

In Search of Askia Mohammed: *The Epic of Askia Mohammed* as  
Cultural History and Songhay Foundational Myth

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of History

May 2016

## Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my family: my parents, siblings, and extended relations. Without their continued support I could not have completed my education.

I also dedicate this thesis to Dr. David Dillard and the professors of the History Department at James Madison University. Dr. Dillard believed in me as a student and as a human being. He invested in me in a way no one has ever invested in me before. I will never adequately repay him for his faith and generosity. Each of the history professors I studied under at James Madison University, in undergraduate and graduate classes, aided my development and prepared me for wherever my path leads. They encouraged me and challenged me to perform at a higher level than I thought I was capable of achieving. I am ever grateful for the opportunities James Madison University afforded me.

## Acknowledgments

Dr. Timothy J. Fitzgerald taught me how to enhance my prose, clarify my arguments, and to view the history of the world from multiple perspectives as well as dimensions. My knowledge of Islam and the Islamic world is a result of his generous and forgiving instruction. He guided me in all of my major writing projects throughout my college career and was invaluable in the production of this thesis. Dr. David Owusu-Ansah is an expert in the field of West African Islam. He provided me resources and insights on this topic that I would never have found on my own. Dr. Lamont King and Dr. John J. Butt offered advice concerning content as well as style. Their input was vital in improving this thesis.

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## Abstract

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## Introduction

*The Epic of Askia Mohammed* is an oral account of the life and reign of the eponymous Songhay king that requires placement in historical and cultural context in order to fully appreciate its importance.<sup>1</sup> While the tale is of interest at face value, a thorough analysis reveals dynamic political, religious, and cultural undercurrents.<sup>2</sup> Reconciling the themes in the popular oral account with the events portrayed in the official written histories as well as current scholarship is the primary task of this thesis. The secondary task is illustrating that the epic is the foundational myth of the Songhay, in the tradition of the other great epics of world history. *The Epic of Askia Mohammed* deserves recognition as a classic of world literature as it relates significant cultural meaning concerning the time and place in which the events are set. The epic is an important and underserved source, as the primary documents concerning the period of Askia Mohammed (r. 1493 – 1528) are few.<sup>3</sup> The historians that chronicled his rule were Islamic clerics and were therefore biased by his well-documented patronage of the *ulama*. Two complete

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<sup>1</sup> A note on spelling: The many sources and reference works utilized in researching this thesis use myriad spellings for almost every proper noun. This is due to the sources having been translated from Arabic into French and then from French into English. Some texts were translated directly from Arabic into English. Others replaced Arabic nouns with African nouns. For example, Sunni Ali is called Si, Shi, Sonni Ali, Sunni Ali, Sunni Ali Ber, Sunni Ali Beru, and other combinations of these names. Sunni and the alternative spellings translate to something like sheikh, not the majority Islamic sect. Ber and Beru mean something akin to "the Great." Place names are difficult as well. Gao is also known as Kaw Kaw. Timbuktu has too many alternate spellings to list. Djenne is often spelled Jenne. This thesis is not concerned with a strict interpretation of local dialects, it is concerned with historical as well as cultural context. Therefore, for clarity's sake, the most common English spelling for all proper nouns are used throughout this thesis.

<sup>2</sup> This thesis concentrates on lines 1 – 482 of the text. This is the portion of the narrative that deals explicitly with Askia Mohammed. The remainder of the epic concerns the reigns of his descendants and the ultimate fall of the Songhay Empire. While interesting, this falls beyond the scope of this thesis.

<sup>3</sup> Askia Mohammed is often called Mamar Kassaye, Mahmoud Ture, Muhammad Toure, and other combinations of these names. Mamar and Mahmoud are diminutive forms of Mohammed. Ture or Toure refers to his tribal lineage. According to the epic, the title askia is derived from his mother's name Kassaye, indicating their close relationship. Another version states that it is derived from the Songhay word that roughly translates to "he is not." This was supposedly uttered by a daughter of Sunni Ali upon hearing of Mohammed's victory over her brother and his subsequent crowning as king. According to al-Sadi, Mohammed found humor in this and took askia as his title as a constant reminder to his detractors that he overcame those that opposed him. A third theory, which seems less likely, is that askia is derived from the Tuareg word *askou* which means captive. This refers to Mohammed's social station as a servant, a veritable slave, to Sunni Ali. While Mohammed was depicted as a slave in the epic, he was a high-ranking official in the Songhay bureaucracy. Further, he was of Soninke stock and culturally Songhay. The use of nomadic language in his official title seems unlikely, no matter the surface level connections.

Arabic language histories of his reign survive: the *Tarihk al-fattash* and the *Tarikh al-Sudan*, hereafter referred to as the *TF* and the *TS*.<sup>4</sup> In them, Askia Mohammed was depicted as a devout Muslim and magnanimous regent, blessed by the *ulama*. He made the hajj to Mecca and gifted the *ulama* of Timbuktu in material wealth as well as allowed them near autonomy in matters of *fiqh* and fatwa. Yet these sources did not sufficiently portray a monarch given the appellation "the Great." Askia Mohammed expanded the domains of the Songhay via armed conquest after usurping the legitimate heir to the throne. *The Epic of Askia Mohammed* accounts for these actions, political and military deeds that added to his fame and prestige. The epic also conveys the experiences of the non-orthodox Muslims among the Songhay and offers a different view of Askia Mohammed. A more religiously syncretic image of the king emerges from the oral tradition, as the broad freeborn class of Songhay society enjoyed a version of Islam that was integrated into local religious beliefs. To understand this, one must become familiar with the sources.

Thomas Hale of Penn State is to thank for capturing and publishing the epic. The oral account was recorded over the course of two sessions with Songhay master griot Nouhou Malio (d.1986). Hale sought out griots in and around the Nigerian capital of Niamey as part of his research for the book *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist*. He spoke with many African bards and interviewed them in order to better understand the nature of African literature. Hale asked the griots to recount stories concerning Askia Mohammed. The versions he received varied in length "from ten minutes to two hours."<sup>5</sup> Some did not know the tale of Askia Mohammed and they referred Hale to their instructors. When inquiring about the griots instructors, seeking out the

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<sup>4</sup> The full title of the *TF*, translated, is *The Chronicle of the Seeker: Serving as an Account of the Towns, Armies, and Leading Figures of the Takrur*.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Hale, *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist: Narrative Interpreters of the Songhay Empire followed by The Epic of Askia Mohammed recounted by Nouhou Malio*, (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1990) 56.



provenance of the griot's tales, the name Nouhou Malio recurred. Hale visited Malio for an interview, though he lived in a small village some miles outside the metropolitan capital. Malio, an elderly man, told Hale that he could recount his generations to the time of Sunni Ali (r.1464 – 1492). This intrigued Hale and he asked if Malio would perform for him. Malio said he would and they set a date and time. Hale prepared a professional tape recorder and captured the griot's performance on December 30, 1980 and again on January 26, 1981.<sup>6</sup> The initial translation of Malio's presentation concerning Sunni Ali, Askia Mohammed, and the Songhay Empire (1375 – 1591) appeared in *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist* in 1990. This first publication was missing large sections of the narrative that Hale and his advisors could not decipher. In 1996, Hale released a slim paperback volume of *The Epic of Askia Mohammed* as part of an African literature series that also contained the well-known and oft studied Sundiata (r. c. 1235 – c. 1255) narrative. This better edited version of the epic contained a near complete translation from the Songhay, as a larger team of advisors worked on the transcript. Hale annotated the 1996 edition, yet the notes deal almost entirely with language and not with historical context. This is in keeping with his specialty in languages and literature. Placing *The Epic of Askia Mohammed* in historical context and testing it against the accounts of the *TF* and *TS*, as well as the existing historiography in general, is what is missing from the research. Though Hale did much to explain the meaning and history behind the epic in *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist*, new and meaningful research on the epic has not been performed since. This is the driving force behind this thesis: the search for new connections and ways to interpret the epic.

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<sup>6</sup> Hale, *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist: Narrative Interpreters of the Songhay Empire followed by The Epic of Askia Mohammed recounted by Nouhou Malio*, 178.

The *TF* is but one example of why this period in West African history is so dynamic and deserving of study. It is the first history of the Sudan written by a native scholar.<sup>7</sup> The author, Mahmoud al-Kati (d. c. 1593), began writing his account of the Songhay when he was 51, yet he was a part of Askia Mohammed's staff from the age of 25.<sup>8</sup> This makes him a firsthand observer of much of the history he chronicled. Al-Kati accompanied Askia Mohammed on the hajj and was close to the court at Kukiya and Gao. While his history covers the origins of the Songhay and their rise to power, most of the chronicle is devoted to the exploits of Askia Mohammed and his descendants. The tone of his work also represents the overall philosophy of the *ulama* of Gao, the Songhay political capital. While Timbuktu was the religious capital and maintained an orthodox Sunni, Maliki stance toward spiritual matters, the *ulama* of Gao enjoyed a version of Islam that allowed more mixing and syncretism with local traditions. The *TF* is replete with spiritual folktales and anecdotes that are indigenous in nature. Al-Kati was likely of Soninke origin, as was Askia Mohammad, and he ultimately became part of the *ulama* at the University of Sankore in Timbuktu.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, Askia Mohammed rewarded the loyalty of this Gao-centric cleric with a high appointment at the religious capital of Timbuktu. Al-Kati in turn wrote a glowing history of his patron. This intimate tone is not found in the *TS*.

The *TS* varies from the *TF* in temporality, content, and in manner. It was written long after the events of the life of Askia Mohammed. The author, al-Sadi (d. c. 1656), wrote the history as a nostalgic account of the Songhay Empire. He lived in a time of Moroccan domination of the Sudan and wrote the *TS* so that the memory of the former kingdom and her people would not vanish. Al-Sadi was a cleric and administrator from a family of Andalusian

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<sup>7</sup> Pierre-Damien Mvuyekure, *World Eras Volume 10: West African Kingdoms 500 – 1500*, (New York: Thomas Gale, 2004) 156.

<sup>8</sup> Mvuyekure, *World Eras Volume 10: West African Kingdoms 500 – 1500*, 156.

<sup>9</sup> Mvuyekure, *World Eras Volume 10: West African Kingdoms 500 – 1500*, 156.

descent.<sup>10</sup> Though his ancestors came from without, and he may have initially been associated with the Moroccan invaders, several generations had passed since they first settled in the Sudan. Therefore, he may or may not have been accepted as a native in his time.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps al-Sadi hoped to bolster his Sudanic credibility by writing the *TS*. In middle age he was appointed by the foreign rulers of Timbuktu to govern the region surrounding Djenne.<sup>12</sup> In 1626-27 he became imam of the Sankore mosque in Timbuktu.<sup>13</sup> This position accounts for the severely religious content and tone of the chronicle. While the *TS* recounts the history of the Songhay rulers, even into the early kingdom period before the time of Sunni Ali, it also affords just as much space for the clerics and scholars of Timbuktu. Askia Mohammed was depicted as a righteous monarch and friend of Islam; a heroic figure from an idealized past. Al-Sadi cited few sources, and those he cited are difficult to reconcile as few documents survive from the period. Yet the *TF* and *TS*, combined with tangentially relative primary sources, suffice for the purposes of placing *The Epic of Askia Mohammed* in context.

In order to understand the symbolism and cultural importance of *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, one must turn to Joseph Campbell (d.1987). His 1949 book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* is a seminal work in the field of modern mythology and cultural anthropology. In it, Campbell not only detailed the stations of the Hero's Journey that appear in the myths of cultures across the planet, he also explored the metaphysics of mythology. Campbell dissected myriad world folktales and opined on the cosmological meaning that they shared. Microcosmic and macrocosmic themes appeared when compared. It is no mistake that these same themes appear in Malio's rendition of the Askia Mohammed narrative. Specifically, Campbell discussed

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<sup>10</sup> Mvuyekure, *World Eras Volume 10: West African Kingdoms 500 – 1500*, 156.

<sup>11</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. "al-Sadi"

<sup>12</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. "al-Sadi"

<sup>13</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. "al-Sadi"

the role of fortunate birth, djinn, and other matters that are directly associated with the epic. Campbell believed the cultural values of heroes and the other archetypal figures in each society's myths were found in the lessons they taught. Myths, he argued, inured the audience with case studies in what behaviors should be embraced as virtues as well as how important each individual's role was to society as a whole, no matter how menial it may seem on the surface. Further, the intended audience of Malio's narrative was the modern Songhay. Certain events in the story are apocryphal and require historical as well as mythological and anthropological analysis. As such, Campbell's insights are vital in deciphering the ultimate meaning of the symbolism in the tale.

Other folk tales, travel accounts, and histories produced in the same region are vital in analyzing *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*. *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* was recounted by the griot Mamoudou Kouyate to historian D.T. Niane in 1965. This well-read and often cited account of the founder of the Mali Empire (c. 1230 – c. 1600) provides a source for comparison in story structure as well as content. Sundiata was of Malinke origin and Askia Mohammed Songhay, therefore, one can analyze them for comparison as African foundational myths. The Songhay likely descended from a group of Soninke that migrated to the middle and eastern Niger region circa 500.<sup>14</sup> Both Malinke and Soninke are subgroups of Mande, meaning that the Malinke and Songhay are ultimately related and similarities should be found between the stories concerning Sundiata and Askia Mohammed. A marked difference is the role of fate in the tales. Destiny is a key player in the Sundiata narrative, while human agency trumps fate in *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*. Helpful too is the travelogue (*rihla*) of the Moroccan Ibn Battuta (d. 1304). A world traveler and renowned scholar, he toured the Sudan in 1352 and 1353, making his

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<sup>14</sup> John Stewart, *African States and Rulers, 2nd Edition*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1999) 203.

firsthand observations concerning politics, economics, religion, and society one of the few valuable outsider accounts of the region in this period. Fellow North African Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) wrote his influential work of history and philosophy in this era as well, *The Muqaddimah*. In it, Ibn Khaldun spoke of the kingdoms of the Sudan in brief passages. More importantly, he expounded on the relationship between settled peoples and nomadic pastoralists. He formulated a theory concerning regime change that is wholly relative to the Sudan. Sunni Ali lost his throne to Askia Mohammed, initiating a change in dynasties for the Songhay. This occurred in the same year as many other important events in global history.

Periodization must be addressed as the events portrayed in *The Epic of Askia Mohammed* cross a traditional barrier in Western historical accounting. Sunni Ali died in 1492, the year the Reconquista was completed as well as the year the Columbian Exchange began. By this reckoning, Askia Mohammed reigned in the Early Modern period. Yet this periodization does not capture the realities of life in West Africa. The explorers that mapped the West Coast of Africa did not have knowledge of the interior, of the great kingdoms, and gave broad swaths of territory a generic label, such as Negroland or Nigritie. Even today, prominent historians such as John Keegan (d. 2012), Ian Morris, and Geoffrey Parker fail to include West African empires in their global military histories.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the Songhay Empire did not have the same global experience as those countries that would come to know the period surrounding 1492 as the Early Modern Period or the Age of Exploration. This separation of lifeways and lived realities demands a different understanding of periodization.

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<sup>15</sup> To Parker's credit, he cited the Battle of Tondibi (1591) in *The Military Revolution* as an exceptional example of gunpowder weapons defeating truly organized non-Western resistance. His overall argument was that Western powers made war on the rest of the world from 1500-1800 and successfully subdued the bulk of humanity. Not only was the Songhay resistance an example of a highly organized response to an invading gunpowder army, those that wielded the modern muskets were the soldiery of Islamic Sa'adian Morocco, another exception to his argument. This further proves that the time and place in which the Songhay flourished is unique and worthy of study. Parker's arguments concerning the Songhay are found on pages 120 and 174 of *The Military Revolution*.

The era of Askia Mohammed is better understood as the Late Medieval period in Africa. The three columns of official power were the monarchy, the *ulama*, and the horse-borne warrior aristocracy. This is a thoroughly medieval constitution. Further, trans-Saharan trade was limited in scope by the severity of the landscape. This restricted the growth of economic systems. Caravan trade could not expand to the magnitude of the ship-borne mercantile trade that marked the shift from general commerce to gross accumulation in Europe. Some noted historians of Africa, such as Roland Oliver (d. 2014), dated the African Medieval period to as late as 1850 when European colonization began in earnest. This dating does not take into account the Atlantic Slave Trade, or the rise of the Ashanti (c. 1670 – 1901) and Dahomey (c. 1600 – 1894) kingdoms. For the purposes of this thesis, the medieval period of West Africa ended following the defeat of the Songhay at the Battle of Tondibi near Gao in 1591. It was there that Moroccan troops armed with gunpowder weapons overcame the last of the line of Askias and subjected Timbuktu as a vassal state. The North African trade cities that ultimately subdued the Songhay in this late period were also the cradles from which Islam spread to the Sudan some nine centuries earlier.

Unlike many of the regions to which Islam spread, there was no other major, universal world religion in the Sudan. Christianity was an important religion in the Eastern Sudan, and Abyssinia was a majority Christian region. Yet the Western Sudan did not know Christianity or any of the older world religions. This is an important phenomenon and must be understood in order to appreciate the importance of Islam in the narrative of *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*. Islam came to the Sudan from the Maghreb. It was there that a portion of a minor sect of Islam fled following a schism among the faithful in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Called Ibadism or Kharijite Islam, these believers were dismayed by the bloody controversy surrounding the succession of the

caliph in the early decades of Islam. The Ibadis supported the Prophet's son-in-law Ali (d. 661) for caliph, but were shocked when it appeared he might negotiate and make peace with those that opposed his right to leadership. They seceded from the *umma* in order to practice what they believed was a purer form of Islam, one that acknowledged the created nature of the words of the Koran and that held that the most righteous among the believers should lead. They dispersed to the many corners of the Arab world, and beyond, in order to practice their faith in seclusion from other Muslims. Such was the case for those that settled in the Maghreb.

The Arab followers of Ibadism lived in small, exclusive communes in the trading cities of North Africa, yet their presence influenced their neighbors and many Berbers converted.<sup>16</sup> Some of these early adopters were of the Sanhaja family of Berber tribes. The Sanhaja took part in the regular caravan trade that crossed the Sahara into the interior of Africa. This well-established merchant network made stops in the city-states of Senegambia as well as to the city-states along the Niger River. Some of the Sanhaja settled among the Sudanese in order to become merchants on the other side of the desert, in the Sahel. These Berber newcomers engendered the first Islamic conversions in the Sudan. As more settlers came to the Sudan, Ibadism was supplanted by the much more orthodox Sunni, Maliki madhhab. By the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Arabic sources stated that Muslim districts existed in two trade cities of the Sudan: Bilad al-Sudan in Ghana and Gao on the eastern bend of the Niger River.<sup>17</sup> Though Sunnism far outweighed Ibadism in the Sudan, Ibadism never disappeared. Ibn Battuta attested to the presence of Ibadi Kharijites among the Sunni of the Maliki madhhab in the village of Zaghari in 1352.<sup>18</sup> Islam spread quickly due to the expediencies a shared religion brought to commerce.

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<sup>16</sup> Jacob K. Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014) 92.

<sup>17</sup> John L. Esposito, ed., *The Oxford History of Islam*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 476.

<sup>18</sup> Ibn Battuta, *Ibn Battuta in Black Africa*, Translated by Said Hamdun and Noel King, (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2005) 41.

## The Development of Muslim States in North and West Africa c.1500–c.1650

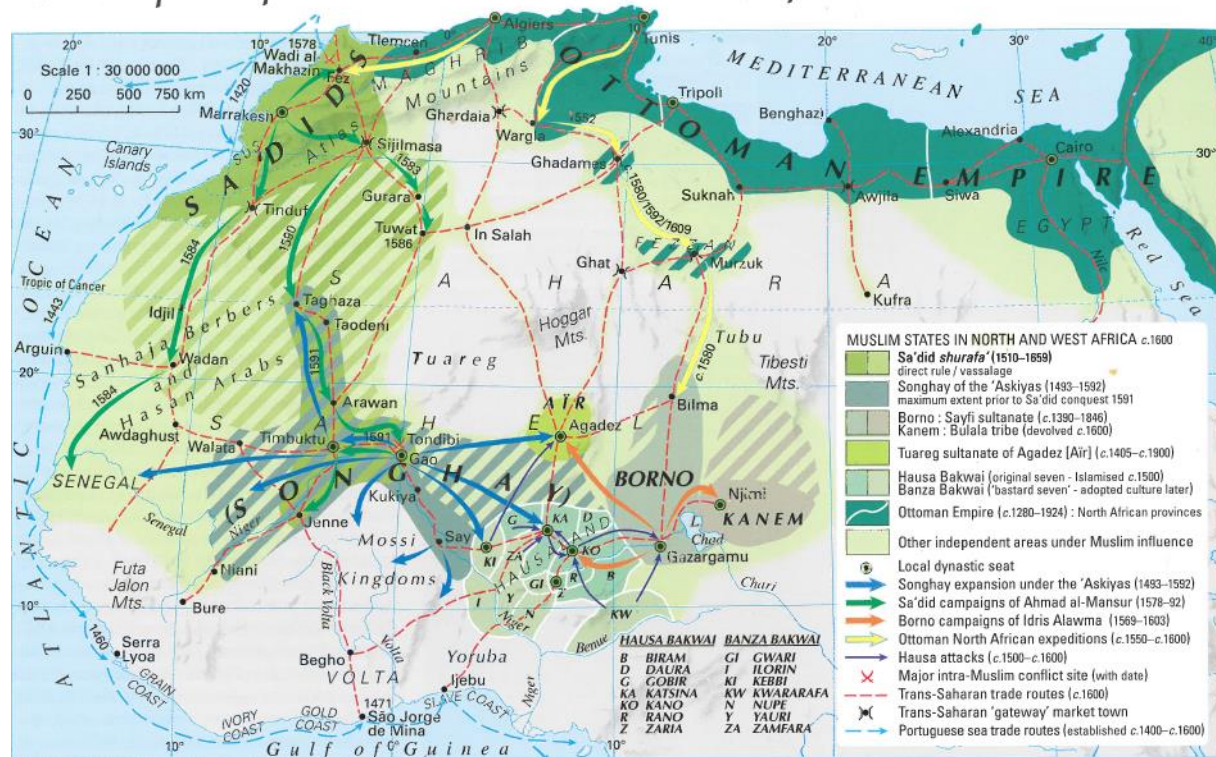


Fig. 1: Map of West Africa c.1500-c.1650. The place names, peoples, and geographic features mentioned throughout this thesis are represented on this map. Note the many military expansions by the political players in this region. This was a dynamic period of change in a vast territory, an area that does not receive a great deal of attention by non-Islamic scholars. Bure in the southwest was a major entrepôt for the Niger River trade system. Gold, ivory, kola nuts, and other goods of the southern forest flowed into the city. Gold was mined or panned in the many smaller rivers not shown. Taghaza and the surrounding territory in the Western Sahara was a key center of salt extraction. Ibn Battuta claimed to have seen mosques and homes constructed from giant blocks of raw salt. Sijilmasa, south of the Atlas Mountains, was the primary starting point for caravans crossing the desert. The Sanhaja Berbers of this region acted as expert guides. Closer to the Songhay homeland, the Tuareg nomads occupied the Air massif. They were a constant threat to Timbuktu in the period of Sunni Ali and Askia Mohammed. The major trade cities of Djenné, Timbuktu, and Gao rested on or very near the broad horseshoe bend of the Niger River. Sunni Ali succeeded in spreading the hegemony of the Songhay into the Upper Niger as the might of the Mali waned. Most Songhay and subject peoples did not live in the cosmopolitan trade cities. Innumerable villages lined the irrigated banks of the river as well as in the inland delta region: the lowlands on the shore of the Niger that flooded annually in the winter, particularly in the Upper Niger. The blue arrows illustrate the further expansion of the Songhay under Askia Mohammed. He made war on the Mossi and Hausa as well as those that dwelled in Senegambia. Note the dates of Portuguese exploration along the coast. Europeans were wholly ignorant of the complex Islamic states of the interior.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Sluglett and Andrew Currie, *Atlas of Islamic History*, (New York: Routledge, 2014) 58.



