



Universidad Autónoma
de Madrid

Biblos-e Archivo
Repositorio Institucional UAM

Repositorio Institucional de la Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

<https://repositorio.uam.es>

Esta es la **versión de autor** del capítulo de libro publicado en:
This is an **author produced version** of a book chapter published in:

Novo, Marta G. "The Aqīt household: professional mobility of a Berber learned elite in premodern West Africa". En Professional Mobility in Islamic Societies (700-1750): New Concepts and Approaches. Eds. Mehdi Berriah y Mohamad El-Merheb. Leiden: Brill, 2021. 52-76.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004467637_005

Copyright: © 2021 by Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, The Netherlands.

El acceso a la versión del editor puede requerir la suscripción del recurso
Access to the published version may require subscription

The Aqīt household: professional mobility of a Berber learned elite in premodern West Africa

Marta G. Novo
Departament of Arabic, Islamic and Oriental Studies
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

Abstract

This chapter addresses the social and geographic mobility of West African 'ulamā' in the 10th/16th – 11th/17th centuries by analyzing the biographies of *sūdānī* scholars made by Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbukṭī (d. 1036/1627) and other contemporary sources from premodern *bilād al-sūdān*. Although all the available textual evidence is clearly self-centered, focusing almost exclusively on Timbuktu, in the case of the *Timbuktu Chronicles*, and on the author's own household, in the case of Aḥmad Bābā's *tarājim*, it permits to catch a glimpse at both aspects of the intellectual life of the region. Aḥmad Bābā's household, the Aqīt clan, appears as paradigmatic of social mobility through specialized scholarship. The central role of Egypt (Cairo) as a center of learning for the *sūdānī* learned elites in this period will also be analyzed, to the detriment of North Africa. Finally, a special remark will be made on the author's reflections on the political leadership of the 'ulamā', which could be interpreted in terms of the self-consciousness of the Ṣanhāja trading elites in a context of lack of regional authoritative power, that of the decay of the Songhay Empire.

Keywords: West Africa, *bilād al-sūdān*, Islamic law, 'ulamā', trans-Saharan networks

Introduction¹

The social advancement of the Aqīts, the most powerful scholarly household of 10th/16th century Timbuktu, has traditionally been considered as meteoric, and although

¹ This article is part of the results of the Research Group (GIF) MASYG (University of Alcalá, UAH) and the Research Sub-Project "Human Dynamics in North Africa: peoples and landscapes in historical perspective (DHUNA)" (HAR2017-82152-C2-2-P; P.I.: de Felipe, E., University of Alcalá), which, together with the Research Sub-Project "Cultural Geography of the Medieval and Modern Islamic Maghreb Online (GEOMAGRED)" (HAR2017-82152-C2-1-P; P.I.: Manzano, M.Á., IEMYRhd, University of Salamanca), is integrated in the Coordinated Research Project "Cultural Geography of the Maghreb and Human Dynamics

their prior socioeconomic condition has not received sufficient attention, it is a good example of how specialized scholarship aided powerful households to reach and consolidate social and political leadership. Just a few decades after their arrival in the city, and without previous dedication to scholarship, the Aqīt household reached the top of its learned elites in what has been known as Timbuktu's golden age. Their story, which was told by the last of the members of the prestigious lineage, Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbukṭī (963/1556-1036/1627), as well as by other contemporary sources, exemplifies the careers of the elite of the *'ulamā'* in premodern West Africa.² In fact, the history of the Aqīts is one of the very rare accounts of learned households which can be drawn from West African sources before the 11th/17th century, an account for which the information available is relatively sufficient enough in order to be considered as representative of the intellectual life of the premodern *bilād al-sūdān* before the Moroccan invasion of the Songhay Empire in the year 999/1591, in spite of the evident tendentiousness of the sources.³ Members of this household occupied the judgeship (*qaḍā'*) of Timbuktu for almost a century, which coincided with the period in which the Askya dynasty ruled over the Songhay Empire. This was also the period of the city's intellectual splendor, as Timbuktu became the main hub of West African Islamic scholarship. Rulings by the Aqīt *qaḍāt* can be found in *fatwa* compilations from the 11th/17th century onwards, all over the *bilād al-sūdān*. They constitute a significant part of West Africa's earliest pieces of Islamic jurisprudence, and this is one of the reasons that make historians consider them

in North Africa (MAGNA)" (HAR2017-82152-C2-1-P) (Coord.: Manzano, M.Á.), funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities and the FEDER Program of the European Union. The author wishes to thank Kaj Öhrnberg for his thorough revision and insightful comments, and Juan Javier García-Abad Alonso for his aid regarding Geographic Information Systems, as well as the two anonymous reviewers of the chapter.

² About Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbukṭī, see Zouber, M., *Aḥmad Bābā de Tombouctou (1556/1627): sa vie et son œuvre*, Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1977; Hunwick, J.O., "A new source for the biography of Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbukṭī (1556–1627)", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 27, 3 (1964), 568; by the same author "Further light on Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbukṭī", *Research Bulletin, Centre of Arabic Documentation*, 1, 2 (1966), 19–31. See also Hunwick, J.O. (ed.), *Arabic Literature of Africa IV*, Leiden: Brill, 2003, 17-31; Sadki, Ḥ., *Makḥṭūṭāt Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbukṭī fī-l-khazā'in al-maghribiyya*, Rabat: Institut des Études Africaines, 1996.

