

4. Songhay from Sonni 'Alī to Askiya Muḥammad

The founder of the Songhay empire and the last effective ruler of the Sonni dynasty was Sonni 'Alī 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 'Alī was so remarkable that some twenty years after his death he was still widely remembered

¹⁸⁵ Al-Maghīlī *in*: Hunwick, *Shari'a*, 14/tr. 70.

¹⁸⁶ Soumaila, *Traditions des Songhay*, 20-25.

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,¹⁸⁸ 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 'Alī relied on the forces and the traditions of the Songhay, as if the Songhay were a homogeneous ethnic bloc.¹⁸⁹ As a member of the Soninke ruling elite he actually followed the steps of his Sonni and Zā predecessors, and thus could build on the dynastic tradition of Ghana in the first place. A Sonni ruler before him, perhaps Sulaymān Dāma, had been able to dislodge the remnant Mali forces represented by the Zā from Gao. Sonni 'Alī himself disposed of sufficient military strength to expand the limits of the empire from Kebbi in the east to Jenne in the west.¹⁹⁰ 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.¹⁹¹ 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 'Alī.¹⁹² 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 Takrūr instead.¹⁹³ Modern

¹⁸⁸ According to Leo Africanus he was “*un gran principe*” (Ramusio, *Descrittione*, 77; Épaulard, *Description*, II, 463). The ms. 954 of Rome omits the passage (Rauchenberger, *Leo der Afrikaner*, 264), but this is obviously due to a mistake of the copy. From this and other instances it can be seen that ms. 954 was not the *Urtext* of Leo's account as Rauchenberger believes (*ibid.*, 148-151) and that Épaulard and others were correct to consider the manuscript 954 to be a copy of the original used by Ramusio (*Description*, I, VII).

¹⁸⁹ Rouch, *Contribution*, 183, 186; Fage, *History*, 80; Levzion, “Western Maghrib”, 428.

¹⁹⁰ Al-Sa'dī, *T. al-Sūdān*, 64/tr. 104-105 (reading *ard Kanta* instead of *ard Kunta*); Ibn al-Mukhtār, *T. al-Fattāsh*, 46/tr. 89. Without textual or other support, some authors believe that the core of Sonni 'Alī's army consisted of a fleet of Sorko fishermen (Rouch, *Contribution*, 183; Levzion, *Ancient Ghana*, 82, 84-85).

¹⁹¹ Having travelled to Timbuktu in the years between 1509 and 1514 (Épaulard, *Description*, VII-VIII; Rauchenberger, *Leo der Afrikaner*, 52), Leo Africanus thought that Songhay was not only spoken in Gao, Timbuktu and Jenne, but also in Mali and in Walāta (Épaulard, *Description*, 16, 464).

¹⁹² Al-Sa'dī, *T. al-Sūdān*, 22, 73, 76/tr. 38, 120, 125; Ibn al-Mukhtār, *T. al-Fattāsh*, 11, 44, 46/tr. 13, 83, 89; *T. al-Fattāsh* (NH), 326-339. Al-Sa'dī is less strict and uses the ethnonym Songhay occasionally in instances referring to the pre-Songhay period *T. al-Sūdān*, 2, 6, 7, /tr. 3, 12, 14. In his translation Houdas extends the usage of Songhay by calling the Zā “princes of Songhay” (*T. al-Sūdān*, 2/tr. 4).

¹⁹³ *T. al-Fattāsh* (NH), 327, 329, 335. With the possible exception of *T. al-Fattāsh*, 29/tr. 49, where the editors however mention a “*feuillet isolé du ms. A*”, Ibn al-Mukhtār does not seem to have used the name Songhay for the earlier period of Gao history (*idem*, 29 n. 1). Al-Sa'dī occasionally does this (*T. al-Sūdān*, 2, 7/tr. 3, 11), although he uses the name mainly as a geographical term (*idem*, 4, 6, 6, 7/tr. 6, 11, 12, 13). Both chroniclers employ the term

