were apparently the Za. Ali Kolon in Mali should have a reference to a simultaneous point of dissent between the Za and the Sonni. The Sonni are vassals of the Keita, the Malian suzerainty; while tribal patriarchs are again the Za. Kolon was a granary. They are either of Sonni origin or a stage in Gao. Such a particular connection is denoted as Zaka but also to the Za. The Sonni were at one stage reinforced in Gao.

The Sonni led a tenacious struggle with periods of nominal authority. Al-Maghili refers to the five Sonni kings each had their own granaries in the area. The Za and the Sonni as two social groups lived side by side ("Chute", 56; Lange, "From Mande", 69). Al-Maghili, the ancestors of Sonni dynasty, refer to the first traditional ruler, the Za, to the second.

4. Songhay from Sonni ‘Ali to Askia Muhammad

The founder of the Songhay empire and the last effective ruler of the Sonni dynasty was Sonni ‘Ali the Great (1465-1492). During his reign, the new Songhay nobility rose to the highest offices of state without fully eclipsing the old Soninke elite. The numerous military expeditions and the incorporation of new provinces into the expanding empire, fostered the integration of Mande and Songhay elements into the ruling class of the new state. Just as the renown of Sonni ‘Ali was so remarkable that some twenty years after his death he was still widely remembered to fight and subdue them before they could assume power. 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. 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 Sango came from beyond the Dallol Mawi, the majority of the Songhay warriors were the most likely composed of the Rosso-Proto-Songhay nobles who were subjugated by the Za. The support of these warrior horsemens, the Songhay were in the long run able to expel the Za from Gao and to confine Za power to that of a local aristocracy ruling over the Zarma. 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 Zama and Zarma to abandon their Zarma overlords and to rally behind them instead. Inversely, the ethnogenesis of the Zarma resulted from the defeat of the Za 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.

---

185 Al-Maghili in: Hunwick, Shari'a, 14/14 at 70.
187 According to Olivier de Sardan, the traditions of the Zarma are those of the aristocracy and not those of all the people (Concepts, 406).
as a great lord, so the people most decisive for his military exploits, the Songhay, provided the name for the new empire.

It has often been assumed that Sonni 'Ali relied on the forces and the traditions of the Songhay, as if the Songhay were a homogeneous ethnic bloc. As a member of the Soninke ruling elite he actually followed the steps of his Sonni and Zá predecessors, and thus could build on the dynastic tradition of Ghana in the first place. A Sonni ruler before him, perhaps Sulaymân Dâma, had been able to dislodge the remnant Mali forces represented by the Zá from Gao. Sonni 'Ali himself disposed of sufficient military strength to expand the limits of the empire from Kebbi in the east to Jenne in the west. Providing the dominant cavalry forces for the Soninke elite of Gao, the Songhay became so influential that by the end of the first decade of the sixteenth century in the western provinces their name was given to the main language of the new empire. By the middle of the seventeenth century, the chroniclers of Timbuktu — again based in the west — applied their name to the hegemony founded by Sonni 'Ali. The same chroniclers were, however, reluctant to project the name into the past beyond the rule of the Sonni. They preferred using the more general term Takrûr instead. Modern scholars introduced the notion that Sonni 'Ali had inhabited the area from the end of the fourteenth century onwards.

One of the leading figures of the 15th century was Sonni 'Ali's contemporary, the high-ranking general 'Ali, who fought against the Songhay, the Zá, and other Western leaders. 'Ali is said to have been the founder of the Songhay dynasty, which, according to some historians, was the result of the union of the Zá and Songhay peoples.

On account of his military prowess, some historians depict the Songhay as a powerful and populous state, with a strong economy and a well-organized society. One of the most significant figures of the Songhay dynasty was Al-Maghili, who is said to have been a descendant of the Zá and Songhay lineages.