³ Hunwick, J.O., "Aḥmad Bābā and the Moroccan invasion of the Sudan (1591)", *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 2/3 (1962), 311–328; Castries, H. de, "La conquête du Soudan par Moulaye Ahmed el-Mansôur", *Hespéris*, III (1923), 438–88; Pianel, G., "Les préliminaires de la conquête du Soudan par Moulaye Ahmed el-Mansôur, d'après trois documents inédits", *Hespéris*, XL (1953), 185–97; García-Arenal, M., *Aḥmad al-Manṣūr. The Beginnings of Modern Morocco*, London: Oneworld, 2009, 91. About the bias in the sources, see Novo, M.G., "Writing the history of Islamic law in West Africa: scholars from the *bilād al-sūdān* in Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbukṭī's biographical works", *Die Welt des Islams* (forthcoming). Also, Stewart, C., "Calibrating the scholarship of Timbuktu", and Hall, B., "Rethinking the place of Timbuktu in the Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa", in Green, T., and Rossi, B., (eds.), *Landscapes, Sources and Intellectual Projects of the West African Past*, Leiden: Brill, 2018, 220–238 and 239–258.

as fundamental parts in the development of the Islamic legal system beyond the southern shore of the Sahara.

This chapter addresses the issue of the spatial and social mobility of the 'ulamā' in premodern West Africa through the careers of the Aqīt household, focusing on how their scholarly network was set up and how it promoted their social advancement, to the point of becoming relevant sociopolitical actors in the Niger Bend area during the apogee of the Songhay Empire. It will also analyze how spatial mobility might have reinforced the network, as well as the symbolic capital derived from it. In order to achieve this, it will focus on the information on Islamic scholarship in premodern West Africa through its main sources, Aḥmad Bābā's biographical works and the so-called *Timbuktu Chronicles*.⁴ While the *Timbuktu Chronicles* provide a more general overview about the professionalization of the 'ulamā' in Imperial Songhay, Aḥmad Bābā's biographies of West African scholars are richer in very important details, such as transmission chains and the geographical origin of their knowledge, or their main subjects of interest, as well as significant references to their role as sociopolitical actors.

Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbuktī is a paramount figure of premodern West African Islamic scholarship. He acquired great renown in his time and after it as the author of two Mālikī biographical dictionaries, the famous *Nayl al-ibtihāj bi-taṭrīz al-Dībāj* (written ca. 1012/1603) and its abridged version, called *Kifāyat al-muḥtāj li-ma'rifat man laysa fī-l-Dībāj* (written ca. 1015/1606).⁵ His legal opinions, many of which have been preserved in a number of North and West African public and private libraries, and also reproduced in later compendia, contributed to extend his fame as a jurist and *muftī*. His rulings on slavery transcended his times and brought his renown up to the present, in recognition

⁴ These are the *Ta'riḫ al-sūdān* and the *Ta'riḫ al-fattāsh*. See 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. 'Abd Allāh al-Sa'dī, *Ta'riḫ al-sūdān*. Arabic text and French translation by O. Houdas (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1900). English translation in Hunwick, J.O., *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire. Al-Sa'dī's Ta'riḫ al-sūdān down to 1613 and Other Contemporary Documents*, Leiden: Brill, 1999. Also Maḥmūd Ka'tī Ibn al-Ḥājj al-Mutawakkil, *Ta'riḫ al-fattāsh fī akhbār al-buldān*, Arabic text and French translation by Houdas, O., and Delafosse, M., Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1913. See also Hunwick, J.O., "Studies in the *Tāriḫ al-fattāsh* I: Its Authors and Textual History," *Research Bulletin – Centre of Arabic Documentation*, 5 (1969), 57–65; Levtzion, N., "A Seventeenth-Century Chronicle by Ibn al-Mukhtār: A Critical Study of *Ta'riḫ al-fattāsh*," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 34, 3 (1971), 571–593; and Hunwick, J.O., "Studies in the *Ta'riḫ al-fattāsh* II: An Alleged Charter of Privilege Issued by Askiya al-Ḥājj Muḥammad to the Descendants of Mori Hawgāro," *Sudanica Africa*, 3 (1992), 133–148. Also Nobili, M., *Sultan, Caliph, and the Renewer of the Faith: Ahmad Lobbo, the Tāriḫ Al-Fattāsh and the Making of an Islamic State in West Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

⁵ Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbuktī, *Nayl al-ibtihāj bi-taṭrīz al-Dībāj*, ed. 'Amar, M., Cairo: Maktabat al-thaqāfa al-dīniyya, 2004, 2 vols.; ed. al-Harrāma, 'A. H., Tripoli (Libya): Kulliyat al-da'wa al-islāmiyya, 2000; ed. on the margins of Ibn Farḥūn's *al-Dībāj al-mudhhab*, Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Ma'āhid, 1932. By the same author, *Kifāyat al-muḥtāj li-ma'rifat man laysa fī l-Dībāj*, intr. and ed. Mutī, M., Rabat: Wizārat al-awqāf wa-l-shu'un al-islāmiyya, 2000.