Trade brought Islam to the Sudan and the merchants and kings were eager to convert to the faith of the caravan traders. More accurately, the practicality of converting to the religion of one's trading partners brought Islam to the ruling classes and merchant classes of the Sudan. Advantageous agreements and contracts were made with members of a shared faith who spoke the same language. As historian John O. Hunwick (d. 2015) put it, Arabic became the Latin of the Sudan. The first record of a king converting to Islam is that of War Dyabi (fl. c. 1035) of the Senegambian kingdom of Takrur.<sup>20</sup> Takrur became a vernacular Arabic term for the Sudan due to this early adoption. Arabs called Muslims from the Sudan Takruri. The historian al-Bakri (d. 1054) recorded three Sudanese kingdoms that flourished in his lifetime: Gao, Ghana, and Takrur.<sup>21</sup> Of Gao, he said the king was Muslim, but not his subjects.<sup>22</sup> He wrote that Ghana was not Muslim in any regard.<sup>23</sup> But of Takrur he stated that the king was pious to the point of zealotry and impressed Islam upon his subjects as well as his neighbors.<sup>24</sup> This was the exception that proved the rule: Islam was an aristocratic religion in the Sudan. The freeborn maintained indigenous beliefs as there was little incentive in conversion in the early years of Islam. They were not obliged to convert, but they did in time. Islam became as important to popular African religion as native beliefs.

This thesis is separated into three chapters. The first chapter concerns the opening of *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, in which the future monarch was born, survived a plot against his young life, and learned of his supernatural lineage. In the second chapter, Askia Mohammed murdered his uncle in order to claim the throne. The culmination of this act resulted in the creation of the specialist labor castes. In the final chapter, Askia Mohammed atoned for usurping

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<sup>20</sup> Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction*, 92.

<sup>21</sup> Esposito, *The Oxford History of Islam*, 476.

<sup>22</sup> Esposito, *The Oxford History of Islam*, 476.

<sup>23</sup> Esposito, *The Oxford History of Islam*, 476.

<sup>24</sup> Esposito, *The Oxford History of Islam*, 476.

the ruling dynasty by force and sought the approval of the greater Islamic world. All of these plot points are tested against the primary sources as well as secondary sources in order to contextualize and further understand the importance of the epic. One finds that Malio communicated complex ideas in simple symbolic terms.

## Chapter One – Sunni Ali and the River Djinn

### Introduction

All good stories require a villain, a hero, and some magic. Nouhou Malio, as a master griot, was a professional storyteller. The tales he knew were passed down for generations unknown. He learned his craft from his father and his father learned from his father before him, and so on, back unto the generation of Sunni Ali. Or so the Songhay legend concerning the creation of the griot goes. The story Malio shared with Thomas Hale is a classic tale cast in the mold of what Joseph Campbell called *The Hero's Journey*. In *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, Sunni Ali is the villain, Askia Mohammed is the hero, and the River Djinn provides the supernatural aid which allows the hero to defeat the villain. All of this is deliberate symbolism. The *TF* and *TS* attest to the meaning behind each of the qualities attributed to the players in *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, even though the historical truth concerning the events is far different. The Arabic language chronicles produced by the *ulama* portray Sunni Ali as a wicked ruler and Askia Mohammed as a righteous man. The *TF* and *TS* give no mention of a River Djinn in the lineage of Askia Mohammed, or of the gifts the River Djinn gave him in order to slay Sunni Ali. The River Djinn appears in the *TF* and *TS* only in symbolic form, as remnants of a heathen past. Therefore, *The Epic of Askia Mohammed* can be thought of as a popular version of history that relates the important themes correctly, even if the facts are lost for the sake of entertainment. To reconcile the accounts one must place the epic in historic and cultural context. Just as the epic begins with the reign of Sunni Ali, any understanding of Askia Mohammed must begin with an appreciation of his controversial predecessor.

### Sunni Ali

*The Epic of Askia Mohammed* opens with an account of infanticide. Sunni Ali received prophecies from seers in which it was foretold that the child of his sister Kassaye would kill him and supplant him as king. To prevent this, he killed every child born to his sister as soon as it was birthed. Once Sunni Ali did this seven times, Kassaye was convinced he was serious and she became celibate.

Every child that Kassaye delivered, as soon as it was born, Si killed it. Until she had given birth to seven children, which her brother Si killed. Kassaye had enough, she said she would no longer take a husband. She stayed like that. Si is on his throne, while Kassaye stayed like that.<sup>25</sup>

In actuality, Sunni Ali and Askia Mohammed were not related. His mother Kassaye was not the sister of Sunni Ali. Yet the false relationship is deliberate. It creates a familiarity that gives greater meaning to the griots tale, as will be seen as the story progresses. The symbolism of this part of the tale is important in relating the perceived wickedness of Sunni Ali to the masses. By mirroring his actions to the purported deeds of Pharaoh Ramses II (r. 1279 – 1213 BC) and Herod the Great (r. 37 – 4 BC), Sunni Ali was grouped among the most infamous immoral kings in the history of Abrahamic faiths. This simple yet effective storytelling device quickly informs the audience as to the extent of Sunni Ali's wickedness without going into the details, for the details are many and lurid. The histories offer a clearer version as to how Sunni Ali received his reputation, and while he was not actually a slaughterer of his sister's newborns, he was accused of crimes just as malevolent.

Little is known concerning the early life of Sunni Ali. He was born into the ruling dynasty of the Songhay kingdom. The Soninke that migrated to the region circa 500 founded Kukiya as their first settlement and capital, and then established Gao about a century later.<sup>26</sup> This

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<sup>25</sup> Nouhou Malio, *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, Edited and translated by Thomas Hale, (Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1996) 17.

<sup>26</sup> Stewart, *African States and Rulers, 2nd Edition*, 203.

occurred in the early stages of a four-century long period of "abundant rainfall" in West Africa that engendered expansion.<sup>27</sup> The rich soil on the banks of the Niger River allowed for abundant production of rice. Annual flooding and intensive irrigation also enabled the arid earth of the Sahel to develop millet, sorghum, and pulses. While these grains are not of the same caloric and carbohydrate value as wheat, they were sufficient sustenance when mixed with a diet of milk, beans, and occasional meals of meat. The Niger proved a resource of fish, transportation, as well as the lifeblood of agriculture. The kingdom grew and prospered, enriched by the trade that flowed in and out of Gao. Ivory and gold harvested in the forest region to the south were traded for salt from the great deposits in the Sahara as well as for horses, iron weapons, artisanal goods, and textiles manufactured in the Maghreb. Salt was of such importance that it was used as currency, as attested by Ibn Battuta.<sup>28</sup> Cowrie shells traded along the Guinea coast penetrated into Songhay and served as money as well. Caravans traversed the sand sea and traded in the markets of Gao, much as they did at Timbuktu, the capital of the powerful Mali Empire to the west. The Mali of the Middle Niger flourished, as they controlled the gold that flowed northward from Bambuk and Bure.<sup>29</sup> The Mali conquered Gao on the lower Niger in 1325, drawing them into their trade network, but the Songhay won back the city in 1375.<sup>30</sup> Sunni Ali lived in Mali as a diplomatic hostage while a child.<sup>31</sup> Nothing is known of his stay in the hands of his kingdom's rivals. When he became rightful monarch of the Songhay in 1464 his people were still in a subordinate relationship with Mali.<sup>32</sup> Though nominally independent, they owed fealty to the old regime, lest they risk war. As fortune turned, Timbuktu grew increasingly weak in this period, as

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<sup>27</sup> George E. Brooks, "Ecological Perspectives on Mande Population Movements, Commercial Networks, and Settlement Patterns from the Atlantic Wet Phase (Ca. 5500-2500 B.C.) to the Present." *History in Africa* 16 (1989): 23.

<sup>28</sup> Ibn Battuta, *Ibn Battuta in Black Africa*, 41.

<sup>29</sup> Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies, 3rd Edition*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014) 455.

<sup>30</sup> Stewart, *African States and Rulers, 2nd Edition*, 203.

<sup>31</sup> *Encyclopedia of African History and Culture Volume II: African Kingdoms (500 – 1500)*, s.v. "Sunni Ali"

<sup>32</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. "Sunni Ali"

the new city of Djenne on the upper Niger overtook Timbuktu as the prime entrepôt for trans-Saharan trade.<sup>33</sup> Decentralization of power led to centrifugalism and the breakup of the Mali Empire.<sup>34</sup> This time of weakness left the Sudan open to violence from without. As regent of the Songhay, Sunni Ali visited terrible destruction upon the capital of the kingdom that was his childhood prison. All he needed was a plausible reason to invade.

Conflict between settled peoples and nomadic peoples has a long and storied history. In the time of Sunni Ali, the actors in this age-old struggle were the Tuareg nomadic pastoralist of the eastern Sahara and the city of Timbuktu. As this occurred during the zenith of the "long dry period," the age of West African Empires, the competition for resources was acute.<sup>35</sup> Such competition was one factor in the formation of these centralized states. In 1468, Sunni Ali's rivals at the Mali capital supposedly reached out to him for assistance in defeating the raiders that were disrupting trade, stealing goods, and causing destruction of property. The Tuareg chieftain Akil (fl. c. 1468) made life in Timbuktu untenable. He was the warlord of a powerful confederacy of nomads from a long lineage. The Tuareg are descended from Berbers and likely migrated into the Sahara to escape the Arab conquests of the 7<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>36</sup> They are often called "blue men" or "the blue veiled men" of the Sahara as they prefer clothing dyed a deep indigo. This natural dye sometimes bleeds onto their skin when they sweat, giving their flesh a blue tint. Their traditional dress makes them easily discernible from other nomad groups. The Tuareg occupy the region in and around the Aïr Massif in the Sahara, where they practice a mix of low-level agriculture as well as pastoralism.<sup>37</sup> They call themselves Imuhag, meaning raider-nobles,

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<sup>33</sup> Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies, 3rd Edition*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014) 455.

<sup>34</sup> Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies, 3rd Edition*, 455.

<sup>35</sup> Brooks, "Ecological Perspectives on Mande Population Movements, Commercial Networks, and Settlement Patterns from the Atlantic Wet Phase (Ca. 5500-2500 B.C.) to the Present," 23.

<sup>36</sup> *Encyclopedia of Islam*, s.v. "Tuareg"

<sup>37</sup> *Encyclopedia of Islam*, s.v. "Tuareg" *Historical Dictionary of the Berbers (Imazighen)*, s.v. "Tuareg"

as raiding and long distance trade are the occupations of the ruling class.<sup>38</sup> The label Tuareg is derived from the Arabic word *tawariq*, meaning those abandoned by Allah.<sup>39</sup> The Tuareg were very late in adopting Islam and therefore outcast from the *umma* for a long period. Like many nomadic peoples, the Tuareg lived by a strict code of social stratification among the tribes in their confederations.<sup>40</sup> Nobles, warrior-vassals, servants, and slaves knew their place and function in desert society and performed their duties so that the tribe survived in inhospitable conditions. In the time of Sunni Ali, they successfully harried the Mali city of Timbuktu in order to procure the supplies necessary to maintain life in the Sahara. Ironically, the establishment of Timbuktu proudly claimed descent from similar desert raiders.

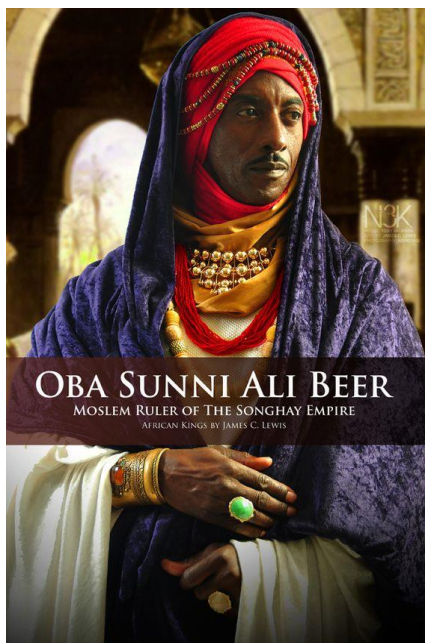


Fig. 2: A model posing as Sunni Ali. Photo Credit: James C. Lewis of Noire 3000 Studios. Fig. 3: Sunni Ali art print from 1998 Anheuser-Busch promotion. Artist Credit: L.D. Dillon.



Sunni Ali had more than one reason to dislike the rulers of Timbuktu. Besides owing the Mali fealty, besides having served as a hostage in Timbuktu, the ruling classes as well as the

<sup>38</sup> *Historical Dictionary of the Berbers (Imazighen)*, s.v. "Tuareg"

<sup>39</sup> *Historical Dictionary of the Berbers (Imazighen)*, s.v. "Tuareg"

<sup>40</sup> *Historical Dictionary of the Berbers (Imazighen)*, s.v. "Tuareg"

*ulama* claimed descent from the Sanhaja Berbers that originally brought Islam to the Sudan.<sup>41</sup> Sunni Ali had a well-known hatred for desert nomads.<sup>42</sup> Many of the prominent families of Timbuktu shared lineages with the nobility of the desert tribes. Perhaps Sunni Ali's anger rose from these relationships combined with more traditional reasons for disliking raiders. These nomads encouraged trade in the city by leading caravans across the desert, as well as by engaging directly in commerce. The kin relationships between Berbers and the settled establishment made for an uneasy association between Timbuktu and the nomadic peoples of the Sahara. Sunni Ali had no such blood ties. All raiders were his enemy. The Sanhaja, Tuareg, and Fulani, as well as smaller tribal groups of Berber origin, raided and traded with Timbuktu. The ruling classes turned a blind eye to the raids when they were of a certain scale, as the chieftain leading the venture was likely a relative of a noble family or member of the *ulama*. Further, they did not want to damage trade relationships with the best caravan guides of the Sahara. Only when the raids of the Tuareg warlord Akil grew beyond control did they desire to combat the desert intruders. Ibn Khaldun had much to say about this peculiar relationship between sedentary and nomad.

The vicissitudes of dynasties intrigued Ibn Khaldun. He devoted much of his writing to explaining his theories on why regimes succeeded and why they failed. As a North African, his base of knowledge and observances were of the kingdoms of the Maghreb. What he noticed was a pattern of dynasties rising and falling from power and for very similar reasons. Ibn Khaldun believed that dynasties failed because the virtues that brought them to power, bravery, toughness, and perseverance, were lost in succeeding generations. This was due to adoption of a sedentary

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<sup>41</sup> Charlotte Blum and Humphrey Fisher, "Love for Three Oranges, or, the Askiya's Dilemma: The Askiya, al-Maghili and Timbuktu, c. 1500 A.D.," *The Journal of African History* 34, No. 1 (1993): 78-79.

<sup>42</sup> Al-Hajj Mahmud Kati, *Tarikh al-fattash: The Timbuktu Chronicles 1493 – 1599*, Translated by Christopher Wise and Haba Abu Taleb, (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2011) 88.



lifestyle in which the warrior aristocracy no longer withstood the harsh realities of nomadic life. Instead, they wore the soft garments of the nobility and enjoyed luxurious lifestyles. Ibn Khaldun believed this was especially true of his homeland, as the desert produced particularly savage warriors with impeccable group cohesion. In his estimation, motivated and organized desert nomads would continually defeat the existing dynasties of former desert nomads that had become unable to defend themselves via overindulgence in luxury. In turn, the new conquerors would become corrupt and the cycle would continue. The capital of the Mali Empire was an example of just such a situation. Without great care, the ruling classes of Timbuktu were likely to fall.

While Ibn Khaldun's critique was formed with the Maghreb as the model, his philosophy applies to many global regions. Various Central Asian dynasties rose and fell in just such a manner over the course of thousands of years. If one replaces horsemen for ship-borne raiders, the British Isles make an excellent example. The raiders become settlers of the Anglo-Saxon era were nearly pressured out of existence by those of the Viking Age, and both succumbed to the Norman Conquest. The capital of the Mali Empire was unable to defend itself from closely related nomadic raiders without assistance from a resurgent vassal state. Mali was under siege from without and within. The Timbuktu establishment, former nomads, could not resist the "barbarians at the gate," or the organized threat from a usurper.

There is no firm consensus concerning just how Sunni Ali came to ravage Timbuktu. Secondary sources state that Sunni Ali was invited to Timbuktu in order to drive off the Tuareg chieftain Akil.<sup>43</sup> Yet the *TS* recounts that Akil was vital in evacuating the *ulama* of Timbuktu,

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<sup>43</sup> *Encyclopedia of African History and Culture Volume II: African Kingdoms (500 – 1500)*, s.v. "Sunni Ali"

providing a thousand camels for their flight.<sup>44</sup> Ruling class refugees fled to Walata and Tagedda, shifting the bulk of trade away from Timbuktu.<sup>45</sup> Those that stayed were humiliated or killed.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps Akil stopped his attacks and turned savior when he saw the devastation Sunni Ali dealt to his kin in the city. Sunni Ali appears not to have discerned between raider and citizen in his attack on Timbuktu. He seems to have targeted any of Berber background. This may be evidence of the bias inherit in a history produced decades after the fact in a rebuilt Timbuktu, a city that retained hatred for the man that so devastated her. The *TF* does not contain a detailed account of the siege of Timbuktu, but the *TS* has much to relate. Al-Sadi recorded that the longtime ruler of Timbuktu had recently died and his son Umar sent a letter to Sunni Ali.<sup>47</sup> In it, Umar implied that even though his father had been a poor and pious man, if anyone tested him, they saw his true power. Umar claimed that this was accurate of himself as well. By sending this letter, Umar failed to be diplomatic in a time of regime change. Instead, he dared Sunni Ali, a king that desired conquest, to test his army against an untried ruler. At least, this is what was passed down from al-Sadi; he does not mention the raiding of Akil, only his rescue of the *ulama*. The truth behind a supposed invitation to drive out the Tuareg is ultimately unknown. What is known is that Sunni Ali began a two-year siege of Timbuktu in the year he received the letter from Umar. The *TF* makes it very clear that Sunni Ali despised nomads, particularly the Fulani. Therefore, he likely warred against both nomad and settled at the same time. What both histories agree on, as

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<sup>44</sup> Al-Sadi, Al-Ifrani, Leo Africanus, and the Anonymous Spaniard, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sadi's Tarikh al-sudan down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents*, Translated by John O. Hunwick, (Boston: Brill, 2003) 93.

<sup>45</sup> Elias Saad, *Social History of Timbuktu: The Role of Muslim Scholars and Notables, 1400-1900*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 42.

<sup>46</sup> Al-Sadi, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sadi's Tarikh al-sudan down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents*, 94.

<sup>47</sup> Umar was of the powerful Aqit clan. In Elias Saad's important work, *Social History of Timbuktu*, he researched the descendants of the leading clans. The Agit leadership maintained a balance with the interloper Akil, but Sunni Ali was a factor that upset their plans.

well as the secondary sources, is that Sunni Ali committed acts of barbarity against the people of Timbuktu.



Fig. 4: *Timbuktu seen from a distance*. By Martin Bernatz (d. 1878), 1853. Bernatz accompanied Heinrich Barth (d. 1865) on his expedition to the Sudan.

While slaying newborns was an evil enough act to cast Sunni Ali as the villain in Malio's tale, the atrocities attributed to him in the histories give his wickedness greater depth. He was said to have forced a mother to grind her own baby with a mortar and pestle and then feed it to his horse.<sup>48</sup> He was also accused of cutting growing babies from their mother's wombs.<sup>49</sup> He demanded thirty virgins as concubines from the nobles of Kabara, the port town on the Niger connected to Timbuktu.<sup>50</sup> These young ladies were commanded to come on foot, and as they had never left the isolation of the harem before, fell from exhaustion halfway.<sup>51</sup> When told of this,

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<sup>48</sup> Kati, *Tarikh al-fattash: The Timbuktu Chronicles 1493 – 1599*, 87-88.

<sup>49</sup> Kati, *Tarikh al-fattash: The Timbuktu Chronicles 1493 – 1599*, 88.

<sup>50</sup> Al-Sadi, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sadi's Tarikh al-sudan down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents*, 94.

<sup>51</sup> Al-Sadi, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sadi's Tarikh al-sudan down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents*, 94.

Sunni Ali ordered them all executed.<sup>52</sup> He killed members of the *ulama*, enslaved Muslims, and destroyed whole villages by burning them with the residents trapped inside.<sup>53</sup> Al-Sadi called him a "great oppressor" and a "notorious evil doer," "a man of great strength and colossal energy, a tyrant, a miscreant, an aggressor, a despot, and a butcher who killed so many human beings that only God Most High could count them."<sup>54</sup> These condemnations from the histories must be read critically for understanding.