Takrûr in reference to the
T. al-Fattâsh, 52, 53, 95
Delafosse, Haut-Sénégal et Niger, 38-84; Fage, History of the Hausa, 131-144; Hunwick, Timbuktu, 46.
Leo Africanus calls the area "Ancient Ghanania" (S.ALS, 191). See also
Hunwick, Timbuktu, 120-121.
Al-Sa'di, T. al-Sudân, 22, 23, 76, 120-125.
Ibn al-Mukhtar, T. al-Fattâsh, 11, 44.
Al-Sa'di is less strict and uses the eponym Songhay occasionally in instances referring to the pre-Songhay period of T. al-Sudân, 2, 6, 7, 12, 14.
In his translation Houdas extends the usage of Songhay by calling the Zâ princes of Songhay (T. al-Sudân, 2, 4).
T. al-Fattâsh (NH), 327, 331.
With the possible exception of T. al-Fattâsh, 29, 49, where the editors however mention a "feuillet isolé du ms. A", Ibn al-Mukhtar does not seem to have used the name Songhay for the earlier period of Gao history (idem, 29 n. 1).
Al-Sa'di occasionally does this (T. al-Sudân, 2, 7, 12, 13), although he uses the name mainly as a geographical term (idem, 4, 6, 7, 12, 11, 12, 13). Both chroniclers employ the term

532
scholars introduced the notion that a supposedly homogenous population called Songhay had inhabited the region of the eastern Niger bend from the medieval period onwards.\textsuperscript{194}

One of the leading members of the Soninke elite during the reign of Sonni ‘Ali was the high-ranking officer Muhammad Türê.\textsuperscript{195} In 1493, a few months after Sonni ‘Ali’s death, he seized power after a successful insurrection in the course of which he fought two bloody battles against Abû Bakr Dâo, the newly enthroned son of the great conqueror.\textsuperscript{196} Henceforth known as Askiya Muhammad, he became the founder of a dynasty which continued to rule over the country up to the Moroccan conquest towards the end of the sixteenth century.\textsuperscript{197} Pursuing the military exploits of his predecessor, he extended the Songhay empire to the whole of Hausaland and Agadez in the east and to Dârâ and Galam in the west. In the northeast, he incorporated the copper mines of Takedda into the empire.\textsuperscript{198}

On account of his Soninke ancestry, noted by the chroniclers of Timbuktu, some historians depict Askiya Muhammad as an alien usurper seizing power from the Songhay dynasty of the Sonni.\textsuperscript{200} This view ignores the fact that all members of the two royal houses, the Zâ and the Soninke, were Songhay by origin. Al-Maghli and the author of the T. al-Fattâsh make it clear that Sonni ‘Ali and Askiya Muhammad descended from the same Soninke invaders who were supposed to have once subdued the country and introduced Islam.\textsuperscript{201} By turning Askiya Muhammad’s mother Kassâ into a sister of Sonni ‘Ali — although she actually was a daughter of Kûra-Koy Buku, an official based on an island of

\textsuperscript{194} Delafosse, Histoire de l'empire, 1, 238-246; Rouch, Contribution, 165-176; Timingham, Histoire, 93-84; Fage, Histoire, 76-77; Levitzion, “Sahara and Sudan”, 677-678; Cuq, Histoire, 131-144; Hunwick, Timbuktu, XXV, XXXIV.

\textsuperscript{195} Leo Africanus calls him “capitano di Sonni Heli” (Ramusio, Descrizione, 77; Épauleard, Description, 462). See also al-Sâ’di, T. al-Sûdân, 1/171, and Ibn al-Mukhbûr, T. al-Fattâsh, 46/8-89.


\textsuperscript{197} The Askiya title appears on two inscriptions of the Juna Kanji cemetery of Old Gao, one of which is dated to 1234 AD (de Morais Farias, Inscrições, 57-59 [n 62, 63]; see also §§ 193, 198).


\textsuperscript{199} Al-Sâ’di, T. al-Sûdân, 71/117; Ibn al-Mukhbûr, T. al-Fattâsh, 59/114.

\textsuperscript{200} Timingham, Histoire, 97; similarly Fage, Histoire, 81, and Hunwick, Timbuktu, XL.

the Niger upstream of Timbuktu — oral traditions even connect the two greatest figures of Songhay history by matrimonial relations. Muhammad Ture was certainly not the only Mande officer in the Songhay army. When referring to an expedition against the Mossi, one of the chroniclers incidentally mentions his father Abû Bakr and his brother ‘Umar, the later Kurmina-Farî, among senior army officers. While Muhammad Ture himself held the title of Tondi-Farima, probably concerned with the provincial government of the Hombori mountains, his brother ‘Umar held that of Kurala-Farima. These examples show that, despite the final eviction of the Zâ from Gao at the end of the fourteenth century and the incorporation of Songhay leaders into the military establishment, certain members of the Mande elite continued to hold important positions in the Gao state.