of his clear stance against racial prejudices in this domain.⁶ The great variety of his works and the deepness of his thought clearly show him as one of the greatest authors of his time, as pointed out already in contemporary sources. Although he was a member of the powerful Aqīt clan, Aḥmad Bābā himself was never appointed to any post of relevance in local or Imperial Songhay administration, nor did his father or his grandfather, who both were brothers of the great *qāḍīs* of their time, Maḥmūd b. 'Umar Aqīt and his son, al-'Āqib. Being apart from the "great affairs", as he put it, allowed him to focus on learning, and after completing the finest education Aḥmad Bābā started writing his own works. Part of them were dedicated to Arabic grammar and to logic, together with commentaries to the most cultivated subject by the West African '*ulamā*' of the moment as well as of later periods, the *Mukhtaṣar* of Khalīl b. Ishāq.⁷ At this point he also started reflecting on the role of Islamic scholars and scholarship in society. It was a moment of great social and political upheaval due to the constant fight for power between the descendants of Askya *al-Ḥājj* Muḥammad since he was removed from power in his later years. The political decline of the Songhay Empire inspired one of the works of what historians have come to name as Aḥmad Bābā's "first Timbuktu period", called *Jalb al-ni'ma wa-ḍaḥ al-niqma bi-mujānabat al-wulāt al-ḡalama*. As M. Zouber described it in his work on the life and works of the renowned Timbuktu scholar, it is an essay against frequenting wrongful rulers (*al-wulāt al-ḡalama*), where the author explains that this may imply moral corruption or end in an ill fate, drawing examples from early Islamic history.⁸

He continued to write about the '*ulamā*' after the fall of the Songhay Empire and the establishment of Moroccan rule over part of its territories, including Timbuktu, and also during the period of his deportation to the Sa'did capital, Marrakech, where he was forced to reside along with a great part of the members of his powerful clan. Between the years 1002/1593-1016/1607, Aḥmad Bābā accomplished his famous *ṭabaqāt* works *Nayl al-ibtihāj* and *Kifāyat al-muḥtāj*, the first of which he may have already started before the Sa'did expedition to the *bilād al-sūdān*. From his "Moroccan period" dates another essay, called *Tuḥfat al-fuḍalā' bi-ba'd faḍā'il al-'ulamā'*, which is a treaty on the

⁶ For Aḥmad Bābā's legal opinions on slavery, see J.O. Hunwick's and F. Ḥarrāq's edition and English translation in Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbuktī, *Mi'rāj al-ṣu'ūd. Aḥmad Bābā's Replies on slavery*, Rabat: Institut des Études Africaines, 2000. See also García Novo, M., "Islamic law and slavery in premodern West Africa", *Entremóns. UPF Journal of World History*, 2 (2011), 1-20.

⁷ Khalīl Ibn Ishāq b. Mūsā b. *Shu'ayb*, Abū l-Mawadda Ḍiyā' al-Dīn, Ibn al-Jundī (d. ca. 776/1374), Egyptian jurist, one of the main figures of the Mālikī *madhhab*. See Ben Cheneb, M., "Khalīl b. Ishāq", in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Consulted online on 6 April 2020 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_4162>. About his most famous work, the *Mukhtaṣar fī l-furū'*, see Brockelmann, C., *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur*, Leiden: Brill, 1937-1942, S II, 83, 86.

⁸ Zouber, M. *Aḥmad Bābā de Tombouctou*, 156-162.

virtues of scholars and their role as models and guides for the community, and on the primacy of scholars over saints (*awliyā*), and that of religious knowledge (*‘ilm*) over cult practices (*‘ibādāt*).⁹ The role of scholarship in society and the piety and devotion of scholars were a main theme in Aḥmad Bābā's thought, to which he dedicated the greatest part of his writings also in the period of his greatest literary and intellectual standing. As we may see later on, this was so also in a self-biographical manner, as a reflection on his own *métier*.

Building a network

As we can read in the first passages of the autobiography of Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbuktī, where the author explained how he came to be an *‘ālim*, when the first scholar in the Aqīt lineage started his career in Islamic jurisprudence, he was already very close to the highest levels. The text, which can be found at the end of the *Kifāyat al-muḥtāj*, goes as follows:

The first of my ancestors who dedicated himself to scholarship (‘ilm) was the faqīh Maḥmūd And-Ag-Muḥammad, grandfather of my maternal grandfather. He was the qāḍī of Timbuktu in the middle of the 9th (-14th) century. After him, ‘Umar, father of my grand-father, was a pious jurist who studied under the pious judge, the mu‘addib Muḥammad al-Kābarī. Then his sons, my grandfather Aḥmad and his two brothers, Maḥmūd and ‘Abd Allāh. Knowledge (‘ilm) spread in their lineage together with leadership (riyāsa). The judgeship was conferred to some of them with abundant wealth (mutamawwal^{an}).¹⁰