Sunni Ali is a complex figure in Sudanic history and he is difficult to understand fully. Al-Kati was biased in his account as he was a client of Askia Mohammed as well as a member of the *ulama*; at Gao and ultimately at Timbuktu. Al-Sadi wrote many years after the events, but was still a member of the Timbuktu religious establishment; those most offended by Sunni Ali's actions. While the many outrages attributed to Sunni Ali may or may not be true, he certainly made enemies, adversaries that lasted generations. The *ulama* did not return to Timbuktu until after Sunni Ali died, more than two decades later. In conquering the centuries old capital of Mali, he made foes of every column of society from the Middle Niger westward. His lack of regard for the sanctity, the unspoken neutral standing of the *ulama*, damned him in the histories. Perhaps Sunni Ali broke these taboos because he saw the Timbuktu establishment as complicit with the activities of the nomadic raiders. It is also likely that he saw a conflict of interest among the *ulama*, as their trading activities may have influenced their political and religious views. Modern historians believe he was a nominal Muslim and held beliefs closer to indigenous notions of magic and sacred kingship. Al-Kati recorded, "His actions were certainly those of an infidel though he made the profession of faith twice-over and spoke as a man who was well-versed in

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<sup>52</sup> Al-Sadi, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sadi's Tarikh al-sudan down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents*, 94.

<sup>53</sup> Kati, *Tarikh al-fattash: The Timbuktu Chronicles 1493 – 1599*, 88-89.

<sup>54</sup> Al-Sadi, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sadi's Tarikh al-sudan down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents*, 91.

the teachings of Islam."<sup>55</sup> No man can know what was in Sunni Ali's heart and what he believed as a matter of faith. His legacy in the Sudan is undeniable.

Sunni Ali was a military ruler, a leader of conquest, a man of constant action. As Joseph Campbell wrote, "The hero of yesterday becomes the tyrant of tomorrow, unless he crucifies *himself* today."<sup>56</sup> This is a different way of saying that Sunni Ali lived long enough to transition from a hero into a villain. His crime was in living too long. The great successes of his early conquests, his military acumen, were overshadowed by his long reign. Like Octavian beholding the corpse of Alexander in Egypt, one must lament how a man so talented in the arts of war was so bereft of civil administrative prudence. In a metaphysical sense, Malio was absolutely right in casting Sunni Ali as the villain, and not just because of the alleged atrocities. Sunni Ali did not aspire to redeem and strengthen the Songhay. He desired to tyrannize and terrorize his enemies. This was his gift, his skill, and he performed well during his reign. Yet one cannot at the same time be a terrorizing tyrant and also a redeemer unless one has the good sense to die young, as Campbell alluded. Sunni Ali lived a long life, full of military successes which expanded the hegemony of the Songhay. He campaigned ceaselessly and was rarely seen at any one of his myriad palaces. Sunni Ali raised the Songhay from a subject kingdom to an imperial power; the largest West Africa had seen. Though remembered as a butcher by those he vanquished, he was a warrior-king to the Songhay, a monarch that brought increase and that subdued foreign lands.

Sunni Ali spent two years reducing Timbuktu. While this halted trade and learning in the city, it also ridded him of enemies in Mali's great capital: desert raiders and those that associated with them. Those that didn't flee at his coming were slowly reduced. He conquered the large city of Djenne in 1473, a venture that took several years of his 28 year reign. To accomplish this,

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<sup>55</sup> Kati, *Tarikh al-fattash: The Timbuktu Chronicles 1493 – 1599*, 88.

<sup>56</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces, 3rd edition*, (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2008) 303.

Sunni Ali made innovative use of watercraft on the Niger.<sup>57</sup> He coordinated his infantry into transport boats and deployed them on the river. He then attacked from land with his massed cavalry, the main body of his forces, while his infantry struck from a different direction. They accomplished this using the many streams and inlets that feed into the Niger. This strategy gave him the tactical advantage over his enemies. At Djenne, some 400 watercraft were involved in the operation that finally defeated the city.<sup>58</sup> The sieges at Timbuktu and Djenne, the key cities of the Mali Empire, exemplify another of Ibn Khaldun's theories on dynasties. Khaldun believed that internal revolutions were not sudden affairs, but required indecisive and repeated battles, such as a siege, in order to determine which side had better group cohesion and would therefore rule the other.<sup>59</sup> Sunni Ali created group cohesion among the Songhay and brought them victory, made them preeminent among the peoples of the Sudan. Sunni Ali produced "unparalleled tyranny and unparalleled success."<sup>60</sup> But every tyrant, no matter how successful, requires a redeemer in a good folktale.

### The River Djinn

Nouhou Malio continued his story after quickly establishing Sunni Ali as the villain. Sunni Ali's sister Kassaye maintained her celibacy until one night when she was visited by a handsome stranger. He was a beautiful man, in gleaming white garments and turban. The air was perfumed wherever he walked. The stranger spoke with Kassaye at length, getting to know her, and then made a proposition.

"Kassaye, I would like to make love with you. Once we make love together, you will give birth to a boy, whom Si will not be able to kill. It is he that will kill Si

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<sup>57</sup> Mvuyekure, *World Eras Volume 10: West African Kingdoms 500 – 1500*, 224.

<sup>58</sup> Mvuyekure, *World Eras Volume 10: West African Kingdoms 500 – 1500*, 224.

<sup>59</sup> Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, Translated by Franz Rosenthal, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) 253.

<sup>60</sup> Mvuyekure, *World Eras Volume 10: West African Kingdoms 500 – 1500*, 224.

and become the ruler." Kassaye said to him, "What?" He said, "By Allah." She said, "Good, in the name of Allah."<sup>61</sup>

The stranger returned several nights in a row and lay with Kassaye, until she became pregnant. As fortune would have it, Kassaye owned a slave woman who became pregnant at the same time. When their children were born, Kassaye had a boy and her slave woman a girl. Kassaye had her slave woman serve as wet nurse to her son during the day and received him back at night when she was out of sight of her brother. The girl, born to the slave woman, was given to Sunni Ali under the guise that Kassaye birthed the female child. Sunni Ali killed the newborn girl. The boy lived and thrived.

The stranger returned seven nights after the boy's birth. He brought with him all of the animals and accoutrements necessary to make sacrifices during the naming ceremony. The stranger and Kassaye named their son Mohammed. As Mohammed grew, Sunni Ali became increasingly wary of him. He was not sure just why he disliked the youth, but he suspected something was foul.

It was thus, it was thus, it was thus, until the child, he began to crawl. When he crawls, he climbs on the feet of Si. He pulls his beard. Si said, "Hey! This child is suspect." Kassaye said to him, "Really? He is suspect, go ahead and kill your captive's son, are you going to kill him? If one kills the son of his captive, one will become really famous."<sup>62</sup>

Kassaye mocked Sunni Ali and his wickedness until he relented and left the toddler alone. She secured Mohammed a position caring for the royal horses so he would be out of sight as he matured. As he grew older and stronger the other stable boys mocked Mohammed because he did not know who his father was. This troubled him, so he went to his mother and inquired as to his heritage. Kassaye told him to be patient. The beautiful stranger came to her that night and gave her a golden ring. He told her to give it to Mohammed. On the last day of Ramadan,

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<sup>61</sup> Malio, *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, 18.

<sup>62</sup> Malio, *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, 19.

Mohammed was to place the ring on his middle finger and stand on the bank of the Niger. Mohammed did as instructed. The Niger opened up to him and Mohammed saw another world beneath the surface. Gleaming cities and villages full of mosques and pious worshippers celebrating the last day of Ramadan filled the Niger, just beyond the site of mortals. Ruling over them was his father, the djinn of the Niger, the powerful spirit that embodied the essence of the river.

The first part of this section of the epic continues the Abrahamic echoes of the story. Like Moses, Mohammed is nursed by a slave and raised by the sister of the king. Unlike Moses, Mohammed is depicted as the natural born son of Kassaye, though she must conceal this fact. Joseph Campbell stated that this is a common trope in the origin story of great leaders. That Askia Mohammed worked as a stable boy of unknown lineage is no mistake on the part of the storyteller. Sargon of Akkad (r. 2334 – 2279 BC) was set adrift in a basket on the Euphrates and raised by a gardener in his legend.<sup>63</sup> Chandragupta (r. 322 – 298 BC), founder of the Mauryan Empire, was abandoned in a clay pot and raised by cowherds in his mythos.<sup>64</sup> In European folktales, Charlemagne (768 – 814) was depicted as serving the Muslim king of Andalusia under a false name as a youth, outcast by his jealous brothers.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, having the hero survive birth despite harrowing odds, living with ignominious heritage, and serving for years in a humble occupation are important elements in engendering sympathy from the freeborn audience of these foundational tales. Askia Mohammed's story was no different.

Again, Sunni Ali and Askia Mohammed were not actually related. This fiction creates a tension that allows transmission of genuine historical themes over the span of a short story with few details. The latter part of this section reveals that the stranger that sired Mohammed was in

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<sup>63</sup> Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 3rd edition, 276.

<sup>64</sup> Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 3rd edition, 276.

<sup>65</sup> Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 3rd edition, 277.



fact a jinni. Not only was Askia Mohammed's father a supernatural being, he was the personification of the all-important, life giving Niger. In a broader contextualization of the epic in world mythology, Campbell reminds us that heroes of unknown parentage inevitably inquire as to the whereabouts of their father.<sup>66</sup> Campbell further relates that such heroes, the same ones that were abandoned as children, most often go on to become emperors of the redemptive type.<sup>67</sup> These foundational heroes commune with a sacred father, and in turn, become the symbolic father of their people.<sup>68</sup> While Askia Mohammed's father was portrayed as a Muslim ruler, the syncretism of indigenous belief with Islam that allowed the audience to accept this otherworldly lineage is indicative of the freeborn Songhay origins of the epic. To understand this one must appreciate the Sudanic conception of djinn.

Stories of djinn and their deeds originated in pre-Islamic Arabia, but the phenomenon flourished in the Sudan. Djinn dwell in a realm somewhere between the world of humans and that of angels. In the Koran, it is written that Allah created men of clay and angels of light.<sup>69</sup> Djinn were made of neither, but comprised of smokeless flame.<sup>70</sup> This allows them to take on many shapes; human and beast.<sup>71</sup> They can also travel great distances very quickly and act as messengers between realms.<sup>72</sup> Under normal circumstances they are undetectable to human senses, but can make themselves known if they desire.<sup>73</sup> In Arabia, djinn inhabited wild places and often embodied particular natural features, such as streams and mountains.<sup>74</sup> In this sense,

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<sup>66</sup> Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 3rd edition, 296.

<sup>67</sup> Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 3rd edition, 297.

<sup>68</sup> Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 3rd edition, 297.

<sup>69</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. "djinn"

<sup>70</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. "djinn"

<sup>71</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. "djinn"

<sup>72</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. "djinn"

<sup>73</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. "djinn"

<sup>74</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. "djinn"

they were very much like the nymphs and satyrs of classical mythology.<sup>75</sup> In the Sudan, djinn quickly became associated with the indigenous nature spirits that inhabited similar places. It was just a matter of giving a new name to an old practice. In Songhay, they were called *zin*. Not only did this mixing of traditions syncretize religions, it expanded the role of djinn. In the *TF*, Askia Mohammed communed with powerful djinn that recounted the origins of the peoples of the Sudan, back unto the generation of Noah.<sup>76</sup> Djinn were sometimes evil, sometimes tricksters, often amoral, and could cause a great deal of harm if toyed with.<sup>77</sup> But for "the stout of heart," djinn bestowed gifts in the form of talents and abilities.<sup>78</sup> For example, the Mande harp known as the kora was a djinn gift, though the hero Wuleng double-crossed the giver and did not keep the promise to wed his daughter to the jinni in exchange for the instrument and lessons.<sup>79</sup> But it was a more common gift that endeared djinn to the people of the Sudan.

By far, the most visible and popular manifestation of djinn in the Sudan was the wearing of protective talismans that contained a bit of the djinn's power. Traveling Sufi clerics made their living by manufacturing this leather neckwear. These usually took the form of a written verse from the Koran ensconced in a decorated leather pouch or similar fob. Once the talisman was imbued with the blessing (*baraka*) of the maker and sealed with djinn magic, the wearer was protected against all manner of calamities: sickness, barrenness, death in battle, poisoning, etc.<sup>80</sup> Although Islamic scholars in different eras offered varying opinions concerning the reality and orthodoxy concerning belief in djinn, they were a vital part of popular Islam in the Sudan. Djinn and the belief in djinn were not particularly problematic in Islam, but it is indicative of multi-

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<sup>75</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. "djinn"

<sup>76</sup> Kati, *Tarikh al-fattash: The Timbuktu Chronicles 1493 – 1599*, 48-59.

<sup>77</sup> Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction*, 36.

<sup>78</sup> Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction*, 36.

<sup>79</sup> Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction*, 37.

<sup>80</sup> John O. Hunwick, *Islam in Africa: Friend or Foe; An Inaugural Lecture Delivered at the University of Ghana, Legon on Wednesday, 10th December, 1975*, (Accra: Ghana University Press, 1976) 14.

layered syncretism. As djinn were a pre-Islamic concept that was folded into early Islamic belief, the manifestation of similar beliefs in areas where Islam spread creates a beautifully stratified, global phenomenon. Yet Thomas Hale was not convinced that the stranger that fathered Askia Mohammed in the epic was a jinni of this sort.

Nouhou Malio was a modern man relating deeds of the past. As such, the words he used require analysis as they may contain mixed meaning. It is possible that concepts of the present slipped into his tales of the Songhay kings. In his initial research, Thomas Hale concluded that the stranger that sired Askia Mohammed has a Songhay spirit called a *holey*.<sup>81</sup> Basing his opinion off of the work of French anthropologist Jean Rouch (d. 2004), Hale argued that the modern Songhay *holey* was more similar to the spirit of the epic than the djinn of popular conception. The *holey* appear as humans, have distinct personalities, carry a particular scent about them, as well as marry and produce families for their unseen worlds.<sup>82</sup> Hale stated that, "the holey represent a widespread element in the Songhay belief system that continues to evolve today."<sup>83</sup> Though this argument is compelling, it does not alter the ultimate meaning of the epic. In order for Malio to express the proper importance in the least amount of time and in the most entertaining manner, djinn work well. Further, in the syncretic religious environment of the Songhay, to label one spirit djinn and another *holey* is dividing and classifying the supernatural a bit too finely. One cannot truly say that a *holey* is not djinn and vice versa. Yet this type of analysis is important and uncovers deeper significance in the sources.

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<sup>81</sup> Hale, *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist: Narrative Interpreters of the Songhay Empire followed by The Epic of Askia Mohammed recounted by Nouhou Malio*, 73.

<sup>82</sup> Hale, *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist: Narrative Interpreters of the Songhay Empire followed by The Epic of Askia Mohammed recounted by Nouhou Malio*, 73-74.

<sup>83</sup> Hale, *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist: Narrative Interpreters of the Songhay Empire followed by The Epic of Askia Mohammed recounted by Nouhou Malio*, 73.

Christopher Wise added significantly to the conversation concerning djinn in the epic. His popular translation of the *TF* received criticism upon release, some deserved and some not. The primary critique of the work was that Wise did not properly annotate those sections that were known forgeries from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. These sections were added to give political legitimacy to the regimes of the time by making them appear the result of prophecy. By not informing readers of this, Wise, a professor of English and Comparative Literature and Western Washington University, did not perform due diligence as a historian. Professor Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias, historian and anthropologist at the University of Birmingham, lambasted Wise for mistranslating words from the original French translation by Maurice Delafosse (d. 1926) and Octave Houdas (d. 1916). Farias believed significant meaning was lost in certain passages and pointed them out in a scathing review. What Wise uniquely contributed to the research, besides his hard work at making the *TF* accessible to a wider English speaking audience, was connecting the folklore of the *TF* as well as the *TS* to *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*.

Nouhou Malio may have passed along more than the story of Askia Mohammed in his tale. He may have inadvertently imparted a mixed legend, one that shows how local myths change over time. In his introduction to the *TF*, Wise connected a folktale contained in his new translation to the story of the River Djinn in *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*. Wise does not say that he found this connection in another's writing. In correspondence with Wise, he stated that, "it wasn't really a discovery, just a matter of listening to local voices," during his time visiting the region.<sup>84</sup>

The accounts of both griot and scribe allude to the pre-Islamic ruler of the region, who is described as a powerful djinn and enormous fish, who rules the Songhay from Kukiya. Each morning, the great fish swam up from the depths of the Djoliba to sit upon the Songhay throne, before returning at nightfall to its underwater kingdom. In the *Tarikh al-fattash*, the fish ruled for untold ages until

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<sup>84</sup> Christopher Wise, e-mail message to author, January 5, 2016.

it was killed by two brothers from Medina, the beloved city of the Prophet Muhammad. The death of the great fish marked the beginning of the Islamic era for the Songhay peoples, although there are many today who maintain that the fish was not killed but continues to preside over its underwater kingdom. Malio depicts this fish as the father of Askiya Muhammad ("Mamar Kassaye") in Hale's transcribed version of the epic, who gives his weapons and ring of power to his son the Askiya Muhammad, which enables him to kill his tyrannical uncle Si ("Shi Ali" in the *Tarikh al-fattash* or Sonni Ali Ber).<sup>85</sup>

This possibility is fascinating, in that Nouhou Malio knowingly or unknowingly imbued Askia Mohammed with the magic of the fish king from the animist past of the Songhay. According to those Wise interviewed while in the traditional lands of the Songhay, the regions surrounding Gao and Kukiya reverted to animism and wholly indigenous religions following the fall of the Songhay Empire to the Moroccans.<sup>86</sup> If this is true, it would help explain the connection between fabled origin story and Islamic spirits in the epic. The story Wise referred to in the *TF* is one of the tales related to Askia Mohammed by a jinni when recounting the lineage of the people of the Sudan from the generation of Noah. Wise was incorrect in explaining the details of the myth, however. This is understandable as the story is rather convoluted and a simple paraphrasing must suffice for the sake of clarity. Two young Arabic men, an uncle and nephew close in age and of mixed Islamic and Christian heritage, went off in search of their lost cousin. This cousin fled Medina years earlier, embarrassed that he had shamed his mother by not properly honoring his aunt. In their journeys, the uncle and nephew received word that their cousin was in Gao and so they traveled to the Sudan. There they found their cousin, but also saw that a giant whale ruled over the Songhay. During the day the great fish revealed himself, but left in the afternoon. The Songhay worshipped the whale as a god. The newcomers saw an opportunity. They made their cousin a magical charm that allowed him to kill the whale, thus

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<sup>85</sup> Kati, *Tarikh al-fattash: The Timbuktu Chronicles 1493 – 1599*, xiii-xiv.

<sup>86</sup> Kati, *Tarikh al-fattash: The Timbuktu Chronicles 1493 – 1599*, xv.

becoming the new ruler. The uncle and the nephew then created a drum and blacksmith tools, as they had been blacksmiths in Arabia. They became the first of their castes in the Sudan: griot and smith. This brief yet confusing story might only be a coincidence or an interesting aside if a similar version did not also appear in the *TS*.

An analogous tale to that of the whale and the young men from Medina exists in the chronicle of al-Sadi. Wise mentioned this in a footnote, though he did not say exactly where the parallel story could be found. It appears early in the first chapter, which concerns the original kings of the Songhay. These are the monarch of the early days, ruling upon the foundation of Kukiya. It is this account that concerns two brothers, the one Wise confused for the one in the *TF*. These young men were Arabs from Yemen who roamed the earth until "fate brought them to the town of Kukiya on the bank of the river in the land of Songhay."<sup>87</sup> The brothers were a ragged lot, haggard and worn out from travel when they arrived. While staying with the Songhay to recuperate, they noted that the Songhay were idolaters. Further, the Songhay were tricked by Iblis into worshipping a fish. This beast appeared on the surface of the river, a golden ring looped through its nose, and issued "commands and prohibitions."<sup>88</sup> The people worshipped the fish and submitted to it like a god. The elder of the Yemeni brothers saw that the Songhay were in "manifest error" and schemed to kill the wicked fish.<sup>89</sup> He waited for the fish to appear one morning and harpooned it, with Allah guiding his hand. The Songhay then proclaimed him their

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<sup>87</sup> Al-Sadi, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sadi's Tarikh al-sudan down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents*, 5-6.

<sup>88</sup> Al-Sadi, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sadi's Tarikh al-sudan down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents*, 6.

<sup>89</sup> Al-Sadi, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sadi's Tarikh al-sudan down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents*, 6.

ruler and he produced a long line of kings, "distinguished by their strength, intrepidity, and bravery, and by their great height and heavy build."<sup>90</sup>

Taken together, these stories indicate that a tradition of venerating the river or a river deity that took the form of a great fish was very likely practiced by the early Songhay. It is no mistake that these tales appear in the written histories as well as the oral tradition. That the fish took on the form of a jinni or a holey is further evidence of syncretism. In the epic, the river spirit retained his dominion over the all-important Niger, his regal bearing, and the golden ring of power. He simply became djinn. That the *TF* tells the story in a syncretic manner and the *TS* in a sternly Islamic manner is no surprise. The *TF* is grounded in the Gao school of Islam that is forgiving of the mixing of religious traditions, whereas the *TS* is rooted firmly in the teachings of the orthodox *ulama* of Timbuktu. Further, the *TS* was written much later. Al-Sadi could not afford sentimentality concerning centuries old folktales, but he could with revered kings of the recent past.

### Conclusion

Sunni Ali was portrayed as a slayer of newborns in *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, making him the villain of the tale. He received this role due to his ferocity in conquering territory, the treatment of his enemies, and tireless campaigning. Sunni Ali was a military innovator and a tyrant to those he subjected. He was notorious for his hatred of nomadic peoples and for his disregard for the sanctity of the *ulama*. Ultimately, he is a controversial figure in Sudanic history. Conversely, Malio gave Askia Mohammed a backstory and lineage worthy of the likes of Moses. He is set up to bring redemption to the Songhay early in the epic. His tale contains many of the same hallmarks of the origin stories of other empire builders. To

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<sup>90</sup> Al-Sadi, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sadi's Tarikh al-sudan down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents*, 6.

accomplish this, Malio, knowingly or not, included him in the lineage of possibly the oldest Songhay mythology. The River Djinn, his rightful father, created him as something more than human but less than divine. Askia Mohammed is not only an Islamic hero, he is decorated with the signs and symbols of indigenous African power as well. Though only a young man, he survived the murderous designs of his uncle, the hard work of the stables, and the taunts of his friends. In the next chapter, his righteous father will supply what he needs to defeat his enemies and rid the land of wickedness and tyranny.