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.¹⁹⁴

One of the leading members of the Soninke elite during the reign of Sonni 'Alī was the high-ranking officer Muḥammad Tūrē.¹⁹⁵ In 1493, a few months after Sonni 'Alī's death, he seized power after a successful insurrection in the course of which he fought two bloody battles against Abū Bakr Dāo, the newly enthroned son of the great conqueror.¹⁹⁶ Henceforth known as Askiya Muḥammad, 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.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 Diāra and Galam in the west. In the northeast, he incorporated the copper mines of Takedda into the empire.¹⁹⁸

On account of his Soninke ancestry, noted by the chroniclers of Timbuktu,¹⁹⁹ some historians depict Askiya Muḥammad as an alien usurper seizing power from the Songhay dynasty of the Sonni.²⁰⁰ This view ignores the fact that all members of the two royal houses, the Zā and the Sonni, were Soninke by origin. Al-Maghīlī and the author of *T. al-Fattāsh* make it clear that Sonni 'Alī and Askiya Muḥammad descended from the same Soninke invaders who were supposed to have once subdued the country and introduced Islam.²⁰¹ By turning Askiya Muḥammad's mother Kassaī into a sister of Sonni 'Alī – although she actually was a daughter of Kūra-Koy Bukar, an official based on an island of

Takrūr in reference to the Mande-Songhay complex (*T. al-Sūdān*, 120/tr. 193; 64/tr. 104-105; *T. al-Fattāsh*, 52, 53, 93/tr. 101, 102, 176).

¹⁹⁴ Delafosse, *Haut-Sénégal*, I, 238-246; Rouch, *Contribution*, 165-176; Trimingham, *History*, 83-84; Fage, *History*, 76-77; Levtzion, "Sahara and Sudan", 677-678; Cuoq, *Histoire*, 131-144; Hunwick, *Timbuktu*, XXV, XXXIV.

¹⁹⁵ Leo Africanus calls him "capitano di Soni Heli" (Ramusio, *Discrittione*, 77; Épaulard, *Description*, 462). See also al-Sa'dī, *T. al-Sūdān*, 61/tr. 117, and Ibn al-Mukhtār, *T. al-Fattāsh*, 46/tr. 88-89.

¹⁹⁶ Al-Sa'dī, *T. al-Sūdān*, 71-72/tr. 117; Ibn al-Mukhtār, *T. al-Fattāsh*, 53/tr. 101-102, 338-339.

¹⁹⁷ The Askiya title appears on two inscriptions of the Jira Kanje cemetery of Old Gao, one of which is dated to 1234 AD (de Moraes Farias, *Inscriptions*, 57-59 [n° 62, 63]; see also §§ 193, 198).

¹⁹⁸ Mauny, *Tableau*, 513-515; Levtzion, "Western Maghrib", 431-434; Hunwick, "Songhay, Borno", 344-346.

¹⁹⁹ Al-Sa'dī, *T. al-Sūdān*, 71/tr. 117; Ibn al-Mukhtār, *T. al-Fattāsh*, 59/tr. 114.

²⁰⁰ Trimingham, *History*, 97; similarly Fage, *History*, 81, and Hunwick, *Timbuktu*, XL.

²⁰¹ Al-Maghīlī in: Hunwick, *Sharī'a*, 13, 17/tr. 69, 72; Ibn al-Mukhtār, *T. al-Fattāsh*, 48/tr. 93-94.

the Niger upstream of Timbuktu – oral traditions even connect the two greatest figures of Songhay history by matrimonial relations.²⁰² Muḥammad Tūrē 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 Abū Bakr and his brother ‘Umar, the later Kurmina-Fāri, among senior army officers.²⁰³ While Muḥammad Tūrē himself held the title of Tondi-Farma, probably concerned with the provincial government of the Hombori mountains, his brother ‘Umar held that of Kutalu-Farma.²⁰⁴ These examples show that, despite the final eviction of the Zā 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 Muḥammad Tūrē may even be seen in connection with earlier succession conflicts, mentioned by al-Maghilī, in which Sonni pretenders had to vanquish the opposition of the Songhay warriors before they could fully be installed as kings.²⁰⁵ The most striking evidence for the continuity between the rule of the Sonni and the Askiya is provided by the pilgrimage of Askiya Muḥammad.²⁰⁶ 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 Abū Bakr Dāo and his closest followers had fled to Aïr,²⁰⁷ most of the former officials of the Sonni regime must have rallied to the successful challenger.