Although slightly enigmatic, with some determinant factors omitted, these few lines in al-Tinbuktī's *tarjama* reveal the constituent elements in the birth of his scholarly lineage. Thus, even if the text does not specify how ‘Umar b. Muḥammad Aqīt came to marry Sitta, qāḍī And-Ag-Muḥammad's daughter, and how he became the student of one of the most relevant figures in the transmission of Islamic jurisprudence in the Niger Bend, Modibbo Muḥammad al-Kābarī, we may assume that some conditions were necessary for it.¹¹

Map 1

The first of them probably was wealth, obtained through the participation in trans-Saharan commercial networks, combined with some social relevance due to a

⁹ Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbuktī, *Tuḥfat al-fuḍalā’ bi-ba’d faḍā’il al-‘ulamā’*, ed. Sāmī, S., Rabat: Institut des Études Africaines, 1992.

¹⁰ Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbuktī, *Kifāyat al-muḥtāj*, vol. 2, 281.

¹¹ For his biography see Hunwick, J.O. (ed.), *Arabic Literature of Africa IV*, 12.

noble descent. We can deduce that, in absence of other significant factors, such as kinship, renowned scholarship or sainthood (*wilāya*), it is very likely that the Aqīts' very propitious starting position in the intellectual milieu of Timbuktu was made possible through their economic means. Their origin in Masina, the region between Timbuktu and Jenne, would explain how the Aqīts may have become partners of other Ṣanhāja trading households northwards in the trans-Saharan trade routes, such as the Timbuktu And-Ag-Muḥammads, and develop alliances with them. H.T. Norris's investigation of the Aqīt *nisbas* showed that when Muḥammad Aqīt arrived in this town he was probably no ordinary man, but the leader of the Massūfa clan of the Uqītūn.¹² Muḥammad Aqīt's unsettled quarrel with Akil, the Tuareg sultan of the Timbuktu, may be considered as another sign of his position, as it could hardly be expected from someone of a low social condition to be able to confront one of the chiefs of the city.¹³ It was also hardly expectable from an ordinary man to establish a marriage with the city's leading scholarly household, but not as much so from a powerful, noble and wealthy stranger. Once again, wealth and social relevance are the most likely explanations of how Muḥammad Aqīt could marry his son to the daughter of one of the city's most relevant figures, *qāḍī* And-Ag-Muḥammad. The marriage alliance between the Aqīt and the And-Ag-Muḥammad households shows that this kind of strategies were used to promote the social mobility of scholars in premodern West Africa.

The marriage of 'Umar b. Muḥammad Aqīt and Sitta bt. And-Ag-Muḥammad allowed the Aqīts to rapidly reach the highest level in Timbuktu's learned circles, the judgeship (*al-qāḍā'*), which they held for over a century. But we can guess that 'Umar must have had some relevance or some potential as an *'ālim* in order to be able to found a scholarly branch in the Aqīt family, or otherwise some other kind of marriage alliance, one that remained within the trading families of the Aqīt and And-Ag-Muḥammad clans, was more likely to have taken place. The basically economic character of the Aqīts before their establishment in Timbuktu, and the specialized scholarly character of the And-Ag-Muḥammads suggest that this scholarly household was the religious branch of a trading clan, especially since it appears that being involved in commercial activities was considered as putting at risk the *wilāya* of some of the great *'ulamā'*, which, perhaps significantly, were not those who were in charge of worldly affairs, such as the *quḍāt*, but eminent scholars who focused on piety and devotion. For instance, The *Ta'riḫ al-sūdān* recalls the anecdote of how Sīdī Yahyà, the revered 9th/15th century North African scholar who settled in Timbuktu, whose name bears one of the mosques and is

¹² Norris, H. T., "Ṣanhājah Scholars of Timbuctoo", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 30, 3 (1967), 634-640.

¹³ Al-Sa'dī, *Ta'riḫ al-sūdān*, ed. Houdas, 36; English translation by Hunwick, J.O., *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, 50.

considered as one of the greatest saints of the city, lost his *wilāya* by getting involved in trade, which he did because he did not want to depend on others.¹⁴ As will be discussed hereunder, and as shown by the opening paragraphs of al-Tinbuktī’s biography, the Aqīt *quḍāt* were extraordinarily wealthy and had an important role in the political affairs of Imperial Songhay, and it may be assumed that such prominent positions entailed a complex social and economic human structure. As happened elsewhere in the lands of Islam, the accumulation of wealth, that liberated the most talented in the family from work and allowed them to become scholars, made the birth of the scholarly network possible, and reinforced it, causing the social advancement of the group, which was more pronounced in the case of the most influential of its members, the elite of the ‘*ulamā*’. It should also be noted that a context of lack of a strong authoritative power, as was the case of the decline of Imperial Songhay, favored that members of the scholarly elites, such as the Aqīts in the *bilād al-sūdān*, contested weak political powers and tried to replace them, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