## Chapter Two – Regicide and Creation of the Castes

### Introduction

The king is dead; long live the king! *The Epic of Askia Mohammed* depicts the transition of Songhay ruling dynasties from the line of Sunnis to the line of Askias as a simple matter of assassination, an act of regicide that was accepted by the masses as well as the *ulama* as a legally binding act without consequence or retaliation. In the tale, no civil war broke out upon Sunni Ali's murder. Further, the epic portrays the creation of some of the Songhay social castes as a result of the disbanding of the royal house of Sunni Ali. Neither of these creative fictions is true. They are myths utilized by bards to support a powerful and pleasing version of the Songhay past, a construct of their own devising. In actuality, Sunni Ali's death was as controversial as his life. Whether he died by accident or whether Askia Mohammed was involved in planning his demise is ultimately unknown, yet both possibilities are still held as viable by historians. That Askia Mohammad figures as the assassin in popular memory says something as to public perception. Yet this could be nothing more than a storytelling device, just as was his fictive blood relationship to Sunni Ali. More importantly, the possible motivations for Askia Mohammed's usurpation of power have become the central area of debate concerning West Africa in this period. Scholars question whether Askia Mohammed acted out of personal interest or as an agent of the Timbuktu *ulama* in overthrowing Sunni Ali, working in concert with the Islamic elite so that Timbuktu might be restored as a center of commerce and scholarship under a new leader. Other historians reject this view and claim that Askia Mohammed was a dabbler in Islam, entertaining many Islamic holy men and points of view as a way to legitimize his stolen kingship. This brought him prestige and helped wash away the stain of murder and sin from his ascension to power. Likewise, by linking the establishment of some of the specialist castes with

the foundation of the Askia dynasty, the Songhay bards legitimized themselves and linked their profession to the greatest of the Songhay kings. Yet the practice of social separation and taboos based on occupation existed in West Africa long before it was adopted by the Songhay. This can be seen in the Sundiata narrative as well as traced historically. And like Sundiata, the hero of *The Epic of Askia Mohammed* rose to power by slaying a wicked magician-king.

### Regicide

To return to the tale of Nouhou Malio, the River Djinn welcomed his son, Askia Mohammed, to his hidden city beneath the surface of the Niger. He embraced his progeny, personally acknowledging that Askia Mohammed was his son. The stable boy was no longer fatherless. He was accepted into the household of a semi-divine being. The River Djinn hosted him briefly in the magical city before sending him back into his own realm. He instructed his son to return home, but not before giving Askia Mohammed important gifts.

His father gave him a white stallion, really white, really, really, really, really, really, really, really white, like percale. He gave him all the things necessary. He gave him two lances. He gave him a saber, which he wore. He gave him a shield. He bid him good-bye.<sup>91</sup>

Askia Mohammed entered the realm of manhood. He was assisted in this passage by his mystical father. In terms of the Hero's Journey, Askia Mohammed received what Campbell termed Supernatural Aid. Campbell noted that this aid most often came from a female figure in foundational myths, such as a divine virgin, a fairy godmother, or an old crone.<sup>92</sup> But men, too, figured as sages in cultural epics: "In fairy lore it may be some little fellow of the wood, some wizard, hermit, shepherd, or smith, who appears, to supply the amulets and advice that the hero will require."<sup>93</sup> Campbell went on to illustrate his point by using examples of djinn intervening in

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<sup>91</sup> Malio, *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, 22.

<sup>92</sup> Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 3rd edition, 65.

<sup>93</sup> Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 3rd edition, 66.

the affairs of men from *The One Thousand and One Nights*. Like the *ifritah* of Arabian folktales, the River Djinn interjected himself in the affairs of the Songhay. Redemption from the evil deeds of Sunni Ali was to come from the offspring of the very essence of the Niger. Having sired and named a semi-divine son, the Niger gave his progeny the tools of a warrior king in order to slay the hated tyrant.



Fig. 5: 19<sup>th</sup>-century engraving of a West African mounted warrior. Note the resemblance to Askia Mohammed as described in the epic. Engravings such as these were published by the likes of William Collins Sons & Co. of London as well as Longman, Green, Longman, & Roberts of London. They were illustrations in ethnographies of newly acquired African colonies. These publishing houses survive as Harper Collins and Pearson Longman, respectively.

Unlike Perseus, another semi-divine figure, Askia Mohammed was simply given the tools to complete his quest. Whereas many figures on the Hero's Journey must complete various tasks in order to accumulate the assorted weapons and armor required to defeat their great foe, the River Djinn outfitted his son with the trappings of a Sudanic aristocratic warrior from the outset of his journey. This separates the epic from other traditions as well as the somewhat contemporary Sundiata narrative. Sundiata overcame a great deal of adversity in the oral tradition associated with his life. Before he vied for the rule of Mali he triumphed over personal physical disability and living as an outcast in the courts of rivals. Askia Mohammed's great ordeals occurred while he was a minor under the protection of his mother. As an infant and a child he was unable to defend himself. Kassaye ensured his safety while living in the home of the

great villain Sunni Ali. Therefore, receiving Supernatural Aid from his father seemingly removed him from beneath the umbrella of safety held out by his mother. Girded with the truth concerning his birth father and armed with what one must assume were weapons and armor imbued with djinn magic, though never explicitly described as such, Askia Mohammed entered the next phase of his journey.

Mosques are sacred spaces, but this fact did not keep Askia Mohammed from slaying Sunni Ali upon his prayer mat. According to Malio, the young man rode his newly acquired white stallion to the open air prayer ground, a common form of mosque in rural parts of the Sudan, where Sunni Ali and his family gathered with the aristocracy to pray. They saw him riding from afar, but they were confused as to his identity. At first they believed it was a prince from a faraway land come to pray with them. As he advanced, some looked upon his face and thought he might be one of Sunni Ali's captives, a stable boy. Askia Mohammed surprised them all.

The horse gallops swiftly, swiftly, swiftly, swiftly, swiftly, swiftly he is approaching. He comes into view suddenly, leaning forward on his mount. Until, until, until, until, until, until, until he touches the prayer skin of his uncle. Then he reins in his horse.<sup>94</sup>

Askia Mohammed did this once more in the same manner and then charged in for a third time. On this last charge he "unslung his lance, and pierced his uncle with it until the lance touched the prayer skin."<sup>95</sup>

What Malio achieved with this dramatic rendering of a trust exercise turned on its head was to relate significant political meaning without drawing out the often dry details of regime change. Also important to note is that this was one of a few instances where Malio shifted from past tense to present tense in order to draw the listener into the tale as if one were actually

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<sup>94</sup> Malio, *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, 22.

<sup>95</sup> Malio, *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, 23.

attending the event he was describing. Thomas Hale offers the best explanation for this seemingly bizarre behavior. Hale asserted that this spectacle of loyalty and horsemanship was a "traditional demonstration" performed on "ceremonial occasions."<sup>96</sup> The horse warrior displayed his ability to master his mount by stopping his charging horse with precision, while the king exhibited his faith in his vassal by not moving from the path of the onslaught. Askia Mohammed had no legitimate claim to the throne, even if Sunni Ali had been his uncle. Sunni Ali had sons and at least one daughter that attended him at prayer that day. By slaughtering him at his most exposed and surrounded by his kin and potential successors, Malio and the bards before him indicated that Sunni Ali was usurped unjustly. Indeed, Askia Mohammed's actions explicitly betrayed the trust exercise, thereby indicating treachery and treason in the transfer of power. Yet Sunni Ali was also killed while at prayer, highlighting the controversy concerning his standing in the faith. This tidbit, perhaps a subtle rub added by the griots, paints the murder in a more just light for those that saw Sunni Ali as a profaner of Islam. Yes, the king was a villain, the audience is informed, but Askia Mohammed was not the rightful heir. He did not possess the royal Songhay signs and symbols that legitimized rule. He took them by force. He also slaughtered the king at his most vulnerable and in a condition of absolute trust in his assassin. The heritage of the River Djinn, the animist god of the past, bolstered Askia Mohammed's position, and his father's gifts further legitimized his claim, yet the manner in which he assumed the crown, despite his ultimate success and popularity, requires constant attention from griots and historians alike.

The historical account of regime change at long last leads to Askia Mohammed the man. None of what Malio recounted so far was at all factual concerning the greatest of Songhay kings. As has been discussed, the Askia Mohammed of the epic is a carefully constructed fiction. He is

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<sup>96</sup> Hale, *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist: Narrative Interpreters of the Songhay Empire followed by The Epic of Askia Mohammed recounted by Nouhou Malio*, 80.

a character in a dynastic family melodrama full of heroes, villains, and magic. This is similar to *The Nibelungenlied* or *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and many other foundational myths: while likely based on real events, the particulars are fanciful. The historical Askia Mohammed had less divine origins.

The sources have relatively little to say concerning the heritage of Askia Mohammed, though recent scholarship has focused on dissecting the meaning and possible mistranslation of those passages. The *TF* relates that, "His father's family name was Arlūm, and he was a member of the Silla clan that is said to have come from Toro. His mother was named Kassey and was the daughter of the Kūra-koi Bukar."<sup>97</sup> The *TS* is similar: "Now the most felicitous and well-guided Muhammad b. Abi Bakr al-Turi – or, it is said, al-Sallanki – was one of Sunni Ali's senior commanders."<sup>98</sup> Thomas Hale concedes that these accounts are not wholly reconcilable as one placed him as descended of the Sylla clan and the other is undecided as to whether he is of Sylla or Toure.<sup>99</sup> Despite which clan he belonged to, the historical consensus is that he was descended of the Futa Toro that migrated to the middle Niger from Senegambia. In fact, many scholarly publications list him as Askia Mohammed Toure. The reason this is important is that he is widely chronicled as of Soninke heritage and not Songhay. Soninke is a subgroup of the greater Mande family, and the Futa Toro fell into that classification in the period under analysis. As mentioned, the Songhay likely descended from the Soninke as well, but that group memory was lost over the thousand years since their trek from the upper Niger. In the time of Sunni Ali and Askia Mohammed, the prime Mande groups were the Malinke and Soninke and they dwelled in the regions surrounding Timbuktu and Djenne. That one of Soninke origin came to rule the Songhay

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<sup>97</sup> Kati, *Tarikh al-fattash: The Timbuktu Chronicles 1493 – 1599*, 115.

<sup>98</sup> Al-Sadi, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sadi's Tarikh al-sudan down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents*, 102.

<sup>99</sup> Hale, *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist: Narrative Interpreters of the Songhay Empire followed by The Epic of Askia Mohammed recounted by Nouhou Malio*, 69.

Empire, carved out of former Malinke and Soninke cities and territories, might seem quite a coup, given the Songhay were rendered subservient to the Mali for most of their history. Yet one should not think of these empires as having hard borders as much as permeable and fluid frontier zones. Indeed, the Senegambia and Mali polities should be viewed as states in decline within an overarching Songhay state that exerted coercive hegemony over the whole. Askia Mohammed was no Malinese insider, despite Soninke heritage. The Mali Empire had been deteriorating for some decades. Like the passage from the *TS* stated, he was one of Sunni Ali's commanders at the time of the king's death. A man as ruthless as Sunni Ali would likely not promote a Mali nationalist.

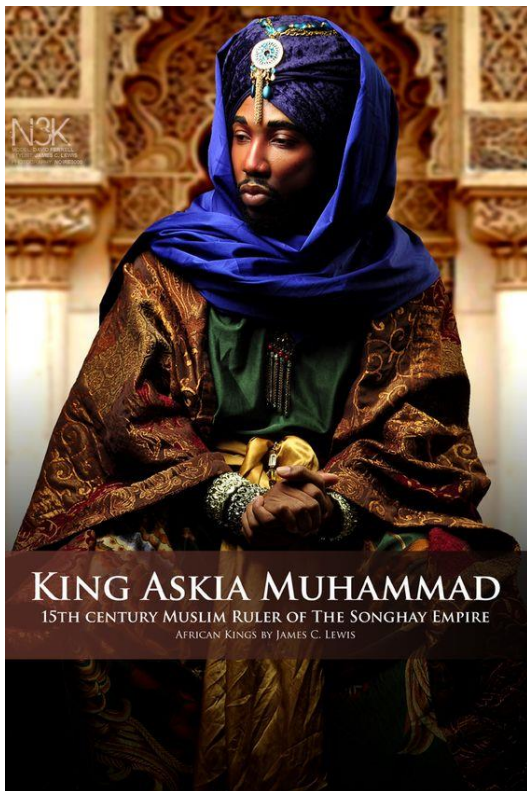


Fig. 6: A model posing as Askia Mohammed. Ibn Battuta commented on the beauty of Sudanic turbans. Note the elaborate *mihrab* in the background which frames his form. Photo Credit: James C. Lewis of Noire 3000 Studios.

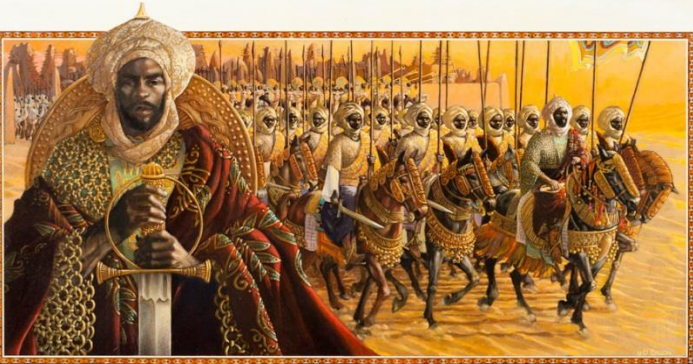


Fig. 7: Askia Mohammed art print from a 1998 Anheuser-Busch promotion. Artist Credit: L.D. Dillon. Askia Mohammed is depicted with a broadsword, a prestigious import, and accompanied by an entourage of cavalry.

Just as the *TF* and *TS* differ on the heritage of Askia Mohammed, so too do they differ on the demise of Sunni Ali. Al-Kati related a tale similar to that of the priest of Apollo, Chryses, in the *Iliad*. He stated that an Islamic holy man came to Sunni Ali to offer complaints concerning

the rape of his daughter, yet Sunni Ali would not see him, so he left.<sup>100</sup> As he departed he cried out to the heavens for divine justice, because there was none to be had on earth.<sup>101</sup> Later, a pair of holy men came to the Songhay court with a litany of charges against Sunni Ali, demanding to see the monarch so that he may hear their complaints.<sup>102</sup> Again, Sunni Ali would not see them. Offended and angered, the holy men called down curses upon Sunni Ali.<sup>103</sup> That very day he was struck by lightning and buried quietly by his retainers, for fear of further offending heaven.<sup>104</sup> The less mythic version offered by Al-Sadi is what is most often found in secondary sources. He related that Sunni Ali was returning from a campaign against a client group of the hated Fulani when he was swept away in a flash flood.<sup>105</sup> John O. Hunwick believed Sunni Ali was traveling in the Inland Delta region of the middle Niger based on the geographic marker of Garma given by al-Sadi.<sup>106</sup> Combined with the death date of November 6<sup>th</sup>, 1492, Hunwick postulated that it was realistic that a quick-forming "torrent" swept Sunni Ali from his mount and that the king drowned, weighted down with weapons and armor.<sup>107</sup> Yet the controversy of his life and the rebellion of Askia Mohammed against Sunni Ali's heir engendered conspiratorial thoughts among some historians.

Some imminent scholars of West Africa believe that Askia Mohammed and the *ulama* planned an insurrection against Sunni Ali and that the usurpation of his dynasty was premeditated. Lansiné Kaba, professor at the Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar, believed that

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<sup>100</sup> Kati, *Tarikh al-fattash: The Timbuktu Chronicles 1493 – 1599*, 101-102.

<sup>101</sup> Kati, *Tarikh al-fattash: The Timbuktu Chronicles 1493 – 1599*, 101-102.

<sup>102</sup> Kati, *Tarikh al-fattash: The Timbuktu Chronicles 1493 – 1599*, 101-102.

<sup>103</sup> Kati, *Tarikh al-fattash: The Timbuktu Chronicles 1493 – 1599*, 101-102.

<sup>104</sup> Kati, *Tarikh al-fattash: The Timbuktu Chronicles 1493 – 1599*, 101-102.

<sup>105</sup> Al-Sadi, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sadi's Tarikh al-sudan down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents*, 100.

<sup>106</sup> Al-Sadi, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sadi's Tarikh al-sudan down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents*, 100.

<sup>107</sup> Al-Sadi, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sadi's Tarikh al-sudan down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents*, 100.



the *ulama* of West Africa were at their most sophisticated state in this period. He pointed out that, while Askia Mohammed has an extensive native written history, no court biographers chronicled the deeds of Sunni Ali. His disdain for the elite of Timbuktu left him bereft of literate followers. While Sunni Ali had a court griot and he is still fondly remembered in the oral accounts of the people living along the Niger River as a great warrior and magician-king, in the tradition of Sumanguru and Sundiata, he is also popularly remembered as a tyrant.<sup>108</sup> This lack of documentary evidence leaves much room for conjecture. Kaba argued that Sunni Ali's lack of positive Islamic credentials, his foul treatment of the *ulama*, and his authoritarian rule gave the Islamic elite cause to justify a jihad against the regent.<sup>109</sup> Kaba did not believe that Sunni Ali was both a Muslim and an African king. He believed that Sunni Ali's primary motive was securing his kingdom and ruling under the aegis of African sacred kingship. Ali's actions, despite his Muslim name, did not indicate any fundamental dedication to Islam. The only documented evidence of such was his observance of Ramadan. Kaba believed that the militant clerics of Timbuktu were complicit with Askia Mohammed in making war on Sunni Ali's son Abu Bakr (fl. c. 1493). Kaba noted that Askia Mohammed sometimes refused to follow direct orders from Sunni Ali while governor of Hombori, a region in the Sahel south of the Inland Delta.<sup>110</sup> Further, Askia Mohammed received the explicit support of the Islamic governor and military commander of the territories surrounding Timbuktu.<sup>111</sup> This divided the military forces available to Abu Bakr and was a clear sign of support from the Timbuktu *ulama*. They believed that they had found a man that would respect Islam and lead the Songhay well. Yet this is not the consensus among scholars of West Africa.

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<sup>108</sup> Lasiné Kaba, "The Pen, the Sword, and the Crown: Islam and Revolution in Songhay Reconsidered, 1464-1493," *The Journal of African History* 25, No. 3 (1984): 249-250.

<sup>109</sup> Kaba, "The Pen, the Sword, and the Crown: Islam and Revolution in Songhay Reconsidered, 1464-1493," 249.

<sup>110</sup> Kaba, "The Pen, the Sword, and the Crown: Islam and Revolution in Songhay Reconsidered, 1464-1493," 254.

<sup>111</sup> Kaba, "The Pen, the Sword, and the Crown: Islam and Revolution in Songhay Reconsidered, 1464-1493," 253.

The death of Sunni Ali indeed led to an insurrection, unlike the narrative offered in the epic. Abu Bakr was quickly crowned by the Songhay army and rallied his forces to meet Askia Mohammed. This indicates that the core of the military aristocracy supported the legitimate heir. If there was a conspiracy, it appears that Askia Mohammed and the Timbuktu *ulama* made no secret of their intentions. Askia Mohammed mustered those of the military aristocracy loyal to his cause. The combatants clashed just outside Gao in January 1493. This short, bloody battle was indecisive. Both parties retired for a matter of months, perhaps gauging one another's strengths and weaknesses and rallying support while more cavalry arrived. This is conjecture, but informed conjecture. Abu Bakr was depicted in the *TF* as a near non-entity, one dimensionally bent on war. Askia Mohammed, conversely, was portrayed as a commander that despised conflict and attempted peaceful negotiations time and again until battle was eminent. This is another attempt by his biographer to legitimize his usurpation. Abu Bakr was a phantom, portrayed as a ruler of little merit. Conversely, Askia Mohammed was depicted as a most magnanimous revolutionary that held bloodshed with disdain. The *TF* does not address Askia Mohammed's motivations for seizing the crown or Abu Bakr's response. On and around April 12, 1493, the forces of Abu Bakr and Askia Mohammed clashed repeatedly. Askia Mohammed was the ultimate victor. Abu Bakr went into hiding for the remainder of his days and history hears nothing more from him. This brief civil conflict ended the line of Sunnis and heralded the beginning of the line of Askias. The revolution successful, the partnership between Askia Mohammed and the militant *ulama* flourished. Or so the argument of Kaba would lead one to believe. Other historians challenged this view.

Askia Mohammed accomplished regime change in a matter of months. He did so by force of arms. Humphrey Fisher of Cambridge argued directly against Kaba, stating that Kaba's was a

passionate argument but not grounded in fact.<sup>112</sup> Fisher pointed out that the *TS*, the account he believed the most reliable, said nothing of a connection between Askia Mohammed and the Timbuktu *ulama* prior to his ascension.<sup>113</sup> Therefore, no conspiracy to revolt existed. He further argued that the Islamic identity of Askia Mohammed was in a state of flux in his early career as regent. Askia Mohammed struggled to find the Islamic practices that most suited him and his style of rule. He entertained the Timbuktu ideology, the syncretic Gao school of thought, as well as the orthodox ideas of the prominent North African cleric al-Maghili in his search for Islamic identity. Islam was more important as a component of Askia Mohammed's rule than a part of his usurpation of power. Fisher argued that all three of these schools of Islamic thought competed for the king's attention at different times, but not before he had established himself as the Songhay king. Yet this critique does not fully address all of Kaba's argument. The amount of real, material assistance Askia Mohammed received from the Timbuktu *ulama* prior to achieving the crown was addressed by Kaba. He stated that the support of the northwestern governors and commanders split the royal army, thus hindering the ability of Abu Bakr to wage war. This is not a mere idea or conjecture, a connection made in the mind given the lack of documentation. The *ulama* denied Abu Bakr material resources necessary to wage war. While this is not evidence of a conspiracy, it certainly is proof of the desire for a change in ruling dynasties. Though there was likely no direct collusion between Askia Mohammed and the *ulama* of Timbuktu in the brief conflict, they certainly had the same enemy and, as the saying goes, the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Askia Mohammed and the Timbuktu *ulama* desired the same end. John O. Hunwick explained it best.

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<sup>112</sup> Blum and Fisher, "Love for Three Oranges, or, the Askiya's Dilemma: The Askiya, al-Maghili and Timbuktu, c. 1500 A.D," 68.

<sup>113</sup> Blum and Fisher, "Love for Three Oranges, or, the Askiya's Dilemma: The Askiya, al-Maghili and Timbuktu, c. 1500 A.D," 68.