²⁰² Rouch, *Contribution*, 187-189; Hama, *Histoire*, 137-140; Soumaila, *Traditions*, 28; Ibn al-Mukhtār, *T. al-Fattāsh*, 59, 78, 81/tr. 114, 148, 151. See also al-Sa’dī, *T. al-Sūdān*, 68/tr. 111.

²⁰³ Ibn al-Mukhtār, *T. al-Fattāsh*, 45/tr. 86.

²⁰⁴ Ibn al-Mukhtār, *T. al-Fattāsh*, 46/tr. 90. For the function of Tondi-Farma, see Hunwick, *Timbuktu*, 344.

²⁰⁵ Al-Maghilī *in*: Hunwick, *Shari‘a*, 14/tr. 70. Hunwick comes close to this solution, but he adds that Askiya Muḥammad’s struggle had a different complexion from that of the Sonni because of his Soninke origin (*Timbuktu*, XL).

²⁰⁶ Al-Sa’dī, *T. al-Sūdān*, 72-73/tr. 119-121. Leo Africanus (Épaulard, *Description*, II, 463). In the *T. al-Fattāsh* only the recent interpolations of ms C mention the pilgrimage (16-17/tr. 25-27).

²⁰⁷ Al-Sa’dī, *T. al-Sūdān*, 72/tr. 117; Hunwick, *Timbuktu*, 102 n. 7. In a note to a passage of *T. al-Fattāsh* copied from *T. al-Sūdān*, Delafosse suggests reading Ayorou, 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 Askiya Muḥammad, a retreat of the defeated king to the Songhay speaking communities of Takedda-Agadez seems to be more likely. The region was overrun by Askiya Muḥammad in 1500 and it was more permanently incorporated into the empire in 1516 (al-Sa’dī, *T. al-Sūdān*, 78/tr. 129; Ibn al-Mukhtār, *T. al-Fattāsh*, 70/tr. 135-136, 339).

The most serious popular objection raised against the Sonni regime was probably related to the never-ending military expeditions of Sonni 'Alī. In contrast, the criticism voiced by the chroniclers against the superficial Islam of Sonni 'Alī was certainly restricted to small circles of devote Muslims among the merchant class in towns like Timbuktu and Jenne.²⁰⁸ Behind a widespread unwillingness to follow the son of Sonni 'Alī 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 Muḥammad Tūrē? 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 Kūra as being among the followers of Muḥammad Tūrē. The prestigious Malian title *mansa*, applied to various Bara-Koys preceding and following him, suggests that he likewise belonged to the Mande 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 Muḥammad Tūrē were members of the old Soninke elite of Zarmaganda and Zarmatarey, 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 Askiya Muḥammad's rule, the Zā 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'dī, *T. al-Sūdān*, 72/tr. 118; Ibn al-Mukhtār, *T. al-Fattāsh*, 59/tr. 115.

²⁰⁹ Levtzion, "Western Maghrib", 427-428; Hunwick, *Shari'a*, 22; similarly Rouch, *Contribution*, 187.

²¹⁰ Ibn al-Mukhtār, *T. al-Fattāsh*, 53/tr. 102. The Songhay title *koy* "lord, ruler" corresponds to a Songhay translation of the Mande title *mansa* held also by later governors of the Bara province (*T. al-Fattāsh*, 81/tr. 152-153). Hunwick suggests that the holders of the title were themselves of Manding origin (*Timbuktu*, 339).

²¹¹ The Zarma are only mentioned by the "Notice historique" of the *T. al-Fattāsh*, 334.

from the *Zā-bēr-banda* incident in the war against Borgu in 1505. At this turning point of Songhay history, Askiya Muḥammad decided to get rid of the enigmatic *Zā-bēr-banda* by making them cannon-fodder in a battle from which they could not escape. When ‘Umar Komdiakha 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 *Zā-bēr-banda*, one of our sources clearly states that they were descendants of the *Zā* 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 *Zā* and insisting on the importance of eliminating the latter from Songhay history, al-Sa‘dī highlights a crucial event which ended the long conflict-stricken relationship between the Sonni/Songhay and the *Zā/Zarma*. After the Borgu war, Askiya Muḥammad 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 Askiya regime had, by the brutal eviction of the Soninke, become Songhay in the same sense as the preceding rule of the Sonni had been.