Though scholarship was not completely absent from the ensemble of elements that made the alliance with Aqīts interesting for the And-Ag-Muḥammads, a solid tradition of learning on behalf of the Aqīts was probably not necessary for the alliance to work. However, once the alliance was set up, the Aqīts, and more specifically ‘Umar b. Muḥammad Aqīt, the only figure in his generation in the Aqīt household for which we may find some references, had access to all the learning resources, that is, teachers and libraries, of the And-Ag-Muḥammads’. As his great-grandson declares, he studied under one of the greatest scholars of his time, Muḥammad al-Kābarī, as well as under his father-in-law, *qāḍī* And-Ag-Muḥammad. We can guess that he and his offspring made the most of the network of their maternal relatives, as their success in becoming great ‘*ulamā*’ was the key differential factor for their social advancement, for a second and greater time in the patriline if we consider that ‘Umar b. Muḥammad Aqīt must have had some talent as a scholar that he could exploit in order to become related to a scholarly lineage. ‘Umar’s son, Maḥmūd (d. 955/1548), succeeded his maternal grandfather in the judgeship of Timbuktu, and became an even greater than him as a *qāḍī*. And the same occurred with Maḥmūd’s sons, Muḥammad (d. 973/1565) and al-‘Āqib b. Maḥmūd b. ‘Umar (d. 991/1583).¹⁵ What made them overtake their relatives in

¹⁴ Hunwick, J.O. (ed.), *Arabic Literature of Africa IV*, 12-13, for Sīdī Yahyā’s biography. Al-Sa’dī, *Ta’rīkh al-sūdān*, ed. Houdas, 50-51; English translation by Hunwick, J.O., *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, 72-73.

¹⁵ About Maḥmūd b. ‘Umar b. Muḥammad Aqīt, see Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbuktī, *Nayl al-ibtihāj*, ed. al-Harrāma, #746, 607–608; *Kifāyat al-muḥtāj*, ed. Muṭī, II, #655, 245–246. Also, Makhlūf, M., *Shajarat al-nūr al-zakiyya fī ṭabaqāt al-mālikiyya*, Cairo: 1930, 1043; Hunwick, J.O. (ed.), *Arabic Literature of Africa IV*, 13-14; Kaḥḥāla, ‘U. R., *Mu’jam al-mu’allifīn. Tarājim muṣannifī al-kutub al-‘arabiyya*, Damascus: al-Maktaba al-‘arabiyya, 1957–1961, XII, 85; Cherbonneau, M., *Essai sur la littérature arabe au Soudan d’après le Takmilat-ed-dibadje d’Ahmed Baba, le Tombouctien*, Constantine-Paris: Abadie, A. Leleux, 1861, 14–16. For the biography of Muḥammad b. Maḥmūd b. ‘Umar b. Muḥammad Aqīt, see Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbuktī, *Nayl al-ibtihāj*, ed. al-

the And-Ag-Muḥammad lineage, as well as other scholarly lineages in Timbuktu or elsewhere in the *bilād al-sūdān* is not clear in the textual evidence available, since there are almost no detailed references to the careers of scholars outside the Aqīt household in the sources. A closer look at the different levels of religious learning and professionalization of scholars may be useful in order to evaluate it.

Professionalization and vertical mobility

The alliance between the Aqīts and the And-Ag-Muḥammads illustrates how new kinship ties potentiated intellectual and commercial profit. The knowledge transfer for social capital, which was so palpable in the Aqīt lineage, had different outcomes that were probably directly related to the student's socioeconomic background in the premodern *bilād al-sūdān*. As could be expected, the sources pay very little attention to ordinary scholars, although we may still glimpse that a rudimentary Islamic education opened the way for administrative positions in Imperial Songhay. The only post related to scholarship in the political structure of the Empire that has been referred to in the *Timbuktu Chronicles* is that of *kātib*, but with no detail to the number of secretaries at the court, their possible hierarchy, or other aspects that may be relevant for the study of the professionalization of *sūdānī* scholars. There is a considerable gap in the information available between the period of the first Muslim communities that established themselves in the *bilād al-sūdān*, and the period in which the Mālīan State became mostly Islamized, and therefore the origins of this professionalization remain uncertain due to the lack of textual evidence. Earlier sources, such as Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, mention that in the Empire of Mālī, Muslim foreign traders were designated as mediators and charged of taking care of the affairs of their community, probably with only a basic knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence.¹⁶ It is also likely that Muslim foreigners may have occupied positions in the administration, as well as served as teachers for *sūdānī* scholars-to-be, as this could be expected from the project of state-islamization carried out by Mālīan Emperors, which included the establishment of diplomatic relations with North-African rulers, that were also used for travel *fī ṭalab al-ʿilm* to several North African locations.¹⁷

Harrāma, #730, 597-8; *Kifāyat al-muḥtāj*, ed. Muṭī, II, #641, 234; Cherbonneau, M., *Essai*, 19–20; "Muḥammad b. Maḥmūd b. ʿUmar b. Muḥammad Aqīt", in Hunwick, J.O. (ed.), *Arabic Literature of Africa IV*, 14-15. About al-ʿĀqib b. Maḥmūd b. ʿUmar b. Muḥammad Aqīt, see Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbuktī, *Nayl al-ibtihāj*, ed. al-Harrāma, #459, 353–4; *Kifāyat al-muḥtāj*, ed. Muṭī, I, #393, 377–8.