Askia Muhammad *chose* to rely on precisely those Islamic factors which his predecessor had decided largely to ignore ... It is in the light of this need for support from the west... that we can best understand Askia Muhammad's policy towards Timbuktu and his use of Islam as an instrument of state policy. His very accession to power, achieved solely by armed struggle without his apparently having any traditional right to supreme office, *was justified* in this manner... All of this complex [coup] process *was later to be represented* to al-Maghili by the Askia as a jihad against Sunni 'Ali and his supporters.<sup>114</sup>

Hunwick believed that the coup narrative was a necessary construct. In terms of legitimizing his rule to prominent scholars outside of the Sudan, he cast his usurpation as an organized revolt that was sanctioned by the *ulama*. This jihad was necessary due to the impiety and non-Islamic rule of Sunni Ali. More will be discussed concerning Askia Mohammed's foreign relations in the final chapter. Internally, he need only prove his Islamic credentials to the *ulama* and only to such a degree that he exhibited a willingness to respect them with some autonomy. This too will be discussed in the final chapter. The bulk of Askia Mohammed's subjects were more concerned with his taking on of traditional signs and symbols of African kingship. As he was not the legitimate blood heir, it is unclear just how he accomplished this.

*The Epic of Askia Mohammed* does much to portray Askia Mohammed as an Islamic king. The line of griots was part of the overall propaganda service utilized in legitimizing his rule. As their legacy was tied to the greatness of their master's legacy, griots were sure to create a grand narrative depicting the reign of their patron. Yet this leaves out those parts of his kingship that are wholly indigenous, though not deliberately. The griot's audience is assumed knowledgeable of notions of African sacred kingship. Non-specialist and Western audiences may not be. Before delving further into the narrative, a brief accounting of what is meant by African sacred kingship is required in order that the epic is fully contextualized.

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<sup>114</sup> Blum and Fisher, "Love for Three Oranges, or, the Askia's Dilemma: The Askia, al-Maghili and Timbuktu, c. 1500 A.D," 69.

West African kings symbolized the health and vitality of the kingdom. As such, strict rules guided how one interacted with the king, lest he become tainted by contact with a lesser individual.<sup>115</sup> Court conversation was triangulated so that the king did not speak directly to petitioners.<sup>116</sup> Solicitors prostrated themselves before the regent and poured a handful of dirt over their heads as a sign of abasement.<sup>117</sup> High nobles were sometimes allowed to humble themselves with a handful of flour instead of ashes or dust from the ground.<sup>118</sup> The king's griot was usually his spokesman. This is attested to early in the Sundiata narrative as well as in the account of Ibn Battuta.<sup>119</sup> The griot was not only the verbal medium by which the king communicated in court, but also his greater voice to his subjects. Pronouncements were made by the griot. The king's very well-being was tied to the efficacy of institutions, the prosperity of the merchants, and the fecundity of the land.<sup>120</sup> As such, the king was considered a man-god in very real ways, the living embodiment of the kingdom and insurer of cosmic order.<sup>121</sup> Yet this lends itself to a very dangerous contradiction. He is a divine being in danger of dying, thus the taboos and ceremonies that placed him above the rest of society.<sup>122</sup> In some African societies, a group of noble families vied for the kingship and the royal line changed often via consensus or different forms of election. This was not the case among the Songhay, where the ruling dynasty remained in power until militarily deposed by another. While this is a brief and incomplete definition of the phenomenon, it suffices for the purposes of contextualizing the epic.

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<sup>115</sup> Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction*, 38.

<sup>116</sup> Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction*, 39.

<sup>117</sup> Ibn Battuta, *Ibn Battuta in Black Africa*, 59. Kati, *Tarikh al-fattash: The Timbuktu Chronicles 1493 – 1599*, 25-26.

<sup>118</sup> Kati, *Tarikh al-fattash: The Timbuktu Chronicles 1493 – 1599*, 25-26.

<sup>119</sup> Niane, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*, 4. Ibn Battuta, *Ibn Battuta in Black Africa*, 48.

<sup>120</sup> Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction*, 38.

<sup>121</sup> H. J. M. Claessen and Peter Skalník, *The Study of the State*, (New York: Mouton, 1981) 2.

<sup>122</sup> Claessen and Skalník, *The Study of the State*, 2.

Neither the documentary evidence nor the oral accounts addressed how Askia Mohammed overcame the problem of usurpation in the minds of his subjects. While he did not kill Sunni Ali or Abu Bakr, he did drive the legitimate heir into hiding via force of arms. Askia Mohammed assumed the previously described signs and symbols of sacred kingship, yet nothing is mentioned of Abu Bakr giving up his claim. One must question what the freeborn Songhay made of a regime change in which the sacred kingship changed bloodlines while a living heir still roamed the earth. Hence, Malio's use of treachery as a literary device. Askia Mohammed was an administrator for Sunni Ali, yet he made war on his former master's son. This makes one question the ultimate importance of the opinion of the freeborn Songhay, as well as the importance of maintaining a dynastic bloodline, given the lack of evidence that speaks of any popular disruption. This speaks to periodization. As the events depicted in *The Epic of Askia Mohammed* occur in the African Late Medieval period, those in power ruled without apparent consideration of the freeborn. Monarchs, the religious and merchant elite, as well as the military aristocracy likely did not take into account the thoughts of their agrarian subjects. While this is conjecture, it is informed conjecture. The silence on this matter is astounding. This draws into question the ultimate importance of sacred kingship in this period and is one of the reasons the transition of power from Sunni Ali to Askia Mohammed is such an important area to study. One wonders just exactly what the Songhay people made of the usurpation by Askia Mohammed. This matter begs for further research into the yet to be translated Arabic language African documents. For Askia Mohammed to legitimize his rule solely through Islamic means is not a reasonable course of action given what is known about West African society. Again, the theme of Islamic atonement and recognition is the topic of the final chapter. For now one must explore the interesting turn of events following the assassination of Sunni Ali as described in the epic. It

is there that one meets the freeborn Songhay as best as possible in the narrative of Nouhou Malio.

### The Creation of the Castes

To pick up the narrative of *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, Sunni Ali was killed at the prayer ground by the son of the River Djinn. Those gathered reached up and laid hands upon Askia Mohammed, meaning to tear him from his snowy mount. Kassaye was among those assembled. She spoke in his defense.

She said, "Let him go! Let him alone, it is Mamar [Askia Mohammed], son of Kassaye. It is Mamar, the son of Kassaye, let him go. Si has killed eight of my children. You want to catch him, someone who has taken the life of one man who has himself taken eight lives—leave him alone!" They let him go. They took away the body, and Mamar came to sit down on the prayer skin of his uncle. They prayed. They took away the body to bury it. That is how Mamar took the chieftaincy. When they finished praying, he mounted his horse, and the people followed him. Then the son of the uncle says to him, "Son of Kassaye, you did it all by yourself."<sup>123</sup>

Not by mere force of his djinn weapons, masterful horsemanship, and deceit did Askia Mohammed win the throne in the Songhay foundation myth. His mother's pleadings and a personal display of piety were integral to winning the hearts and minds of his detractors. The Supernatural Aid provided by his father was not strong enough to overcome every obstacle, only that of the wicked tyrant Sunni Ali. The protective umbrella cast over Askia Mohammed by his mother was still necessary to secure his rule. The moment he was recognized by Sunni Ali's kin he was taken into their custody. Kassaye's pleadings identified the assassin as her trueborn son, not the lowly stable boy he had pretended to be. He was not the son of a slave woman, enslaved by birthright, but regal. Revealed as the child of a member of the royal family, a cousin to the legitimate heir no less, Sunni Ali's household and entourage did not slay Askia Mohammed on

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<sup>123</sup> Malio, *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, 23.

the spot. They listened to Kassaye's grievances and seemingly acknowledged the wickedness of their father. Kassaye is an example of woman as goddess in Campbell's reckoning of The Hero's Journey.

Kassaye played a central role in the adventures of her son throughout *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*. She saved him from Sunni Ali's murderous designs as a babe and spared him the wrath of his children upon slaying the tyrant. In further sections, which this thesis does not analyze, she provided her son and his army magical assistance in escaping the clutches of the Bargantche people, a tribe who got the better of him in pitched battle. Kassaye played the role of the goddess-mother in this foundation myth, being both protector as well as giver of magic to Askia Mohammed. "Woman," wrote Joseph Campbell, "in the picture language of mythology, represents the totality of what can be known. The hero is the one who comes to know."<sup>124</sup> Campbell further argued that the female may only reveal as much as the hero can comprehend as he develops.<sup>125</sup> One sees this in the epic. Initially, Kassaye simply protected Askia as a baby as he was in the ignorance of youth. As a young man she revealed the identity of his father. She further revealed his royal heritage to the court to save his life again. While Askia Mohammed was ruler of the Songhay, she imbued objects with magic and gifted them to her son so that he might slow the advance of his enemies and escape certain doom. Prior to this occasion she had not shown any arcane abilities. Indeed, Kassaye gradually revealed her greater capabilities as her son grew in military and political power. She mated with a jinni, obscured her semi-divine son's identity into near adulthood, and was a constant member of his court. As such, she was the goddess-mother of the Songhay foundation myth.

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<sup>124</sup> Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 3rd edition, 97.

<sup>125</sup> Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 3rd edition, 97.



Askia Mohammed showed piety and initiative in slaying Sunni Ali, factors that won over his royal cousins. Malio related that Askia Mohammed sat on the very prayer mat where his victim was slain just moments before. Once the bloodied corpse of Sunni Ali was removed, the congregation prayed. He offered supplication to Allah, along with the rest of the gathering. The assassination of Sunni Ali did not stop the holy rites from proceeding. Askia Mohammed's leadership in ensuring that prayer continued as planned presaged his future portrayal as a warrior of Islam. Once the prayers were complete, the son of Sunni Ali congratulated his cousin for overthrowing his father, awed by Askia Mohammed's actions. "Son of Kassaye, you did it all by yourself," he fawned.<sup>126</sup> This indicated that Sunni Ali's son feared his father in the same manner as the freeborn. Further, the message Malio expressed was that Sunni Ali ruled with such authoritarian vigor that no coalition dared plan a coup, let alone a single assassin plot against the merciless dictator. His son was depicted as ineffective and frightened, lacking both the courage and the will to overthrow his father. The ramifications were surely horrific. Yet Askia Mohammed, the supposed stable slave, succeeded where others dared not even plot in hushed tones behind bolted doors. Malio accentuated this point by repeating the phrase, "He did it himself, the people didn't do it."<sup>127</sup> Again and again the griot uttered the phrase, driving home the point that Askia Mohammed earned the throne by his courage, he won the kingship by the spear. A single person succeeded where an entire society failed. Askia Mohammed crossed the threshold from potential hero to valiant king. As such, he required an entourage of followers. Their background was surprising.

Sudanic society in the time of Askia Mohammed consisted of a loosely defined class system. There was not deep and strict stratification. The three main categories of the social order

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<sup>126</sup> Malio, *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, 23.

<sup>127</sup> Malio, *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, 23.

were noble, freeborn, and slave.<sup>128</sup> Even these simple divisions proved problematic. Based on regional dialects and the infusion of Arabic into African languages, the true difference in social standing between nobles and freeborn in any given Sudanic society varied and is often difficult to truly understand.<sup>129</sup> In essence, freeborn were also noble in the sense that they had extensive personal liberty. Elements of egalitarianism marked the majority of society. The most meaningful distinction was that those of the freeborn class could not expect to ascend into a royal lineage.<sup>130</sup> Heredity was a limiting factor in attaining nobility as notions of African sacred kingship relied on maintaining regal bloodlines. There were also societal taboos regarding treatment of slaves. Most were utilized as agricultural and household labor. Slaves taken in war and slaves born into households were perceived and treated differently, as masters were naturally deferential to those that grew up in their presence.<sup>131</sup> A rival noble taken in combat was a prized slave for obvious reasons, while it was forbidden to enslave one of the skilled castes.<sup>132</sup>

The caste system in the Sudan was not at all like the Indian system from which it derived its name. Caste people (*nyamakalaw*) were defined by possession of a skill. *Nyamakalaw* roughly translates to blacksmith. George Brooks of Indiana University believed that the earliest caste artisans among Mande speaking peoples were married couples wherein the male was a blacksmith and the wife was a potter.<sup>133</sup> He postulated that these proto-*nyamakalaw* pairings began as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries B.C. when Berbers transmitted Phoenician forms of iron working across the Sahara. Therefore, this imperfect definition has deep roots, unto the very

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<sup>128</sup> Tal Tamari, "The Development of Caste Systems in West Africa," *The Journal of African History* 32, No. 2 (1991): 223.

<sup>129</sup> Tamari, "The Development of Caste Systems in West Africa," 224.

<sup>130</sup> Tamari, "The Development of Caste Systems in West Africa," 224.

<sup>131</sup> Tamari, "The Development of Caste Systems in West Africa," 224.

<sup>132</sup> Tamari, "The Development of Caste Systems in West Africa," 224.

<sup>133</sup> Brooks, "Ecological Perspectives on Mande Population Movements, Commercial Networks, and Settlement Patterns from the Atlantic Wet Phase (Ca. 5500-2500 B.C.) to the Present," 28.

beginning of the institution. Perhaps a more apt term for *nyamakalaw* is artisan. While an important sector of society, they were not the most populist.

The vast majority of the population of the Sudan was freeborn. These were the agriculturalist backbone of society. Freeborn farmers not only grew crops for themselves and their livestock, but also a surplus to support the army and array of specialist citizens that formed the state. *Nyamakalaw*, alternatively, were skilled workers that formed a minor portion of society, less than twenty percent of a given population.<sup>134</sup> They were metal workers, musicians and entertainers, leather workers, carpenters, jewelers, potters, weavers, calabash fashioners, and griots, just to name a few.<sup>135</sup> Not every Sudanic society recognized each handicraft as a caste. The reason this is important is because there was a taboo against freeborn performing the skills of a *nyamakalaw* as well as a prohibition against *nyamakalaw* and freeborn intermarrying.<sup>136</sup> In certain societies, a freeborn agriculturalist was allowed to make objects or utilize skills for personal use while this might be forbidden in a neighboring community. What was considered a caste occupation varied from place to place. This had economic ramifications. Larger societies ensured employment, availability of goods, and continuity of a skilled labor class by separating said class from the rest of the community. Forcing *nyamakalaw* to intermarry produced generations of children taken as apprentices into the family trade, effectively resupplying society with both goods and services. Indeed, *nyamakalaw* were almost always made to live in separate neighborhoods within towns and trade cities.<sup>137</sup> Socially, *nyamakalaw* were perceived in a station somewhere between freeborn and slave, though griots and true iron-working blacksmiths were

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<sup>134</sup> Tamari, "The Development of Caste Systems in West Africa," 224.

<sup>135</sup> Tamari, "The Development of Caste Systems in West Africa," 224.

<sup>136</sup> Tamari, "The Development of Caste Systems in West Africa," 225 & 230.

<sup>137</sup> Tamari, "The Development of Caste Systems in West Africa," 231.

held in high esteem.<sup>138</sup> Therefore, the more stratified the caste system in a Sudanic society, the more prosperous the society.

While the experts agree on the generalities concerning the caste system, they offer differing, nuanced interpretations. Dr. Tal Tamari, Research Fellow at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (Paris) and Lecturer at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, believed that the caste system described in the preceding paragraph, "appeared among the Malinke no later than 1300, and [was] present among the Soninke and Wolof no later than 1500."<sup>139</sup> Brooks believed that the caste system as it existed in the time of Askia Mohammed was a result of the politics of empire building. He wrote, "Horse warrior state-builders imposed a stratified tripartite social structure: (a) elites and free persons; (b) *nyamakalaw*/endogamous occupational groups, comprising smiths, leatherworkers, and bards; and (c) large numbers of slaves, either captured during conquests or obtained through commerce." Where Tamari saw a social phenomenon, Brooks saw the results of deliberate policy choices. Malio placed the creation of three major caste occupations at the moment of Askia Mohammed's ascension to power.

Nouhou Malio told Thomas Hale that he could trace his lineage to the time of Sunni Ali. He was not speaking in hyperbole. The legitimate heir to the Songhay throne was so overcome by Askia Mohammed's display of courage that he became the griot of his father's murderer on the spot. Askia Mohammed mounted his horse and started away, but the young man followed him. At first, Kassaye thought he was going to beg for mercy, "You want to shame yourself. You who are the son of the man, you want to beg for the son of the woman."<sup>140</sup> He corrected her quickly, "Me, I sing his praises. I follow him, I become a *jeséré*, I follow him. I put my share in

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<sup>138</sup> Tamari, "The Development of Caste Systems in West Africa," 225 & 230.

<sup>139</sup> Tamari, "The Development of Caste Systems in West Africa," 221.

<sup>140</sup> Malio, *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, 23.

his share throughout the Songhay area, and I'll take what I am given."<sup>141</sup> Malio then addressed the audience, stating "This is why we are *jeseré*," and "A griot has thus been created. There's how the profession of griot begins."<sup>142</sup> *Jeseré* is the Soninke term for griot.<sup>143</sup> The ultimate origin of the word griot is unknown, neither is Malio's mixed usage in this passage.<sup>144</sup> Malio believed that he and other Songhay griots descended from a son of Sunni Ali. Thomas Hale pointed out that this is one of a great many stories concerning the origin of the griot in the Sudan.<sup>145</sup> What makes this one unique is that the Songhay griots claim descent from royalty.<sup>146</sup> As Ibn Battuta and the Sundiata narrative attest, as well as the research of Tal Tamari, the griot was a fixture in the Sudan for centuries prior to the reign of Askia Mohammed. While this origin story is not factual, it adds to the overall importance of the Songhay foundation myth. Yet the griot was only one of the three castes purportedly created upon the death of Sunni Ali.

Another of Sunni Ali's sons dedicated himself to a profession once life at court was no longer an option. Malio uttered, "The second son, he disappeared into the sky. He brought a handful of razors, he dumped them down. He became a *sohanci*. He is at the origin of *sohancis*, who do circumcisions for people."<sup>147</sup> *Sohancis* were active members of Malio's intended audience and this needed no further explanation in the performance given for the sake of Thomas Hale. Non-specialists and western audiences in general are not so well informed. As indicated by the *sohanci*'s supposed gift of flight, they purportedly possess arcane abilities and are commonly

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<sup>141</sup> Malio, *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, 23 & 24.

<sup>142</sup> Malio, *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, 24.

<sup>143</sup> Hale, *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist: Narrative Interpreters of the Songhay Empire followed by The Epic of Askia Mohammed recounted by Nouhou Malio*, 36.

<sup>144</sup> Hale, *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist: Narrative Interpreters of the Songhay Empire followed by The Epic of Askia Mohammed recounted by Nouhou Malio*, 36.

<sup>145</sup> Hale, *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist: Narrative Interpreters of the Songhay Empire followed by The Epic of Askia Mohammed recounted by Nouhou Malio*, 281.

<sup>146</sup> Hale, *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist: Narrative Interpreters of the Songhay Empire followed by The Epic of Askia Mohammed recounted by Nouhou Malio*, 282.

<sup>147</sup> Malio, *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, 24.

labeled sorcerers. Anthropologist Paul Stoller of West Chester University spent many years, off and on, as the guest of a Songhay *sohanci*. An esoteric scholar, Stoller described how *sohancis* quite literally consume the essence of their power, as though eating the force which they transform into either physically restorative spells or curses of wounding and sickness.<sup>148</sup> Stoller described in detail some of the exact processes he witnessed, many involving ritual incantations and ceremonies with enchanted objects.<sup>149</sup> Songhay *sohanci* often exhibit scarring on their arms from testing their abilities, as a primary *sohanci* skill is to become invulnerable to blades.<sup>150</sup> Hale noted that Songhay *sohancis* indeed claim descent from the infamous magician king Sunni Ali.<sup>151</sup> Further, Hale cited longtime French anthropologist Olivier de Sardan in stating that the *sohanci* that thrived under the reign of Sunni Ali dispersed to many corners of the Sudan upon his death.<sup>152</sup> Hale does not say that this is due to Askia Mohammed's dedication to Islam, yet one may surmise that this was the case given the *ulama's* stance against such conjuring. John O. Hunwick deferred to the research of Jean Rouch, who believed that the *sohanci* were the literal blood relations of Sunni Ali that fled, along with Abu Bakr, to Wanzerbe, an island in the Niger.<sup>153</sup> These Rouch called Sohance. One can easily see how the descendants of the fabled magician king became identified as sorcerers. Whether or not the *sohanci* dispersed or concentrated in one spot is difficult to say. The truth is likely that both accounts are correct to some degree. What both theories agree on is that the *sohanci* were not a part of Askia Mohammed's rule.

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<sup>148</sup> Paul Stoller, *Sensuous Scholarship*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997) 7, 12-18.

<sup>149</sup> Stoller, *Sensuous Scholarship*, 12-18.

<sup>150</sup> Stoller, *Sensuous Scholarship*, 13.

<sup>151</sup> Hale, *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist: Narrative Interpreters of the Songhay Empire followed by The Epic of Askia Mohammed recounted by Nouhou Malio*, 282.

<sup>152</sup> Hale, *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist: Narrative Interpreters of the Songhay Empire followed by The Epic of Askia Mohammed recounted by Nouhou Malio*, 282.

<sup>153</sup> Al-Sadi, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sadi's Tarikh al-sudan down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents*, 103.

While it may have been acceptable as part of popular religion under Sunni Ali, sorcery and witchcraft were forbidden in orthodox Islamic societies. As will be explored in the final chapter of this thesis, Askia Mohammed was dedicated to Islam. He restored Timbuktu and was a patron to Islamic scholars. The Islamic cities that Sunni Ali conquered very likely considered him a pagan interloper from the east.<sup>154</sup> That Malio suggested the *sohanci* appeared only after Sunni Ali's death is rather apocryphal and is further indication that the epic is a foundational myth. Sunni Ali was a practitioner of magic, as were others in his dominion. The *sohanci* are part of modern Songhay society, but fled during the reign of Askia Mohammed. Whether they were simply the relatives of Sunni Ali or sorcerers is not known for sure, but the answer likely lies somewhere in the middle. This speaks entirely to audience and to message. The audience of the epic is the modern Songhay and the message is that all good things, all traditional things, came during the reign of their greatest king, without regard to the historical record. This is precisely the sort of meaning one finds in foundation myths. The final caste sired from Sunni Ali's heritage concerned the Niger.

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<sup>154</sup> Al-Sadi, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sadi's Tarikh al-sudan down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents*, xxxix.