The insurrection led by Muhammad Ture may even be seen in connection with earlier succession conflicts, mentioned by al-Maghili, in which Sonni pretenders had to vanquish the opposition of the Songhay warriors before they could fully be installed as kings. The most striking evidence for the continuity between the rule of the Sonni and the Askiya is provided by the pilgrimage of Aśkiya Muhammad. If, only three years after his rise to power, the new ruler could afford to be absent from the country for nearly two years, the dynastic overthrow can only have resulted in limited changes within the political structures of the state. Once Abû Bakr Dâo and his closest followers had fled to Aïr, most of the former officials of the Sonni regime must have rallied to the successful challenger.


285 Al-Maghili in: Hunwick, *Shart’â*, 14/ct. 70. Hunwick comes close to this solution, but he adds that Aśkiya Muhammad’s struggle had a different complexion from that of the Sonni because of his Soninke origin (*Timbuktu*, XI).

286 Al-Sâ‘î, *T. al-Sudân*, 72-73/ct. 119-121. Leo Africanus (*Épaulard, Description*, II, 463). In the *T. al-Fattâh* only the recent interpolations of ms C mention the pilgrimage (16-17/ct. 25-27).

287 Al-Sâ‘î, *T. al-Sudân*, 72/ct. 117; Hunwick, *Timbuktu*, 102 n. 7. In a note to a passage of *T. al-Fattâh* copied from *T. al-Sudân*, Delafosse suggests reading Ayoor, a village situated on an island of the Niger between Kukiya-Bentia and Tillabery (*Barth, Travels*, III, 515; Rouch, *Contribution*, 187). However, since this region was certainly controlled by Aśkiya Muhammad, a retreat of the defeated king to the Songhay speaking communities of Takedda-Agâdez seems to be more likely. The region was overrun by Aśkiya Muhammad in 1500 and it was more permanently incorporated into the empire in 1516 (al-Sâ‘î, *T. al-Sudân*, 78/ct. 129; Ibn al-Mukhêtâr, *T. al-Fattâh*, 70/ct. 135-136, 339).
connect the two greatest
Muhammad Turé was
When referring to an
mentally mentions his fa-
ni, among senior army
of Tondi-Farma, prob-
bambari mountains, his
ules show that, despite
teenth century and the
ishment, certain men-
tions in the Gao state.
seen in connection with
ich Sonni pretenders
ore they could fully be
unity between the rule
Askiya Muhammad.26
uld afford to be absent
throw can only have
of the state. Once Abū
of the former officials
lenger.
Soumaila. Traditions, 28;
also al-Sa‘di, T. al-Sūdān,

Tondi-Farma, see Hanwick,
close to this solution, but
on from that of the Sonni
Pepoulard, Description, II,
mention the pilgrimage
. 7. In a note to a passage
ning Ayorou, a village situ-
Barth, Travels, III, 515;
mainly controlled by Askiya
communities of Takedda
Muhammad in 1500 and
al-Sa‘di, T. al-Sūdān, 78/8r.
The most serious popular objection raised against the Sonni regime was probably related to the never-ending military expeditions of Sonni ‘Ali. In contrast, the criticism voiced by the chroniclers against the superficial Islam of Sonni ‘Ali was certainly restricted to small circles of devout Muslims among the merchant class in towns like Timbuktu and Jenne. 208 Behind a widespread unwillingness to follow the son of Sonni ‘Ali into further military adventures, it is possible to perceive a structural imbalance introduced into the societies of the Middle Niger by the increasing weight of the Songhay warriors. From this point of view, it is not surprising that the successful challenger to the regime rose from among the less bellicose traditional Soninke elite of Gao.

Who were the forces behind the revolt led by the Soninke officer Muhammad Ture? Most authors suppose that support for the insurrection came mainly from the western provinces. 209 Looking at the history of Gao from the west, the chroniclers of Timbuktu are indeed only able to mention the Bara-Koy Kura as being among the followers of Muhammad Ture. The prestigious Malian title manza, applied to various Bara-Koy preceding and following him, suggests that he likewise belonged to the Mandé section of the imperial ruling class. 210 Probably, the chroniclers were unable to provide the names of further supporters of the revolt because they neither held the offices of governors in the western provinces close to them, nor did they belong to the high-ranking officials of the court. In fact, it is more likely that the majority of military leaders following the call of Muhammad Ture were members of the old Soninke elite of Zarmaganda and Zarmatey, the leaders of the progressively emerging Zarma ethnic group. These partisans committed to political change, were geographically too distant from Timbuktu, and their actions were too limited in time – as we shall see – to raise the attention of the chroniclers. 211 Any regime based on Songhay support must have been highly suspect to them, whatever its other merits might have been. By contributing to the success of a revolt against the Sonni regime, they probably expected to regain their former leading positions in Gao.

