311/tr. 444, 468, 471. With respect to a meeting of Askiya Muḥammad in Gao, Ibn al-Mukhtār distinguishes between “all the Songhay” and the “nobles and common people” of Gao (*T. al-Fattāsh*, 59). The distinction is still maintained during the reign of Askiya Ismā’il (1537-1539) (*T. al-Fattāsh*, 145/tr. 261). The translation here is misleading. In fact, the Songhay are in this instance differentiated from the inhabitants of Gao).



Map 12: The eastward expansion of Mali and the emergence of the Songhay warriors, 14th – 15th centuries

The actual rulers of Gao during the Mali period were apparently the Zā. Although al-Sa'dī attaches the Sonni genealogically to the Zā by claiming that 'Alī Kolon was a son of Zā Yāsiboy, the last but five of the Zā,¹⁷⁹ the Sonni stood in opposition to them. Yet, as we have seen, this confrontation was not the result of the foreign origins of the Sonni, since the birth of 'Alī Kolon in Mali should be interpreted, on the basis of Sonni traditions, as a reference to a simultaneous opposition to Mali and to the Zā.¹⁸⁰ Indeed, the main point of dissent between the Zā and the Sonni must have been the question of Malian suzerainty: while the Zā continued to rule in the ancient capital of Gao as vassals of the Keita, the Sonni founded their own independent court in Kukiya early during the Mali period.¹⁸¹ A close connection between Zā and Malian domination is suggested in particular by the Zarma tradition of Zarmale. The tribal patriarchs are again supposed to have left Melle or Mali, often situated south of Māsina but sometimes also at Dirma/Tendirma,¹⁸² on the flying base of a granary. They are either thought to have come by way of Hombori or Gao. During a further stopover in Wanzerbe, they are said to have met the Sohance who opposed them.¹⁸³ Such a sequence, first the Sonni and then the Zarma, and the particular connections of the patriarchs with the Malinke, would seem to imply that the arrival of the Zarma founding heros was not only related to the expansion of Ghana but also to that of Mali. It further suggests that Malian suzerainty was at one stage reinforced by the presence of a Malinke governor and his people in Gao.

Firmly established in Kukiya, in all likelihood the Sonni led a tenacious struggle of resistance against Malian authority interspersed with periods of nominal rapprochement.¹⁸⁴ Towards the end of the fifteenth century, al-Maghilī refers to vigorous Songhay warriors by stating that the successive Sonni kings each had

¹⁷⁹ *T. al-Sūdān*, 5/tr. 9-10.

¹⁸⁰ According to the local tradition of Gao recorded by al-Maghilī, the ancestors of Sonni 'Alī conquered Gao and imposed Islam (Hunwick, *Shari'a*, 13/tr. 69; Lange, "From Mande", 293-294, 297).

¹⁸¹ Ibn al-Mukhtār, *T. al-Fattāsh*, 45/tr. 85. Earlier I conceived the Zā and the Sonni as two distinct royal clans (from different origins) which existed for a long time side by side ("Chute", 172; "From Mande", 297-299).

¹⁸² Ardant du Picq, *Population africaine*, 17, and Urvoy, *Histoire*, 56, refer to the first tradition and Gado, *Zarmatarey*, 148-149, 160, and Mounkaïla, *Mythe*, 141, to the second.

¹⁸³ Rouch, *Contribution*, 207-208. A Songhay tradition of Tera insists on the alignment of the Zarma and the Malinke, their common retreat to Mali and the later return of the Zarma (Soumaila, *Traditions des Songhay*, 23-25).

¹⁸⁴ Hunwick considers the first Sonni king as a Zā prince who revolted against Malian rule and he compares the attitude of the Malians towards the Sonni of Kukiya with the attitude of the later Moroccan Arma towards the Askiyas of Dendi (*Timbuktu*, XXXVII-XXXVIII). De Moraes Farias believes that the Sonni were a Mandinka war band (*Inscriptions*, §§ 449-450).

to fight and subdue them before they could assume power.¹⁸⁵ Oral traditions of Tera mention the arrival of the Songhay during the period of Malian domination, their friendly reception by the Sorko, their refusal to pay taxes to Mali, and their intermarriage with Zarma women. The traditions further connect the defeat of Mali with the flight of the Zarma to their country of origin.¹⁸⁶ These pieces of information establish a link between the political and the ethnic history of the eastern Niger bend. First the Songhay, having probably been attracted by the powerful Sonni leaders, came into the river valley where they met the Sorko. Lacking a united aristocracy of their own they accepted the Sonni leaders in spite of their Mande origins. Although it cannot be excluded that a vanguard came from beyond the Dallol Mawri, the majority of the Songhay warriors were most likely composed of the thwarted Proto-Songhay nobles who were subjugated by the Zā. With the support of these warrior horsemen, the Sonni were in the long run able to expel the Zā from Gao and to confine Zā power to that of a provincial aristocracy ruling over the Zarma.¹⁸⁷ Hence it would appear that the ethnogenesis of the Songhay was the consequence of Sonni militancy against Malian authority. It is in the course of their struggle of liberation that the Sonni encouraged oppositional cavalry forces from Zarmaganda and Zarmatarey to abandon their Zarma overlords and to rally behind them instead. Inversely, the ethnogenesis of the Zarma resulted from the defeat of the Zā by the Sonni and the ensuing withdrawal of Mali from the Middle Niger. Therefore, the collapse of Malian overlordship was certainly not the result of direct large-scale confrontation between local and foreign forces, but of an indirect conflict between the Sonni and the local partisans of Mali.