Fig. 8: *Canoes on the Niger*. 19<sup>th</sup>-century English engraving.



Fig. 9: *Songhay Village*, 1870. William Collins Sons & Co., London. The Niger River, as well as the rivulets and streams that flowed into her, was vital to agrarian Sudanic society. Note what appears to be a mosque in the background. This is similar to the prayer ground described by Malio.



Having observed her two brothers found caste occupations, the daughter of Sunni Ali took on a skilled profession as well. Just as her one brother astonished the gathering by swirling high into the air, she dramatically plunged into the Niger.

The daughter cried out and jumped into the river. She spent seven days under the water. No one knew where she went. It was on that day she came out as *sorko*. The *sorkos* come from her. Her grandchildren are the *sorkos*. They are not simply hunters on water, they are called *sorkos*. It is difficult to obtain a *sorko*, if they tell you to look for a *sorko* in the countryside, now it is difficult. The descendants of the daughter are called *sorkos*.<sup>155</sup>

Like almost every term mentioned in the epic, *sorko* has many meanings and must be unpacked for clarity. As with her brothers, the daughter of Sunni Ali is the foundational figure for all future *sorkos*. Having spent a week below water, she surfaced as mother of riverfolk. There was no mention as to whether or not she encountered Askia Mohammed's father. Malio specified that she was the originator of a particular sort of riverfolk and not all *sorkos*. Generally speaking, *sorkos* were freeborn people that made their living as fishermen, hunters, and navigators upon the Niger.<sup>156</sup> Another term for hunters on the Niger was *gawaye*.<sup>157</sup> Therefore, the use of the word *sorko* was perhaps a way of differentiating a caste occupation from river hunting in general. Hunwick believed those of the *sorko* caste were likely the first peoples to settle the Middle Niger in antiquity, having trekked from the headwaters region where sufficient lumber was harvested to manufacture canoes.<sup>158</sup> But there are further possibilities.

Hale again deferred to Olivier de Sardan in this matter, who believed that there were two classes of *sorko*. One was of the general type that plied their trade on the upper Niger and

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<sup>155</sup> Malio, *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, 24.

<sup>156</sup> Hale, *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist: Narrative Interpreters of the Songhay Empire followed by The Epic of Askia Mohammed recounted by Nouhou Malio*, 282.

<sup>157</sup> Hale, *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist: Narrative Interpreters of the Songhay Empire followed by The Epic of Askia Mohammed recounted by Nouhou Malio*, 282.

<sup>158</sup> Al-Sadi, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sadi's Tarikh al-sudan down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents*, xxx.

another which had a monopoly on hunting hippopotami. Perhaps the daughter of Sunni Ali began the line of *sorkos* that were noble enough to stalk the great river horse. To further muddle the issue, the *TF* mentioned *Sorko* as peoples Sunni Ali freed from the hegemony of Mali, though noted Islamic scholar Nehemiah Levtzion (d. 2003) believed this was part of the forgery added by Sékou Amadou (d. 1845) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and therefore cannot be trusted.<sup>159</sup> Malio indicated that *sorkos* were much diminished in modern Songhay society, stating that merely hunting on the Niger did not make one a true *sorko*. Maurice Delafosse, a French colonial governor, university professor, and one of the original translators of the *TF*, noted that *sorko* and *somono* were terms used for Niger fisherman that he encountered while in Africa.<sup>160</sup> Hunwick quoted Rouch in confirming that Somonou and Bozo are "fisherfolk" of the Niger in modernity.<sup>161</sup>

The appearance of *sorkos* upon the death of Sunni Ali is as apocryphal as the foundation of the *sohanci*. *Sorkos* were an integral part of the campaigns Sunni Ali waged against Mali. As previously discussed, Sunni Ali was a great military innovator and utilized the Niger in ways no war leader had before. *Sorkos* navigated his troop transports and ensured that his infantry arrived where and when they were needed. Again, this speaks to audience. Malio lamented the passing of a once storied and respected occupation that all but vanished due to creative destruction. Tying the origins of the *sorko* to Askia Mohammed, again, bolsters the epic's standing as a foundation myth. Yet Askia Mohammed was responsible for a change in the lives of the *sorko*.

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<sup>159</sup> Hale, *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist: Narrative Interpreters of the Songhay Empire followed by The Epic of Askia Mohammed recounted by Nouhou Malio*, 282.

<sup>160</sup> Maurice Delafosse, *The Negroes of Africa*, Translated by F. Fligelman, (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1968) 159.

<sup>161</sup> Al-Sadi, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sadi's Tarikh al-sudan down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents*, xxx.

What occurred under the reign of Askia Mohammed and his descendants was that those of the *sorko* caste became subservient to the state, *mamluks* in Arabic.<sup>162</sup> Those familiar with the term understand that the phenomenon of *mamluks*, as practiced in other Islamic societies, was not conceived in the same manner in the Songhay Empire. These were no foreign-born warrior brotherhoods. Instead, the *sorko mamluks* were one of the administrative innovations attributed to Askia Mohammed. Control of the Niger and the distribution of troops and food stuffs were vital to the health and management of the state. As such, nationalization of the *sorko* caste was an important step in expanding Songhay hegemony. Not only did the *sorkos* construct canoes of varying size, they built vessels composed of planks.<sup>163</sup> These were lashed together and caulked watertight, similar to the trade vessels constructed on the Malabar Coast in the same period.<sup>164</sup> The askias demanded a yearly quota of watercraft in order to expand their fleet.<sup>165</sup> In this way Askia Mohammed moved troops and rice to those areas of his empire in most need.

### Conclusion

Nouhou Malio packed a lot of meaning into the sparse information offered in *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*. In order to make his audience understand the treason and unlawful usurpation implied in the historical narrative surrounding Askia Mohammed's rise to power, he symbolically caste Sunni Ali as a pious innocent in the moment of his death. This was difficult, as Malio had initially portrayed Sunni Ali as the wickedest of tyrants, a slayer of newborns. Yet placing him on his prayer skin, inside a mosque, displaying such trust in a stranger, depicted him as devout and hospitable in the most positive manner. This is a perfect illustration of the complex

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<sup>162</sup> Al-Sadi, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sadi's Tarikh al-sudan down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents*, xxx.

<sup>163</sup> Al-Sadi, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sadi's Tarikh al-sudan down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents*, xxx.

<sup>164</sup> Al-Sadi, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sadi's Tarikh al-sudan down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents*, xxx.

<sup>165</sup> Al-Sadi, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sadi's Tarikh al-sudan down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents*, xxxi.

and difficult nature of the players and the dynamics of the period in West African history. Sunni Ali was a military innovator and an unceasing warrior that defeated every enemy set before him. He threw off the domination of Mali and punished them for what he saw as sins. Societies venerate those that bring victory in battle like none other. He is remembered well by the people of the Niger. Conversely, he was a tyrannical ruler. Askia Mohammed, as will be seen in the following chapter, expanded the Songhay Empire even further and ruled with a lighter touch during a golden age. Yet his war against Sunni Ali's heir went against political convention, against what was perceived as best for the well-being of the people, the land, and the kingdom. Malio depicted Askia Mohammed as the son of the very essence of the Niger, only to tarnish his reputation as an assassin. His kingdom was spear won, but not in a fair fight. The words of the epic seem so simple at face value. Upon contextualization, they are fraught with deep cultural meaning. Nowhere was this seen more than in the creation of the castes.

The epic is not a tale wholly concerned with the deeds of the protagonist. As a foundational myth, Malio and the griots before him added elements of Songhay society to the story in order to give the epic more weight. As Askia Mohammed was their greatest king, certain popular social functions were tied to his ascension to power in order to lend them prestige. This innovation, this addition to the biography, is acutely pertinent to the modern Songhay audience. Traditional occupations suffered attrition due to creative destruction. The modern nation-state of Niger, where Malio resided, is still mostly agrarian, making up 40% of the GDP.<sup>166</sup> Yet Niger's extensive natural resources, especially uranium and petroleum, are growing sectors and seen as the key to the nation's economic independence once security and stability is established in the

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<sup>166</sup> *The World Factbook*. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency.  
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ng.html>.

region.<sup>167</sup> Indeed, a Western-style service sector is replacing customary professions in the modern state.<sup>168</sup> As such, the traditions of the Songhay are waning. Malio's telling of the epic offers a nostalgic, loving account of the origins of the *griots*, *sohancis*, and *sorkos*. These caste people live among the agriculturalists of Malio's world. He lamented their station in modernity by recounting their high esteem in the days of Askia Mohammed.

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<sup>167</sup> *The World Factbook*. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency.  
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ng.html>.

<sup>168</sup> *The World Factbook*. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency.  
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ng.html>.

## Chapter 3 – Atonement and Hajj

### Introduction

Askia Mohammed required a source of legitimacy for his kingship as he unmistakably usurped the throne from the authentic heir to the Songhay dynasty and drove him into exile. Since he assumed the signs and symbols of sacred kingship by force, he needed another political factor for support. Askia Mohammed already had the loyalty of the warrior aristocracy. The Islamic establishment was the final pillar of the ruling classes he needed to persuade. Since the *ulama* of Timbuktu had contributed to his success in the brief civil war, his pleas for their support were welcome. He easily gained the backing of the important Muslim Mande clans in Mali.<sup>169</sup> Askia Mohammed also recruited a permanent standing army and conducted raids on the non-Muslim tribes that bordered the Songhay Empire.<sup>170</sup> This is reflected in *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*. Askia Mohammed was depicted as a successful raider and warrior for the faith (*mujtahid*) in the Sudan. He was much more. Indeed, he was a conqueror as well as a revolutionary administrator. Malio described him as violently pious, threatening to destroy whole villages that refused to convert to Islam. The line between myth and reality blurs in this area. Askia Mohammed is remembered widely as a devout king that spread Islam in the Sudan. This proselytizing Islamic identity further enhanced his standing with the *ulama*. The overall result was a general forgiveness for his usurpation by the Islamic scholars and administrators, though not stated explicitly in the histories.

To solidify his standing within the global Islamic community, Askia Mohammed made the hajj. In Malio's narrative, he could not cross the Red Sea until he atoned for shedding the blood of his uncle. While this was a fiction, it furthered the foundation myth of the Songhay.

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<sup>169</sup> Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 3rd Edition, 456.

<sup>170</sup> Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 3rd Edition, 456.

Malio depicted the creation of the myriad mosques of the Sudan as the price of atonement that Askia Mohammed paid in order to visit the Ka'ba and the tomb of the Prophet. Indeed, he could not meet with the *sharif* of Mecca and convince him that he deserved the title of Caliph (*khalifa*) if he did not found mosques in the many villages under his rule. These mud mosques are a form of sacred architecture unique to the Sudan and must be appreciated to properly contextualize the epic. Further, the encounter with the *sharif* of Mecca is a contested event, as is the hajj in general, and requires analysis in order to ultimately place the epic's account of Askia Mohammed in perspective.

### Atonement

Following the creation of the castes, Malio continued the epic with a lengthy and vivid account of the early rule of Askia Mohammed.

Now, Mamar [Askia Mohammed] came to sit down. He ruled then, he ruled, he ruled, he ruled, he converted. Throughout Mamar's reign, what he did was to convert people. Any village that he hears is trying to resist, that is not going to submit, he gets up and destroys the village. If the village accepts, he makes them pray. Mamar made them convert, Mamar made them convert, Mamar made them convert. Until, until, until, until, until, until he got up and said he would go to Mecca. Thus he started off as far, as far, as far as the Red Sea.<sup>171</sup>

Once there, an anonymous "they" informed him he could not cross because he had "killed an ancestor."<sup>172</sup> "They" may have been the *ulama* of the Mamluk Sultanate (1250-1517) of Cairo. Malio did not say. Askia Mohammed was required to atone for this sin before he could enter the sacred land that housed the holy cities. The faceless "they" offered him three choices. He could shepherd a hen and its newborn chicks from the Sudan to the Red Sea, he could clear land in the "distant, uncleared bush" by hand and cultivate a crop of millet without any aid, or he could

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<sup>171</sup> Malio, *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, 24.

<sup>172</sup> Malio, *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, 25.

return home and "start a holy war."<sup>173</sup> Askia Mohammed, as a noble warrior and the son of a jinni, naturally chose the last of these options.

In terms of the foundation myth, this was a continuation of what Campbell called the Road of Trials. Having received Supernatural Aid from his divine father and enjoyed the protective umbrella of his mother in the role of the Goddess, he crossed the First Threshold on the Road of Trials by slaying Sunni Ali. Askia Mohammed had to complete the Road of Trials before he could rule as the legitimate king. The gatekeepers to the holy cities, to the Hijaz, offered him several options in regards to tasks. The first concerned husbandry and the second agriculture. While these were noble tasks the freeborn, they were not suitable for a king. Askia Mohammed is often labeled an administrative regent and less remembered for his conquests in encyclopedia entries, both general and specialized.<sup>174</sup> This is not how he was perceived in the Songhay foundation myth. As Askia Mohammed was outfitted as a warrior via the aid of his supernatural father, an Islamic king in his own right, it was natural that he chose the way of war and continued what he had already begun.

According to Malio, jihad and conversion occurred via coercion.

The cavalier who goes there, he traces on the ground for the people the plan for the mosque. Once the foundation is traced, the people build the mosque. It is at that time Mamar Kassaye [Askia Mohammed] comes to dismount from his horse. He makes the people—they teach them verses from the Koran relating to prayer. They teach them prayers from the Koran. Any village that refuse[s], he destroys the village, burns it, and moves on.<sup>175</sup>

Askia Mohammed seared indelible images in the collective memories of the people of the Niger River. Malio's account is but one of the oral traditions surrounding his rule, and he was so

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<sup>173</sup> Malio, *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, 25.

<sup>174</sup> In the *Encyclopedia Britannica Online* article, Rouch stated that, "While Sonni 'Alī had been a warrior, Muḥammad was above all a statesman." In *Cultural Sociology of the Middle East, Asia, and Africa: An Encyclopedia*, LaReese Hubbard of California State University, Long Beach characterized Askia Mohammed as "a good administrator, an able warrior, and a devout Muslim." In *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Askia Mohammed was described as "more a statesman than a warrior."

<sup>175</sup> Malio, *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, 26.



inspired by the recollections of the jihad period that he described the holy wars twice, separated by an anecdote concerning familial blood guilt. The historical account reveals a more nuanced reign. Askia Mohammed in fact believed that jihad was the "responsibility of the state" as well as a convenient excuse for expansion.<sup>176</sup> He made war on the "stateless" Mossi peoples south of the Niger bend. He was familiar with them from his time as governor of Hombori. He also warred on the Diara and the Futa Toro, the peoples of his supposed heritage. Askia Mohammed captured the city of Kano among the Hausa States, imposed a trade outpost upon the Tuareg of the Air Massif, and exacted tribute from the salt miners of Teghaza and the copper miners of Tagedda.<sup>177</sup> He also created a large central administration that integrated formerly marginalized clans and rebuilt Timbuktu as a center of both secular and sacred scholarship.<sup>178</sup> He did so by exhibiting a dedication to Islam as well as commerce. Rouch enumerated the administrative positions created by Askia Mohammed thusly: "director of finance, justice, interior, protocol, agriculture, waters and forests."<sup>179</sup> He populated these posts with his extended male relations.<sup>180</sup> While he was not a military commander on the level of Sunni Ali, he was no idler when it came to expanding the Songhay dominion. It is a false dichotomy to label one the military genius and the other the administrative mastermind. Askia Mohammed was a king that excelled both in war and empire management.

Askia Mohammed actively distanced himself from the policies of Sunni Ali. He "encouraged resettlement" in Timbuktu, as the city was all but abandoned for some twenty

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<sup>176</sup> Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 3rd Edition, 456. Edward Ramasay, ed. *Cultural Sociology of the Middle East, Asia, & Africa: An Encyclopedia, Volume II*, (Washington, DC: SAGE Publications, 2012) 107.

<sup>177</sup> Ramasay, ed. *Cultural Sociology of the Middle East, Asia, & Africa: An Encyclopedia, Volume II*, 107.

<sup>178</sup> Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 3rd Edition, 456. Ramasay, ed. *Cultural Sociology of the Middle East, Asia, & Africa: An Encyclopedia, Volume II*, 107.

<sup>179</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "Muhammad I Askia." The Songhay terms for these posts are contained in the *TS*. For clarity's sake, as the audience for this thesis is considered Western and non-specialist, the English vernacular is used. The article published in the *Encyclopædia Britannica Online* was written by Jean Rouch.

<sup>180</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "Muhammad I Askia."

years.<sup>181</sup> He enfranchised many judges (*qadis*) in order to expand the bureaucracy, including the first *qadi* for the city of Djenne.<sup>182</sup> He empowered his brother Umar to govern the western portion of the empire, the Upper Niger, while he directly governed the rest from the political capital of Gao, a "cosmopolitan city of foreign Arabs, Berbers, and Sudanese Muslims, each with separate mosques."<sup>183</sup> He spent several years at Gao, off and on, perfecting his administrative apparatus: "he set up with rare talent the system of tithes and taxes, the regulation of agriculture and fishing, and the recruitment and training of his administrators and governors."<sup>184</sup> Timbuktu flourished and became the religious capital of the empire, its prestige drawing scholars to the many mosques and madrasa of the semi-autonomous city.<sup>185</sup> His primary supporters, the ruling classes, were city dwellers, and he supplied them with a constant source of labor via slaves taken as captives in war.<sup>186</sup> All of this, especially his devotion to spreading Islam, earned him the support of the *ulama*. As Hunwick pointed out, this was quite deliberate. In turn, the support of

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<sup>181</sup> Saad, *Social History of Timbuktu: The Role of Muslim Scholars and Notables, 1400-1900*, 46.

<sup>182</sup> Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 3rd Edition, 456.

<sup>183</sup> Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 3rd Edition, 456.

<sup>184</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "Muhammad I Askia."

<sup>185</sup> Saad, *Social History of Timbuktu: The Role of Muslim Scholars and Notables, 1400-1900*, 11, 25. John O. Hunwick, Nehemia Levtzion (d.2003), and Elias Saad agreed that the *ulama* of Timbuktu enjoyed a high level of political freedom before and after the calamitous rule of Sunni Ali. Michael Gomez of NYU wrote a critique of this view. Essentially, Gomez questioned whether the *qadi* of Timbuktu, one administrator, truly superseded the numerous Songhay officials in Timbuktu, as an elaborate bureaucracy was in place in order that the Askia could rule the empire efficiently from Gao. Gomez argued that the Songhay Empire had a nucleus and a periphery and that Timbuktu resided within the nucleus, and therefore was under direct gubernatorial control due to its importance to trade. Hunwick responded with an outstanding article that explained the many scenarios in which the secular and sacred authorities in Islamic societies coexisted via coercion and compromise. Hunwick suggested a nuanced understanding of the give and take that was required for Timbuktu to achieve the autonomy he believed it enjoyed. The Askias provided the *ulama* with "land grants, grants of privilege, donations in cash and kind (particularly slaves), and the right to give sanctuary." In return, the *ulama* provided the Askias with "the outflowing of *baraka*, withholding of curses, making of protective amulets, intercession with God, conducting ceremonies, drafting official documents, and provisioning of soldiers on occasion." Notice that Hunwick included the entirety of the *ulama* and not just the *qadi* of Timbuktu. This is central to his argument. The *qadi* coordinated the activities of the *ulama* and issued fatwahas that aided or hindered the Askias. As long as this balance of goods and services was maintained, this trade in favors, Timbuktu maintained relative autonomy. It must be said that Gomez was correct in questioning the status quo opinion, as it forced Hunwick to produce a superior answer to his challenge.

<sup>186</sup> Ira Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 3rd Edition, 456. Edward Ramasay, ed. *Cultural Sociology of the Middle East, Asia, & Africa: An Encyclopedia, Volume II*, 107.

the *ulama* gave Askia Mohammed, "the moral authority to check local despots."<sup>187</sup> He earned the support of the warrior aristocracy by bringing victory and plunder.<sup>188</sup> He earned the support of the *ulama* by spreading Islam to the agrarian freeborn. Central to the success of spreading Islam to the agrarian freeborn was the mandate for the construction of mosques.

One cannot know if mosque construction as portrayed in the narrative of the epic is correct, and if it is, to what extent it is accurate. Whether villagers were coerced at lance-point to convert and construct a house of worship or die seems rather dramatic, yet Malio makes a compelling case. When one considers the violent spread of world religions in other times and places, the narrative of the epic does not seem out of character. Further, when one compares the construction practices of contemporary mud mosques in the same region, Malio's depiction becomes more believable. The intended audience of the epic, the modern Songhay, was familiar with mud mosque construction as it has changed little over time. Mosque construction is still a community effort and utilizes the same materials and methods. This passage would therefore have more resonance as a foundational myth for those aware of Sudanic mosque types. Westerners and non-specialists need more information to place the epic in cultural context.

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<sup>187</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. "Songhay"

<sup>188</sup> In the popular PC strategy game *Civilization V*, one may choose to play as the Songhay, which is led by Askia Mohammed. As there is a substantial military facet embedded in game play, each civilization receives a military unit specific to its historical context. The Songhay receive a unit known as Mandekalu Cavalry. This unit appears as a mounted lancer wearing robes and a turban. In game terms, the Mandekalu Cavalry replaced the Medieval Knight which all civilizations would have received instead. In my research I have found only one source that uses the term Mandekalu. George Brooks referred to horse warriors as Mandekalu. He also describes speakers of Mande dialects as Mandekalu, such as Malinke and Soninke peoples. He wrote, "The ca. 1100-ca. 1500 dry period marked the apogee of horse warriors, who skillfully exploited the potential of cavalry to conquer vast territories across the Sahel and Savanna zones of West Africa." He also pointed out that the Soninke monopolized the grasslands and supply of horses in West Africa in this period. No other source of the extensive sources I utilized in my research used the term Mandekalu, as it is an obscure and unusual word. Most sources refer to the horse warriors of the Sudan as cavalry, cavaliers, or simply as horse. In terms of the representation of West African horse warriors in *Civilization V*, those referred to as Mandekalu Cavalry by Brooks evolved over the course of four centuries. In the time of Sundiata and Mansa Musa, they were horse archers. In the time of Sunni Ali and Askia Mohammed, they were lancers and swordsmen. Camel warriors were part of the askia's retinue on the northern fringes of his empire. In short, the term Mandekalu is inaccurate for military purposes and the unit does not reflect the diversity of the Songhay military.