¹⁶ Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Tuḥfat al-nuẓẓār fī gharāʾib al-amṣār wa-ʿajāʾib al-asfār*, ed. Defrémery, C., and Sanguinetti, B.R., Paris: Anthropos, 1968, IV, 394-5 and 397-8.

¹⁷ The beginnings of islamization of West Africa have been analyzed, among others, by Cuoq, J., *Histoire de l'islamisation de l'Afrique de l'Ouest*, Paris: Geuthner, 1984, and Levzion, N. and Pouwells, R., *The History of*

It may be inferred from Aḥmad Bābā's biographical works that the ordinary curriculum followed by students of religious sciences was adapted to the circumstances of recent Islamization and Arabization, as denoted by the strong presence of the subjects of grammar and rhetoric among the works that were learned by the *sūdānī* scholars of the 10th/16th century, and many of the works composed by West African scholars are commentaries to works related to the Arabic language.¹⁸ A great interest was put in the domain of logic, probably under influence of al-Sanūsī's works, but it is likely that this subject was not dealt with in the most elementary levels of learning, from which there is no specific information at all.¹⁹ It is hard to ascertain from the biographies of the intellectual elite what would the essential learning of West African scholars be like, but it would be reasonable to guess that the more known curricula followed by non-Berber groups such as the Dyula could not be so different from the basics in 10th/16th century *bilād al-sūdān*, that is, some of the key works in the domain of *ḥadīth*, with the works of Muslim or Bukhārī, as well as the most popular *fiqh* work in the region, the *Mukhtaṣar* of Khalīl b. Ishāq, or the *Muwaṭṭa'* of Mālik b. Anas.²⁰ In any case, the available textual evidence does not permeate anything in what regards the process of specialization within the learning careers, as so far no specific texts mention the process. We can read in Aḥmad Bābā's biographic works that, in 10th/16th century Timbuktu, teachers taught in their homes, as well as in places of worship, as can be observed in the biography of al-Tinbukti's *shaykh*, Muḥammad b. Maḥmūd b. Abī Bakr Baghayogho al-Wangarī (d. 1002/1594).²¹ The verb used for learning a work is *qara'a*, and there is no

Islam in Africa, Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2000. See also Gomez, M.A., *African Dominion: A New History of Empire in Early and Medieval West Africa*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019.

¹⁸ The complete reference to all the learnt, transmitted and composed works by *sūdānī* scholars in Aḥmad Bābā's biographical works can be consulted in Novo, M.G., “Writing the history of Islamic law in West Africa”, *op. cit.* A wider study, chronologically and geographically, is that of, C. Stewart and Hall, B., “The historic “core curriculum” and the book market in Islamic West Africa”, in Krätli, G., and Lydon, G., eds., *The Trans-Saharan Book Trade*, Leiden: Brill, 2011, 109-174.

¹⁹ See Van Dalen, D., *Doubt, Scholarship and Society in 17th-Century Central Sudanic Africa*, Leiden: Brill, 2016, 90, 109–119.

²⁰ Wilks, I., “The transmission of Islamic learning in the Western Sudan”, in Goody, J. (ed.), *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968, 162–197.

²¹ Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbukti, *Nayl al-ibtihāj*, ed. al-Harrāma, #736, 600–3; *Kifāyat al-muḥtāj*, ed. Muṭī, II, #646, 237–40. For Muḥammad Baghayogho's biography and works, see Hunwick (ed.), J.O., *Arabic Literature of Africa IV*, 31-32. Also al-Qādirī, *Nashr al-mathānī*, ed. Ḥajjī, M. and Tawfiq, A., Rabat: al-Jama'iyya al-maghribiyya li-l-ta'lif, 1986, IV, 40; al-Muḥibbī, *Khulāṣat al-athar fī a'yān al-qarn al-ḥādī 'ashar*, Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1966, IV, 211–2; al-Bagdādī, *Hādiyat al-ārifīn, asmā' al-mu'allifīn wa-āthār al-muṣannifīn*, ed. Bilge, R. and Inal, M. K., Istanbul: Wikālat al-ma'ārif, 1951–1955, II, 260; al-Bagdādī, *Idāḥ al-maknūn fī l-dhayl 'alā kashf al-zunūn 'an asāmī l-kutub wa-l-funūn*, ed. Yaltakaya, S., Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-'ilmiyya, 1992, II, 697; Kaḥḥāla, *Mu'jam al-mu'allifīn*, XI, 315. Cherbonneau, M., *Essai*, 25–31; see also Hunwick, J.O., “Further light on Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbukti”, 22–5; and Hunwick, J.O., “A contribution to the study of Islamic teaching

trace of the terminology used in other *tabaqāt* works in other contexts of the Islamic world, such as *ḥaddatha* or *akhbara*. We may assume that a certain degree of oral transmission took place, but it is not possible to know specifically which works were taught orally and learnt from different teachers, as could be the case of the *ummahāt* of the Mālikī law school, and which ones were just consulted individually through the copies obtained from the Maghrib or from the central lands of Islam.