During the first decade of Askia Muhammad’s rule, the Zarma of the eastern provinces of the Gao kingdom seem to have once more assumed high-ranking positions in the Gao state. Their temporarily influential roles can be deduced

208 Al-Sa‘di, T. al-Sudais, 72/tr. 118; Ibn al-Mukhtar, T. al-Fattahsh, 59/tr. 115.
210 Ibn al-Mukhtar, T. al-Fattahsh, 53/tr. 102. The Songhay title key “lord, ruler” corresponds to a Songhay translation of the Mandé title manza held also by later governors of the Bara province (T. al-Fattahsh, 81/tr. 152-153). Hunwick suggests that the holders of the title were themselves of Mandé origin (Timbuktu, 339).
211 The Zarma are only mentioned by the “Notice historique” of the T. al-Fattahsh, 334.

5. Further Developments

Under the rule of the Askia, the Gao state was characterized by exceptionally capable and reaching expeditions. Moreover, the Askia demanded distant kingdoms like Gao-Sané delivered tributes, while

212 Al-Sa‘di, T. al-Sudais, 72/tr. 118.
214 Delafosse identified the “ancestors of Za-bér ‘the great’” in the same way as Trimingham, Zarmatey, Gao-Sané, 272, “From the connexions of the Za in the sixteenth century to the remark in the “Notice historique” (Timbuktu, XXXVII n. 5).
215 Rouch, Contribution, 346-352.
From Ghana and Mali to Songhay: The Mande Factor in Gao History

from the Zaôr-banda incident in the war against Borgu in 1505. At this turning point of Songhay history, Askia Muhammad decided to get rid of the enigmatic Zaôr-banda by making them cannon-fodder in a battle from which they could not escape. When Umar Komliakh complained to his brother about the massacre, it was answered that only through the elimination of these brave warriors had it been possible to guarantee the survival of Songhay.212 As for the identification of the Zaôr-banda, one of our sources clearly states that they were descendants of the Zâ dynasty, while this source at the same time rejects the erroneous tendency to apply this name to the Sonni.213 Although such confusion is understandable on account of the genealogical closeness of the two dynasties, historians should refrain from committing the same mistake.214 By distinguishing sharply between the Songhay and the Zâ and insisting on the importance of eliminating the latter from Songhay history, al-Sa’di highlights a crucial event which ended the long conflict-stricken relationship between the Sonni/Songhay and the Zâ/Zarma. After the Borgu war, Askia Muhammad pursued the same ethnic policies as his Sonni predecessors. Therefore, neither the change of dynastic title, nor a more favourable approach to Islam, conceals the fact that the Askia regime had, by the brutal eviction of the Soninke, become Songhay in the same sense as the preceding rule of the Sonni had been.

5. Further Developments and Conclusion

Under the rule of the descendants of Askia Muhammad, the history of Songhay was characterized by numerous court intrigues and succession disputes. Only exceptional rulers like Askia Ishaq I and Askia Dawûd were able to lead far-reaching expeditions to Hausaland, to central Mali and against the Mossi.215 Moreover, the Askias made few attempts to integrate conquered territories: distant kingdoms like those of Hausaland or the Malian principalities merely delivered tributes, while closer districts like those of the western Niger Bend and the

212 Al-Sa’di, T. al-Sudan, 767ff. 125.
214 Delafosse identified the Zaôr-banda first as Zaberma, i.e. Zarma, and later as “descendants of Zaôr-th’he great Za”, i.e. the Zaôr (T.m-Sénégal, 1, 245; T. al-Fattâsh (NH), 333 n. 4); similarly Tringham, History, 91 n. 4, Gado, Zarmatarëy. 13-14, 163, and Lange, “Rois de Gao-Sané”, 272, “From Mande”, 287, 299-300. Hunwick dismisses a survival of the descendants of the Zaôr in the sixteenth century and therefore turns the Zaôr-banda, irrespective of the remark in the “notice historique” of T. al-Fattâsh, into members of the Sonni ‘Ali clan (Timbuktu, XXXVII n. 56).