Mud mosques, or mosques constructed of *banco*, meaning raw earth, are a ubiquitous feature of the inland delta region of the Upper Niger River.<sup>189</sup> This region is narrowly defined as the forty-thousand square miles along the banks of the Niger between Djenne and Timbuktu that flood in the winter, to the point where the single-floor dwellings that dominant the lowlands can only be reached by canoe.<sup>190</sup> Mud mosques are also found in the Middle Niger region, the area of the Songhay, though German scholar Dorothee Gruner pointed out that Songhay mosques vary stylistically from those on the Upper Niger.<sup>191</sup> Malian mud mosques are constructed with curves and decorative accents while rural Songhay mud mosques are square, sparse, and typically unadorned.<sup>192</sup> Islam is the predominant religion in this region and the construction and maintenance of central village mosques is a result of continued community effort, a practice that has changed little since the time of Askia Mohammed.<sup>193</sup> These structures are not at all like the large, spired mud mosques of the large cities, such as the Great Mosque of Djenne or the Sankore Mosque and Madrasa in Timbuktu. Those structures are based on North African models. Rural mosques are a combination of "sculpture" and architecture, as the builders mold the wet earth into curves and sweeping forms that the urban mosques do not resemble.<sup>194</sup> Rural mosques initially sprouted in villages along the internal "pedestrian trade routes" of the Sudan.<sup>195</sup>

As hinted at in the epic, construction of a village mosque begins with the most rudimentary of planning. Traditionally, an imam decides the orientation of the *qibla* and then

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<sup>189</sup> Sebastian Schutyser, *Banco: Adobe Mosques of the Inner Niger Delta*, Introduction by Jean Dethier, Ruth Eaton, and Dorothee Gruner, (Milan: 5 Continents, 2003) 15.

<sup>190</sup> Schutyser, *Banco: Adobe Mosques of the Inner Niger Delta*, 20.

<sup>191</sup> Schutyser, *Banco: Adobe Mosques of the Inner Niger Delta*, 25.

<sup>192</sup> Schutyser, *Banco: Adobe Mosques of the Inner Niger Delta*, 25.

<sup>193</sup> Schutyser, *Banco: Adobe Mosques of the Inner Niger Delta*, 22. Martin Frishman and Hasan-Uddin Khan, eds., *The Mosque: History, Architectural Development, & Regional Diversity*, (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1994) 181. *The World Factbook*. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency.

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ng.html>.

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ml.html>. Mali's population identifies as Muslim at a rate of 95%, while those of Niger identify as Muslim at a rate of 80%.

<sup>194</sup> Schutyser, *Banco: Adobe Mosques of the Inner Niger Delta*, 15.

<sup>195</sup> Frishman and Khan, eds., *The Mosque: History, Architectural Development, & Regional Diversity*, 182.

leads a prayer.<sup>196</sup> Then the master builder, called a *bari*, lays out the footprint of the mosque, beginning with the location of the Mecca wall, without utilizing any sort of plans or blueprints.<sup>197</sup> He does this by scratching the outline on the ground. The devices of construction are stored within his recollections and the memory of his muscles. Often he invokes Abraham (Ibrahim), the father of Western religions, as part of laying the foundation.<sup>198</sup> This is vital, as a proper foundation in a flood plain maintains structural integrity. Mosque layouts vary greatly in the Sudan, though most have very little space under roof and no windows or arches as the construction material does not lend itself to spanning strength.<sup>199</sup> Local Palmyra palms and mango trees are harvested for use as pillars in those mosques that create an interior space, yet this is a sacrifice of scarce raw materials that are sometimes imported.<sup>200</sup> Rooms inside rural mosques are tiny, accommodating only a few worshippers in a dark room with no fixtures, save the *mihrab*, prayer mats, and perhaps an oil lamp.<sup>201</sup> Otherwise, one will find various formats and minaret shapes, depending on the taste of the master builder. He is helped in construction by everyone in the village.

The *bari* directs the labor of the community. He may or may not live in the village. Those from without are paid in cash, in kind, or in some combination of the two.<sup>202</sup> Work is divided among gender lines. Men perform carpentry and general construction work, while women are relegated to carrying water, mixing mortar and plaster, as well as weaving strips of palm fronds into various shapes that are incorporated into the mud along support structures.<sup>203</sup> Masons are

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<sup>196</sup> Schutyser, *Banco: Adobe Mosques of the Inner Niger Delta*, 24.

<sup>197</sup> Schutyser, *Banco: Adobe Mosques of the Inner Niger Delta*, 23-24.

<sup>198</sup> Schutyser, *Banco: Adobe Mosques of the Inner Niger Delta*, 24.

<sup>199</sup> Frishman and Khan, eds., *The Mosque: History, Architectural Development, & Regional Diversity*, 182.

<sup>200</sup> Schutyser, *Banco: Adobe Mosques of the Inner Niger Delta*, 20. Frishman and Khan, eds., *The Mosque: History, Architectural Development, & Regional Diversity*, 182.

<sup>201</sup> Schutyser, *Banco: Adobe Mosques of the Inner Niger Delta*, 24.

<sup>202</sup> Schutyser, *Banco: Adobe Mosques of the Inner Niger Delta*, 23.

<sup>203</sup> Frishman and Khan, eds., *The Mosque: History, Architectural Development, & Regional Diversity*, 182.

part of a special artisanal caste.<sup>204</sup> Bricks are handmade and composed of the "clayey earth" found in the region.<sup>205</sup> These bricks are cylindrical by virtue of their hand-casting.<sup>206</sup> In the time of Askia Mohammed, brickmaking was often performed by slaves.<sup>207</sup> Most mud mosques are still true mud mosques in that they do not use fired bricks. These cylindrical bricks clog up most of the available space in the village as they air dry. The master builder directs the masons in stacking and mortaring the bricks to his vision for the shape of the mosque. Wooden stakes, called *torons*, are embedded in the layers for use as scaffolding as the mosque rises. These stakes are left in place so that future repairs are performed with ease, as well as for decorative purposes.<sup>208</sup> This is particularly important on the minaret, of which rural mud mosques usually have but one. These bristling towers are the most distinctive feature of Sudanic mud mosques. Once complete, the entire surface is coated in a mud plaster that gives the structure a solid, even appearance. Yet the mosque is not complete without finishing touches.

Though these mosques are constructed in the arid Sahel and the desert, rain is still the greatest danger to their structural stability. As such, measures to abate the destructive force of water are implemented in construction. Mosques that integrated enclosed spaces in their design utilize a slightly pitched roof that usually appears flat. Rain water is thus directed to rain spouts. These are either constructed of mud or palm stems that are halved and hollowed.<sup>209</sup> Ostrich eggs, which represent "purity and fertility," are often used as decorations atop spires.<sup>210</sup> Ostrich egg shells are also incorporated into the top layer of mud plaster on areas that will receive the most

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<sup>204</sup> Frishman and Khan, eds., *The Mosque: History, Architectural Development, & Regional Diversity*, 182.

<sup>205</sup> Schutyser, *Banco: Adobe Mosques of the Inner Niger Delta*, 22.

<sup>206</sup> Frishman and Khan, eds., *The Mosque: History, Architectural Development, & Regional Diversity*, 182.

<sup>207</sup> Schutyser, *Banco: Adobe Mosques of the Inner Niger Delta*, 22.

<sup>208</sup> Schutyser, *Banco: Adobe Mosques of the Inner Niger Delta*, 24.

<sup>209</sup> Schutyser, *Banco: Adobe Mosques of the Inner Niger Delta*, 26.

<sup>210</sup> Frishman and Khan, eds., *The Mosque: History, Architectural Development, & Regional Diversity*, 191.

weathering.<sup>211</sup> These mosques are enchanting, but one must be careful not to allow their beauty to blind objectivity when analyzing them for information concerning the past.

Though these mosques are current, they are also representative of the time of Askia Mohammed. The materials and general methods are similar, as building with earth, wood, and plant fibers is the earliest form of human construction and conducive for any agrarian society living in a flood plain. Consider the Mesopotamian civilizations. Yet these rural mosques are not ziggurats. They can be completed in less than a week, or take more than a month to construct, depending on size and labor force.<sup>212</sup> Malio did not say just how much time Askia Mohammed gave each village to build their mosque once the outline had been traced for them. He said Askia Mohammed rode to the village once the mosque was completed and taught them to pray from the Koran.<sup>213</sup> If one assumes that these events took place while on campaign, the original messenger was likely a forward scout and no more than a day's ride from the main force of the army. Therefore, it is quite conceivable that the villagers initially constructed a simple open-air mosque with stones and built a more substantial mosque of a different sort later. Yet this is conjecture. As tribal architecture expert Labelle Prussin explained, the loss of evidence in the Songhay heartland creates a bias toward those structures that survived.<sup>214</sup>

Very few examples of Songhay sacred architecture endure, but what does exhibit a marked difference in minaret structure. The best example is that of the tomb of Askia Mohammed, which acts as the minaret of one of the mosques of Gao. The tomb is constructed in the three-stepped pyramid style instead of the conical style prevalent in the inland delta.<sup>215</sup> Prussin believed this was indicative of the style of minaret that mounted the plain, low-walled,

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<sup>211</sup> Frishman and Khan, eds., *The Mosque: History, Architectural Development, & Regional Diversity*, 191.

<sup>212</sup> Schutyser, *Banco: Adobe Mosques of the Inner Niger Delta*, 24.

<sup>213</sup> Malio, *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, 26.

<sup>214</sup> Frishman and Khan, eds., *The Mosque: History, Architectural Development, & Regional Diversity*, 181.

<sup>215</sup> Frishman and Khan, eds., *The Mosque: History, Architectural Development, & Regional Diversity*, 183.

square mosques that populated the villages of the Songhay and Hausa States in the time of Askia Mohammed.<sup>216</sup> Therefore, the construction materials and methods used by the Mali are similar if not the same, as that of the Songhay, but the layout and design varied from the Upper Niger to the Middle Niger, both in the time of Askia Mohammed and today.



Fig. 10: Sarafere Mosque. Photo credit: Sebastian Schutyser. A sparse Songhay mud mosque.

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<sup>216</sup> Martin Frishman and Hasan-Uddin Khan, eds., *The Mosque: History, Architectural Development, & Regional Diversity*, 183.





Fig. 11: Bougouni Mosque. Photo credit: Sebastian Schutyser. A hand-sculpted Malian mud mosque.



Fig. 12: Tomb of Askia Mohammed in Gao. Photo credit: Thierry Joffroy. Note the stepped pyramid minaret, the tomb, bristling with *torons*.

## Hajj

By Nouhou Malio's reckoning, Askia Mohammed made holy war on every tribe and village between the Songhay and the Red Sea.

He conquers them, he moves on. Every village that refuses his demand, he conquers it, he burns it, he moves on. Until the day—Mamar [Askia Mohammed] did that until, until, until, until the day he arrived at the Red Sea. It is on that day that they gave him the right to cross. Before arriving at the Red Sea, all the horsemen, those who died, those who were tired returned. Except for Modi Baja, Modi Baja and the *jeseré*, his cousin, who stayed with him. It is they alone who remained at his side. He made the crossing in their company. So they arrived in Mecca.<sup>217</sup>

Malio's narrative is not the only source that must be read critically to separate fact from fiction. The *TF* is not wholly reliable concerning the hajj, as portions of the section concerning the pilgrimage are proved 19<sup>th</sup>-century forgeries. These passages include apocryphal prophecies by djinn as well as false revelations by notable Cairo scholar al-Suyuti (d.1505) that were self-serving to the forger. This does not mean the *TF* is void of pertinent information concerning the hajj, but one must disregard any passages concerning prophecies made during the pilgrimage. As al-Kati accompanied Askia Mohammed on the hajj, the *TF* is truly a valuable, if tainted, resource. The *TS* and other supporting documents, in concert with the *TF*, construct a full picture of the pilgrimage, making the uncontested portions of *TF* a vital component of a composite historical narrative.

For clarity's sake, a historical accounting of the hajj is required before returning to the epic. Askia Mohammed left on pilgrimage in 1495 and returned in 1497, leaving his brother Umar to rule in his stead.<sup>218</sup> By naming a mere two followers as comrades to Askia Mohammed, Malio set up an important cultural anecdote that is analyzed in the coming pages. One must understand the true context of events before unpacking the meaning of the anecdote. Al-Sadi

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<sup>217</sup> Malio, *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, 26.

<sup>218</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "Muhammad I Askia."

described a more believable entourage for Askia Mohammed than did Malio, even though his numbers were a bit too round for absolute credibility. He wrote that the king was accompanied on the hajj by one thousand infantry and five hundred cavalry.<sup>219</sup> He further recorded that Askia Mohammed brought along three hundred *mithqals* (2,805 lbs.) of gold: one hundred for "maintenance," one hundred for "commodities," and one hundred donated to charities in Medina.<sup>220</sup> Al-Kati wrote that the king bought land in Mecca and constructed a house for himself, which he dedicated to the Ka'ba.<sup>221</sup> There he entertained noble visitors.<sup>222</sup> Paramount among those he wished to entertain was the most influential descendant of the Prophet (*sharif*) of the holy city.

Askia Mohammed desired the approval of the *sharif* of Mecca in order to fully legitimize his claim to the Songhay throne. He received acknowledgement from the North African cleric al-Maghili, but this approval was insufficient to sanction his reign. A critic of Sunni Ali and an apologist for Askia Mohammed, al-Maghili called for the implementation of a strict, orthodox interpretation of Islam in the Sudan.<sup>223</sup> Askia Mohammed appreciated al-Maghili's support, but the *ulama* of Timbuktu and Djenne, and most vocally Gao, would not abide the application of al-Maghili's dictates, such as the separation of the sexes and the covering of women.<sup>224</sup> Askia Mohammed needed a stronger endorsement. He reasoned that none would stand against him if the *sharif* of Mecca would stand with him. This was a matter of debate in the Late Medieval and Early Modern periods.

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<sup>219</sup> Al-Sadi, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sadi's Tarikh al-sudan down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents*, 104.

<sup>220</sup> Al-Sadi, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sadi's Tarikh al-sudan down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents*, 105.

<sup>221</sup> Kati, *Tarikh al-fattash: The Timbuktu Chronicles 1493 – 1599*, 130.

<sup>222</sup> Kati, *Tarikh al-fattash: The Timbuktu Chronicles 1493 – 1599*, 130.

<sup>223</sup> Ralph A. Austen, *Trans-Saharan Africa in World History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) 88.

<sup>224</sup> Austen, *Trans-Saharan Africa in World History*, 88. Blum and Fisher, "Love for Three Oranges, or, the Askiya's Dilemma: The Askiya, al-Maghili and Timbuktu, c. 1500 A.D.," 74.

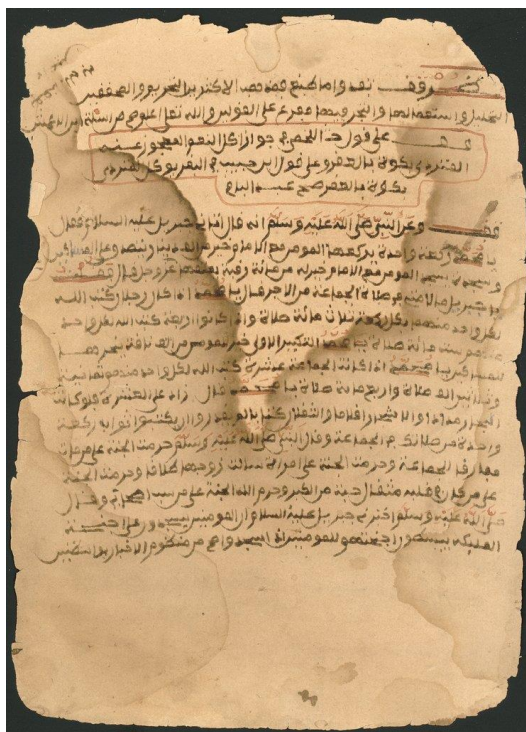


Fig. 13: *Askiah's Questions and al-Maghili's Answers*. Mamma Haidara Commemorative Library, Timbuktu. The first page of a forty-two page correspondence between Askia Mohammed and al-Maghili concerning Islamic doctrine.

The age of caliphates was passed. Islamic scholars pondered the theological quandaries that arose when the sacred authorities were usurped by secular power. The caliph, theoretically, was to "guarantee the maintenance of pure Islam in conformity with its law, to protect the faithful, and defend them against heretics and unbelievers."<sup>225</sup> According to Erwin Rosenthal (d. 1991), the caliph was obligated by duty to set up a bureaucracy in order to best serve the *umma*, including the offices of, "vizier, emir, *qadi*, sultan."<sup>226</sup> Yet the Abbasid caliph was reduced to a figurehead under the hegemony of the ruling military power *du jour* since the Buyid Dynasty (934 – 1062) overthrew Baghdad. The center of the greatest earthly, secular power (*mulk*)

<sup>225</sup> Erwin Rosenthal, *Political Thought in Medieval Islam: An Introductory Outline*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1968) 24.

<sup>226</sup> Rosenthal, *Political Thought in Medieval Islam: An Introductory Outline*, 26.

shifted to Cairo and with it went the Abbasid caliph. For some five hundred years the caliph had not lead a united Islamic state in name or in fact. This caused a great deal of scholarly debate as to how governments should form, as sacred and secular powers vied to rule from the throne. Philosophers recalled the origins of the faith and how the first successors to the Prophet, the *Rashidun*, managed to wield both political and religious authority. Many sought to return to that early state, but could not perceive a way in which to unite Islam. In the time of Askia Mohammed, the opinion of one of the most influential Islamic scholars in history held sway.

Al-Ghazali (d. 1111) was a proponent of religious authority residing in the camp of military authority. He cited the hadith, "Religion and <temporal> power are twins."<sup>227</sup> He argued this to justify the rule of the Seljuq Empire (1037 – 1194) of his day.<sup>228</sup> Al-Ghazali believed that true, God-sanctioned power was in the hands of those with supreme military force because the caliph was necessarily the imam to whom the strongest martial leader pledged allegiance.<sup>229</sup> He believed this because he held great disdain for chaos and destruction. Order and public welfare being paramount, the commander that enforced peace and stability had the mandate of God and whomever the keeper of the peace deemed religious leader was the rightly ordained caliph.<sup>230</sup> Happiness in society, according to al-Ghazali, was found by following the commands of the justly followed imam and the sultan that recognized him as caliph.<sup>231</sup> This was a part of a greater Islamic tradition. Al-Ghazali's theology was in line with the famous Islamic saying, "Better one hundred years of the Sultan's tyranny than one year of people's tyranny over each other." There is also the harmonious hadith that read, "Obey him who holds authority over you, even if he be a

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<sup>227</sup> Rosenthal, *Political Thought in Medieval Islam: An Introductory Outline*, 39.

<sup>228</sup> Rosenthal, *Political Thought in Medieval Islam: An Introductory Outline*, 40.

<sup>229</sup> Rosenthal, *Political Thought in Medieval Islam: An Introductory Outline*, 42. The *TF*, *TS*, and al-Ghazali use imam and caliph in an almost interchangeable manner in regards to regional authority in this period of Islamic history. In West Africa, blood relationship to the Prophet was held in high esteem. Therefore, a *sharif* was deemed most suitable for purposes of investiture.

<sup>230</sup> Rosenthal, *Political Thought in Medieval Islam: An Introductory Outline*, 42.

<sup>231</sup> Rosenthal, *Political Thought in Medieval Islam: An Introductory Outline*, 39.

mutilated Ethiopian slave." Therefore, receiving the blessing of the imam recognized by the greatest secular authorities would greatly enhance Askia Mohammed's standing among the faithful at home and abroad. This is exactly what he sought, though there is controversy as to just which *sharif* sanctioned his rule.<sup>232</sup>

Askia Mohammed passed through Cairo and communed with al-Suyuti on his way to Mecca and Medina. This fact split the scholarly consensus as to just which *sharif* named him the caliph of the Sudan. The *TF* stated that the *sharif* of Mecca "invested him with sovereignty by placing a blue turban on his head and giving him the title of imam."<sup>233</sup> The *TS* read similarly, but specifically stated that it was the Abbasid *sharif* that named Askia Mohammed "viceregent (*khalifa*)."<sup>234</sup> Hunwick believed this was evidence that al-Suyuti, as the preeminent scholar of Cairo, acted as a mediator for the conferment of the title of imam in "the land of Takrur" by the Abbasid caliph, who also resided in Cairo.<sup>235</sup> Al-Suyuti and the Abbasid caliph lived under the protection of the Mamluk Sultanate and Cairo was the seat of both religious and political power. Even after the Ottoman ascendance to ultimate power, Istanbul claimed the mantle as the center of secular and sacred authority, not Mecca. Further, al-Suyuti was "enormously influential" to

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<sup>232</sup> Rosenthal acknowledged that al-Ghazali had notable critics. The Andalusian Ibn Rushd (d. 1198), known in the West as Averroes, opposed the philosophies and theology of the Persian al-Ghazali. He believed that al-Ghazali was inconsistent in his opinions and shifted allegiances when it benefited his position. In particular, Ibn Rushd was disturbed with al-Ghazali's attack on the works of the Central Asian scholar Ibn Sina (d. 1037), known in the West as Avicenna. Ibn Rushd, like Ibn Sina, believed that the Koran could be analyzed with the reason and logic espoused by the classical Greek philosophers they both enjoyed reading. Al-Ghazali believed that only sharia was necessary to contemplate the Koran and forbade his followers to use Western philosophy in interpretation.

<sup>233</sup> Kati, *Tarikh al-fattash: The Timbuktu Chronicles 1493 – 1599*, 130. Al-Sadi stated that it was a black turban. Rouch, in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online* article, stated Askia Mohammed wore a green turban. There is not a controversy in the historiography, as none of the experts commented on this discrepancy. All three of these colors have positive meanings in Islam. It is quite likely Askia Mohammed wore several different turbans and that the color varied by occasion. The color of the turban he received at the moment of investiture does not seem relevant. Perhaps one with more expertise in this area will further research in this area, should this variance in color prove meaningful.

<sup>234</sup> Al-Sadi, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sadi's Tarikh al-sudan down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents*, 105.

<sup>235</sup> Al-Sadi, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sadi's Tarikh al-sudan down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents*, 105. Hunwick was consistent in this stance, having stated the same opinion in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* article concerning Askia Mohammed.

the Muslim community of West Africa in his lifetime as well as long after his death, particularly his writings concerning the arrival of the Mahdi and the blessed justice he would bring.<sup>236</sup> This lends credence to the Cairo interpretation of investiture. Still, Elias Saad believed events unfolded differently.