References to other positions more directly related to religious learning and practice are more common in West African sources, though still scarce, as only *khaṭībs*, *imāms* and *qāḍīs* appear, quite often without any further detail. These positions are linked only to the most prominent locations in the area, Gao, Jenne and Timbuktu, though we may assume that there must have been at least *imāms* in minor towns, and perhaps *khaṭībs*. There are a very few mentions to the *khaṭīb* of Gao and Jenne in the *Ta'riḫ al-sūdān*, and some mentions to *khaṭībs* in Timbuktu, but if this position was part of the political administration is not specified. There are no specifications of the tasks, nor if the *khaṭīb* of the capital ranked higher than others in dependent territories. In a very interesting passage of al-Sa'dī's work, we read that the people of Jenne used to settle their affairs by the *khaṭīb*, "as is the custom of the *sūdān*" and that only in the 10th/16th century did they start to judge them according to the *sharī'a*, litigating before *qāḍīs* like the *bīḍān*.²² The ethnic distinction of justice authorities among the Berber and non-Berber West Africans made by al-Sa'dī's text raises many questions about how the practice of Islamic jurisprudence took place south of the Sahara, which unfortunately cannot yet be answered with the scarce textual evidence available. Although the fragment clearly tries to differentiate and hierarchize the Berber and non-Berber traditions of learning, what we can hardly glimpse from the description of the intellectual life of the *bilād al-sūdān* more likely suggests that *bīḍān* and *sūdān* alike shared the same scholarly background, as will be discussed later in this chapter. It is probable, as will be shown, that the divide presented by al-Sa'dī may have intended to emphasize the difference as part of a self-conscious attitude of superiority by the Ṣanhāja elites, which were at the time involved in the process of building their sociopolitical dominion in the Niger Bend area.

The *Timbuktu Chronicles* dedicate more attention to the position of *imām*, which is referred to in Gao and Jenne only briefly, and in a more detailed manner in the case of Timbuktu. The chronicles refer to the post of *imām* of the different mosques in the

traditions in West Africa: the career of Muḥammad Baghayogho, 930/1523–4", *Islam et Sociétés au Sud du Sahara*, (1990), 149–62.

²² Al-Sa'dī, *Ta'riḫ al-sūdān*, ed. Houdas, 18; English translation by Hunwick, J.O., *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, 26. Hunwick suggests that in Gao the *khaṭīb* was also the *qāḍī*, see *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, 366.

city, Jingereber, Sidi Yahyà and Sankore, and these positions were appointed by the *qāḍī* of Timbuktu. It is perhaps significant that the *imāms* were more varied from the point of view of ethnicity than the judges: while *imāms* had many different ethnic backgrounds such as Fulbe, Soninke or from different North African backgrounds, Arab or Berber, those who were appointed as *qāḍīs* came only from the Ṣanhāja, which shows the predominance of this Berber clan over other ethnic groups involved in the intellectual and religious life of the city. The *Timbuktu Chronicles* also refer to the appointment of *khaṭībs* for the abovementioned mosques, which was as well made by the *qāḍī*. No reference in the abovementioned sources is made as to how were *khaṭībs* paid, while the *Ta'riḫ al-sūdān* specifies that *imāms* were paid on an annual basis "by notable families", with equal participation of every one of them.²³ This may lead to think that, even though only the Askyas, the highest political authorities, appointed the *qāḍīs*, in Jenne and Timbuktu, there may have been some sort of collegiate designation before this appointment, except of course in the case of the *qāḍī* appointed by Sonni 'Alī. It is also probable that the Askyas appointed someone that was already a leading member of the community of scholars, the *jamā'a*. The regular payments of the notables suggest that they considered themselves as part of the *khāṣṣa*.

The sources do not specify other possible sources of income of the scholars that appear in them, whether they were private or whether they came from higher authorities. It is difficult to know to what extent the dedication to learning was affordable for ordinary families, as determining the cost of living in 10th/16th premodern *bilād al-sūdān* with the present textual evidence may only be an approximative guess. West African sources do not feature any references to any institution of learning other than the relationship between student and teacher, so we may assume that this sort of professionalization was sustained by the student's own wealth; that is, the wealth of a household. The sources are particularly silent about how the '*ulamā*' met their day-to-day needs. On the one hand, there are just a couple of mentions of economic activities related to scholars, which are trade and the exploitation of slave labor, as could be expected, and only one of the West African '*ulamā*' that appears in Aḥmad Bābā's biographical works was not a full-time student in the beginning of his career.²⁴ On the

²³ Al-Sa'dī, *Ta'riḫ al-sūdān*, ed. Houdas, 60-61; English translation by Hunwick, J.O., *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, 86.