Saad fully acknowledged that Askia Mohammed met with al-Suyuti in Cairo, but the many passages in al-Suyuti's autobiography that seem to refer to him do not align chronologically with his pilgrimage.<sup>237</sup> Furthermore, the memoir refers to visitors as traveling from the catch-all term Takrur as opposed to a more specific geographical marker that would positively identify the king.<sup>238</sup> Yet he is certain that al-Suyuti and Askia Mohammed had an extended visit, based on corroborating evidence in the form of the writings of al-Suyuti's student al-Shadhili and the many mentions of it in the writings of the scholars of Timbuktu.<sup>239</sup> Therefore, Saad believed that they visited, but that it was the *sharif* of Mecca that bestowed his blessing on Askia Mohammed's rule. His main evidence was the sword with which the king was coronated by the *sharif*.<sup>240</sup> Askia Mohammed brought this holy weapon back to the Sudan and it was used to install every new Songhay king until the fall of the empire.<sup>241</sup> Saad believed this investiture by the *sharif* of Mecca was so powerful that the cities of Walata and Tadmekka surrendered without resistance upon his return by virtue of his new status.<sup>242</sup> As important as this enthronement was to the historical account, it played no role in the epic.

Malio portrayed the hajj as a deeply pious event. He split the Meccan adventures of Askia Mohammed into two vignettes. The first took place at the tomb of the Prophet.

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<sup>236</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "Islamic world."

<sup>237</sup> Saad, *Social History of Timbuktu: The Role of Muslim Scholars and Notables, 1400-1900*, 47.

<sup>238</sup> Saad, *Social History of Timbuktu: The Role of Muslim Scholars and Notables, 1400-1900*, 47.

<sup>239</sup> Saad, *Social History of Timbuktu: The Role of Muslim Scholars and Notables, 1400-1900*, 47.

<sup>240</sup> Saad, *Social History of Timbuktu: The Role of Muslim Scholars and Notables, 1400-1900*, 48.

<sup>241</sup> Saad, *Social History of Timbuktu: The Role of Muslim Scholars and Notables, 1400-1900*, 48.

<sup>242</sup> Saad, *Social History of Timbuktu: The Role of Muslim Scholars and Notables, 1400-1900*, 48.

He made the pilgrimage and he said he would like to see the tomb of Our Lord's Messenger. In those days they had not built it yet. He came, they told him, he said he wanted to see the tomb of Our Lord's Messenger. They replied to him, "By Allah truly, the tomb, truly, you won't see it. Because if you peek into this tomb, the thing that is in there will keep you from getting out." He asked that they let him peek into it. They said, "Fine, on one condition. Now have them go off to get large pieces of iron chain to tie around his waist. Some strong men should stay behind him and hold on tightly to the chains."<sup>243</sup>

As only two men accompanied Askia Mohammed in Malio's narrative, it was they who gripped the chains as the king peered into the tomb of the Prophet. Askia Mohammed perceived something growing on the bottom of the grave. Unable to resist something so obviously overflowing with divine grace (*baraka*), he all but plunged headfirst into the hole and ripped the vegetation from the floor of the tomb with his bare hands, eating it as fast as he could. He found that they were soft like "young onion shoots" and "he grabbed and pulled, he ate."<sup>244</sup> His companions eventually wrested him out of the grave via the chain. Askia Mohammed's cousin, the griot, was on his right and Modi Baja was on his left. He gave each of them what was left of the tender shoots in his hands. The Modi Baja saved his portion and took it home to sell in the Sudan. The griot ate his share immediately, which caused Malio to gently laugh at his ancestor. He lamented that griots suffered to his day, while the descendants of Modi Baja did not. This anecdote is brimming with cultural meaning.

The visit to the Prophet's tomb is the culmination of several of the themes of The Hero's Journey. Askia Mohammed came to Mecca on the hajj, one of the Five Pillars of Islam. He traveled to the World Navel, the center of Islamic creation, the nexus of the globe for adherents to the faith. Visiting the tomb of the Prophet is not a requirement of the pilgrimage, yet it was a rite that Askia Mohammed chose to perform before proceeding to the Ka'ba. In myth, the nucleus of this World Navel is often a literal well. In this case, it was the tomb of the Prophet. Campbell

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<sup>243</sup> Malio, *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, 27.

<sup>244</sup> Malio, *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, 27.



stated that the objective of The Hero is to unlock and release the flow of life from the navel into the world: "The miracle of this flow may be represented in physical terms as a circulation of food substance, dynamically as streaming energy, or spiritually as a manifestation of grace."<sup>245</sup> Askia Mohammed found a combination of these factors.

The Hero was warned of the dangers of entering the sunken spring at the World Navel by the guardians of the tomb. They hinted that he would never return from an encounter with "the thing that is in there."<sup>246</sup> Yet Askia Mohammed plunged into the well of danger, the World Navel, in pursuit of the Ultimate Boon. In this case, the Ultimate Boon, the great reward at the end of the Road of Trials, took the form of Elixir Theft. As Campbell argued, stealing a magic elixir is one of many ways The Hero brings the Ultimate Boon to his people in world mythology. The ease with which the Hero acquires the elixir distinguishes him as a "superior man."<sup>247</sup> Askia Mohammed, aided by his comrades, devoured the Magic Elixir within the tomb of the Prophet, as though he feared it might disappear in a moment, and received the Ultimate Boon of *baraka* from the definitive source of all Islamic revelation and sanction. As Campbell alluded, the World Navel provided divine sustenance, spiritual succor. This is powerful imagery that communicated official endorsement of Askia Mohammed's rule far more efficiently than an explanation of investiture by the *sharif*. Imbued with the *baraka* of the Prophet, none dare stand against him.

Malio explained the low station of the griot in his day by blaming his ancestor for greedily keeping the blessed onion shoots for himself instead of sharing them with others of his caste, like Modi Baja. Modi Baja should be seen as an archetype. Modi Baja was indeed a proper name, but it is also the root word for the modern Songhay marabout diviners known as *modibo* or

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<sup>245</sup> Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 3rd edition, 32.

<sup>246</sup> Malio, *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, 27.

<sup>247</sup> Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 3rd edition, 148.

*moodibaajo*.<sup>248</sup> Malio said that they, "sup well, they lunch well, they dress well."<sup>249</sup> This indicated more than a tinge of professional jealousy.

The Prophet's *baraka* secured, Askia Mohammed visited the Ka'ba. Malio described the experience as penitent and empowering.

He went three times around the Indigo Tree. He repented, he repented... (undecipherable). His sin and his *minor* sin. He put them all together, and he put them all there. He (undecipherable) sword of Dongo. He slung the *sword* of Dongo on his shoulder. It is in these terms that *jeseré* sing his praises. They take it from way back all the way to there. "*Long live Mamar [Askia Mohammed]. Long live Kassaye. Your ancestor is Mamar, Mamar son of Kassaye.*"<sup>250</sup>

Like so many pilgrims before and since, Malio depicted Askia Mohammed as circling the Ka'ba. Malio repeated this passage several times for emphasis, with minor deviations. He referred to the Ka'ba as the Indigo Tree, which is an ancient name for the sanctuary.<sup>251</sup> This Tree of Life stretches toward heaven at the World Navel, "the universe itself, grow[ing] from this point. It is rooted in the supporting darkness; the golden sun-bird perched on its peak; a spring, the inexhaustible well, bubbles at its foot."<sup>252</sup> By portraying Askia Mohammed as one that sought absolution for his sins, Malio cleansed the king of the murder of Sunni Ali. The narrative of the epic utilized the hajj as a means of legitimizing the rule of Askia Mohammed via the *baraka* of the Prophet as well as by cleansing his blood guilt by acknowledging and seeking forgiveness for his sins at the Ka'ba. In terms of the Hero's Journey, this entire episode is classified as Atonement with the Father. This is not a literal atonement with his djinn father, but a metaphysical atonement with God. Having grossly sinned by murdering his uncle, he could not rule righteously without God's forgiveness. It did not matter that Sunni Ali was a wicked tyrant.

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<sup>248</sup> Malio, *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, 69. Hale, *Scribe, Griot, and Novelist: Narrative Interpreters of the Songhay Empire followed by The Epic of Askia Mohammed recounted by Nouhou Malio*, 283.

<sup>249</sup> Malio, *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, 27.

<sup>250</sup> Malio, *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, 27.

<sup>251</sup> Malio, *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, 70.

<sup>252</sup> Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 3rd edition, 32.

Askia Mohammed usurped his rule by assassinating him on his prayer mat, disguised as a stranger. For the purposes of the epic, Askia Mohammed had to atone for his actions by spreading Islam, building mosques, and repenting his sins at the Ka'ba. For this, Malio rewarded him with the sword of Dongo, the Songhay deity of thunder and lightning.<sup>253</sup> Whether Malio associated this mythic sword with the actual sword given Askia Mohammed by the *sharif* of Mecca is unknown.

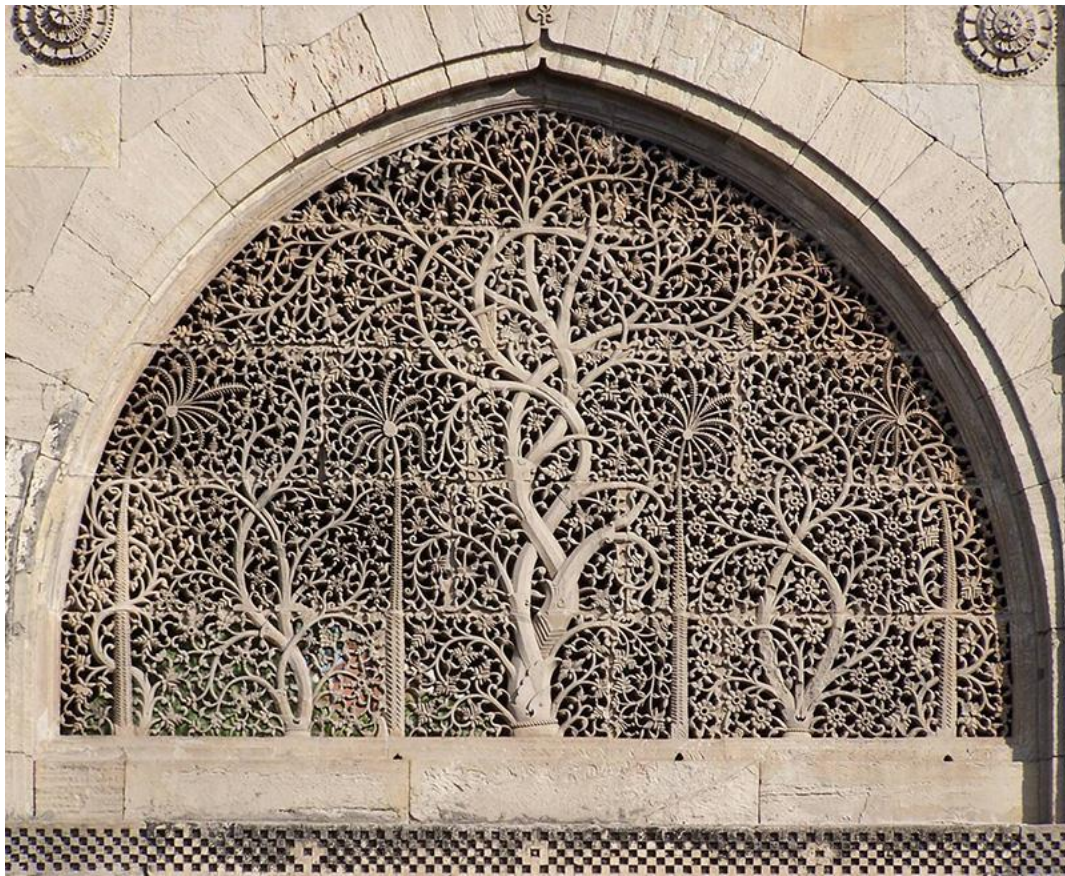


Fig. 14: Indigo tree relief. The Tree of Life, associated with the World Navel, is a mythic motif that spans the globe and was favored in Islamic sacred art: from Anatolia to India to Africa. This example is from a mosque in Gujarat. Indigo trees were indigenous to the Sudan, South Asia, and the Americas.

<sup>253</sup> Malio, *The Epic of Askia Mohammed*, 70.

Filled with the *baraka* of the Prophet, cleansed of his sins, and bearing the weapon of the indigenous sky god, Askia Mohammed, semi-divine son of the djinn of the Niger, returned to the Sudan to rule as the Caliph of Takrur.

### Conclusion

As concerns the epic, Askia Mohammed achieved what Campbell termed the Freedom to Live and became the Master of the Two Worlds by atoning for the murder of his uncle and redeeming himself in the eyes of God. He paid penance for his crime by converting his subjects to Islam and commanding construction of a mud mosque in every village from the Sudan to the Red Sea. Consuming the tender shoots that grew within the World Navel sanctified his soul and blessed him as the one rightful ruler of the Sudan. No longer did he bear the burden of illegitimacy. Cleansed of the stain of murder, Askia Mohammed reigned over the Songhay Empire with the approval of his subjects. In completing the hajj, he achieved salvation. Askia Mohammed laid his sins at the base of the ancient indigo tree, an iteration of the World Tree, and circled it thrice, begging forgiveness of God. He humbled himself before the Creator and received the Sword of Dongo, the divine right of rule, in return. In life, he was the recognized absolute regent of the Sudan, thus the Freedom to Live, the supreme personal achievement at the end of the Road of Trials and triumph of the Ultimate Boon. In the afterlife he became the Master of the Two Worlds, as the fieldwork of Rouch revealed that Askia Mohammed is believed a jinni that still visits the people of the Niger.<sup>254</sup> As such, he transcended the realm of living men into the space between men and angels, mastering both the mortal and immortal worlds.

In starkly historical terms, Askia Mohammed legitimized his questionable claim to power by first solidifying his standing with the *ulama* of the Sudan and then the Islamic authorities of

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<sup>254</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "Muhammad I Askia."

the holy cities. The tacit alliance he made with the Timbuktu elite during the brief civil war aided in establishing a strong relationship with the *ulama*. By vigorously championing Islam and demanding conversion in newly conquered territories, he engendered positive relations with the Islamic leadership. More importantly, he expanded the Songhay bureaucracy and infrastructure, employing more of their class in the functions of state. Integrated into the political and commercial magistracies of the empire, as well as granted many fiscal concessions, the *ulama* endorsed Askia Mohammed. He then sought out the sanction of the Islamic leadership in Cairo and the Hijaz. Whether he was dubbed Caliph of Takrur by the *sharif* of Cairo or Mecca does not matter a great deal in the final accounting. Upon his return to the Sudan, Askia Mohammed was recognized as the legitimate ruler because of his investiture in the land of the holy cities. This is in spite of exactly what absolutions were performed or who presided over what sort of ceremony. These details are lost, but the results are very clear. Askia Mohammed reigned over an expansive Sudanic empire, recognized by his own subjects as well as by foreign powers as the rightful monarch. This was vital to sustaining his long reign because he could expect fewer internal as well as external threats to his claim to power.

## Conclusion

The dynamic reign of Askia Mohammed ended in heartbreak. By Malio's reckoning, he simply faded away. The griot offered no heroic death for the king, or any demise at all, he simply began the narrative of his son and successor Askia Musa (r. 1529 – 1531). This was for the best. The reality was harsh and hard to take. Like Sunni Ali, Askia Mohammed lived too long. Where his predecessor became a tyrant, Askia Mohammed became a shadow of his former self. Nearly blind and withered with age, he was forced from power by his unruly and ambitious progeny. They warred amongst themselves for their father's throne without appreciation for the effort exerted in creating a new royal dynasty. His sons battled for the crown without gratitude for the immense efforts Askia Mohammed made in order to legitimize the usurpation of the Sunni Dynasty. They perceived themselves as young, vital leaders that fulfilled the symbolic requirements of African sacred kingship without comprehension that their father made their bickering claims possible. To their point, a nearly disabled king at eighty years of age did not inspire greatness, no matter his past exploits. His time was passed, yet he lingered. Frustrated by Askia Mohammed's unwillingness to abdicate, and for what they believed was the good of the kingdom, they rebelled.

Askia Mohammed did not submit to his sons without resistance. His faithful brother and trusted emir Umar died in 1519.<sup>255</sup> This loss was crippling, as Umar was his greatest human asset during his reign. The rebellious sons murdered Umar's replacement, another of their uncles, in 1528 when he attempted to force reconciliation upon the quarrelling siblings.<sup>256</sup> The eldest son, Musa, immediately led a coup. The pleadings of Askia Mohammed's closest counselors went

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<sup>255</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "Muhammad I Askia."

<sup>256</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "Muhammad I Askia."

unheeded. The *TF* and the *TS* agree that Askia Mohammed lost power on August 15, 1529.<sup>257</sup> Al-Kati believed he ruled for thirty-nine years, while al-Sadi believed he ruled for thirty-six.<sup>258</sup> If one determines the beginning of his reign as the victory over Sunni Baru in mid-April 1493, he reigned for approximately thirty-five years, which made him around forty-five years old when he claimed the throne. Askia Mohammed was then banished to an island on the Niger River, much as he had expelled Sunni Baru as well as Sunni Ali's blood relations when he claimed dominion over the Songhay Empire.<sup>259</sup> He dwelled there in a deteriorating state for nine years while his sons methodically slaughtered one another and his empire declined. Upon his ascent to power, Askia Mohammed's third son Ismail allowed him to return to the royal abode in Gao for what turned out to be the last year of his life.<sup>260</sup> Ismail also permitted him to once more don the regal turban and bear the royal sabre, symbols of his former glory.<sup>261</sup> Askia Mohammed died at around the age of ninety and was entombed in the earlier described shrine.

Unfortunately, the empire Sunni Ali and Askia Mohammed built rose to dominance when the Mediterranean world was adopting gunpowder weapons. The Songhay were not ignorant of cannons and musketry, but they did not convert as the technology was new, imperfect, and expensive. Their enemies in the Sudan did not have muskets, therefore maintaining a cavalry-based military was sufficient for their immediate needs. Then, in 1591, the Morocco-based Sa'adi Dynasty (1554 – 1659) marched on Timbuktu and delivered a crushing defeat to the Songhay. Musketeers composed the core of their army. The lance-bearing horsemen of the Songhay could not stand against the volleys of lead. Askia Ishaq II (r. 1588 – 1591) organized a fighting retreat

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<sup>257</sup> Kati, *Tarikh al-fattash: The Timbuktu Chronicles 1493 – 1599*, 146. Al-Sadi, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sadi's Tarikh al-sudan down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents*, 117.

<sup>258</sup> Kati, *Tarikh al-fattash: The Timbuktu Chronicles 1493 – 1599*, 146. Al-Sadi, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sadi's Tarikh al-sudan down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents*, 117.

<sup>259</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "Muhammad I Askia."

<sup>260</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "Muhammad I Askia."

<sup>261</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "Muhammad I Askia."

to Gao, where the Songhay army was ultimately defeated at Tondibi on March 13, 1591. The remainder of the Songhay royalty and nobility sought refuge in their ancient haunts near Kukiya and at Dendi. The Songhay Empire was no more. Timbuktu, and all associated trade, as well as the Middle Niger, fell under the hegemony of Morocco.

Nouhou Malio communicated the facts of the reign of Askia Mohammed in his condensed narrative via the signs and symbols of mythology utilized in the foundation myths of many other global cultures. Malio portrayed Sunni Ali as the villain of Songhay history by depicting his actions as similar to the Pharaoh of the story of Exodus. He characterized Askia Mohammed as the hero by portraying his heritage as semi-divine. In the confrontation between the hero and the villain, Malio created a paradox. The villain was murdered while performing a pious act. The hero assassinated the villain by treacherous and deceitful means. This illustrated the complex understanding of the shift in royal dynasties, as the normal avenues of regime change were not followed and a period of civil war and chaos ensued. Sunni Ali was not wholly a villain. Askia Mohammed was not wholly a hero. This nuanced episode in the epic exemplified the sort of subtle understanding the griots communicated to their listeners over the centuries. Malio, like the griots before him, was acutely aware of his audience. As a foundation myth, he incorporated the creation of important caste peoples that existed to his own day. The *sorkos*, *sohancis*, *griots*, and *modibos* that were part of modern Songhay society were connected to the great kings of the Songhay past. These made up a portion of his audience. Further, he ensured that the hero atoned for his complex sins so that his memorable exploits were not tainted by his unlawful seizure of power. Malio communicated all of the important points of the story of Askia Mohammed in such a way that his audience understood the moral implications of the character's actions and he tied the messages involved in the tale to vital societal institutions. In this way, he



passed along a cultural foundation myth, one that ranks among the other storied foundation myths of world history.

A close analysis of the *Epic of Askia Mohammed* allowed for a deeper understanding of cultural and historic context. One cannot understand Askia Mohammed and his many accomplishments without an appreciation for Sunni Ali and his particular set of skills. Askia Mohammed's desire for the investiture of the *sharif* of Mecca is not fully comprehensible unless one develops an appreciation for the importance of African sacred kingship and the influence of the *ulama* over the Songhay regent. The nature of Islam in the Sudan in the period shows that a vast tapestry of syncretic beliefs was practiced. Knowledge of the types of mosques constructed in the Sudan makes it much easier to envision the conquests of Askia Mohammed. Details concerning the stratification of society, restrictions placed on *nyamakalaw*, and the institution of slavery all enhanced Malio's narrative. There are myriad other examples of how contextualization led to greater understanding. In concert with the mythological analysis, a more complete mosaic of the period and events was revealed.

Askia Mohammed was the greatest of the Songhay kings, the greatest of all West African kings. He increased the size, prestige, and income of an already enlarged empire, the largest in West African history. More importantly, he administered the state with a complex bureaucracy while at its zenith, ensuring that his army and public projects were fully funded. He would have been the envy of many contemporary states if the Sudan were not isolated by desert and ocean. For the sake of comparison, Sunni Ali was akin to Charles Martel (d. 741) and Askia Mohammed was akin to Charlemagne (d. 814). This is true in terms of warfare and statecraft. Yet Askia Mohammed and Sunni Ali are mere footnotes in African history, while the likes of

Mansa Musa (r. 1312 – 1337) and Shaka Zulu (r. 1816 – 1828) receive a great deal of exposure.

Askia Mohammed and Sunni Ali are deserving of more.

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Approved and recommended for acceptance as a thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Special committee directing the thesis work of Joseph Daniel Wilson

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