²⁴ This is the case of Makhlūf b. 'Alī b. Ṣāliḥ al-Balbālī (d. 940/1533), a Walātī scholar whose *fatwas* had a considerable impact in the *bilād al-sūdān*, see Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbuktī, *Nayl al-ibtihāj*, ed. al-Harrāma, #747, 608; *Kifāyat al-muḥtāj*, ed. Muṭī, II, #656, 24. Also "Makhlūf b. 'Alī b. Ṣāliḥ al-Balbālī", in: *Arabic Literature of Africa Online*, General Editors J.O. Hunwick, R.S. O'Fahey. Consulted online on 10 April 2020 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2405-4453_alao_COM_ALA_20001_1_4>; Cherbonneau, *Essai*, 7; Bivar, H.D., and Hiskett, M., "The Arabic Literature of Nigeria to 1804: a provisional account", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 25, 3 (1962), 110–1.

other hand, some scholars are described as being extremely wealthy, and we may assume that this wealth came, at least partially, from trade, probably not carried out by themselves, but by associated relatives, and also from the donations received from rulers, or, as we have seen in the case of the *imāms* of Timbuktu, from the *jamā'a*. We also do not know if teachers admitted every student at their lectures, regardless of origin or intellectual qualities, or if the access to the most prestigious teaching networks in the city was only open for students with great achievements.²⁵ We may assume that collaboration between learning households included the introduction of students in these networks, as permeates from the *Ta'rikh al-sūdān*, but we are ignorant of the rivalries that certainly existed between prominent households caused the exclusion of rivals from them.²⁶

In the case of the only post that was appointed by the Askya, which was the *qāḍī*, there is no mention of regular payments, but of diverse "gifts", that were also made to other persons of relevance, such as *imāms* or even secretaries. There are also no references to *qāḍī-l-quḍāt* or *qāḍī-l-jamā'a* in the sources. Leo Africanus briefly mentions that "in Timbuktu there are numerous judges, scholars and priests, all well paid by the King".²⁷ The generosity of the Askya as portrayed in the *Timbuktu Chronicles* does not match the great expenses that are referred to from some members of the Timbuktu *jamā'a*, especially of *qāḍī* al-ʿĀqib, who seems to embody this generosity to its highest degree, in one of the signs of the sources' self-centered character. Once again, there are no mentions to the origins of al-ʿĀqib's wealth, so we can just guess that part of his fortune came from the Askya's gifts. It is also probable to argue that being a *qāḍī* was profitable in the economic sense of the term, since this position allowed not only to intervene in the social and economic life in a way that could favor the social group of origin, but also to obtain a significant symbolic capital in the form of prestige, and to configure the social reality through the interpretation of divine norms. The textual evidence available does not allow to infer that judges took advantage of their position, as none of the *qāḍīs* that appear in the sources were accused of corruption, but this must also be taken cautiously, given their palpable self-centered character. It could be argued that no such accusations would make their way into the *Timbuktu Chronicles* or into Aḥmad Bābā's *tarājim* of his fellowmen, written with a more than evident intention of self-praise.

²⁵ The teaching networks of the city were thoroughly described by Saad, E.N., *Social History of Timbuktu. The role of Muslim Scholars and Notables, 1400–1900*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

²⁶ Al-Sa'dī, *Ta'rikh al-sūdān*, ed. Houdas, 76-77; English translation by Hunwick, J.O., *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, 110-111.

²⁷ Translated by Hunwick, J.O., *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, 281.

Spatial mobility

The mobility of scholars to and from the *bilād al-sūdān* and within it appears early in Arabic geographical sources, from which we learn that Islam was introduced in the area through the contact of Muslim traders with local ones. Unfortunately, the information about this is vague. Mentions of African scholars travelling to Fez in expeditions sent by the rulers of the first great West African political entities, especially Mālī, do not come into detail, and so the names of these scholars and their teachers, and of the works they learnt, remain obscure. We may just assume that, before the 9th/15th century, there may have been a certain mobility of West African scholars towards the Maghrib, and from North African scholars into the *bilād al-sūdān*, following the trans-Saharan trade routes. However, in the 10th/16th-century the impact that the Orient had in the diffusion of Islamic learning in West Africa was probably bigger, although its reach probably was reduced to the elite of the 'ulamā'.

Map 2

Aḥmad Bābā's biographical works include what may be considered, up to our present knowledge, as the first West African detailed account on the intellectual activities of scholars from the *bilād al-sūdān*. His works *Nayl al-ibtihāj* and *Kifāyat al-muḥtāj* include the biographies of fifteen 'ulamā', including himself, among hundreds of other jurists of the Mālikī *madhhab*. In these works, as well as in the so-called *Timbuktu Chronicles*, there are barely any references of scholars traveling to the Maghrib *fī ṭalab al-'ilm* in the 10th/16th century and beyond. Only one of the *sūdānī* scholars that appear in Aḥmad Bābā's *ṭabaqāt* works, Makhlūf al-Balbālī,²⁸ traveled to study at Fez and other locations in the Maghrib. However, it does seem that the mobility of scholars between the Maghrib and West Africa took place mainly southwards, where Timbuktu as well as other cities, such as Jenne, Gao, Kano or Katsina, attracted scholars who settled there to teach.²⁹

Mobility within the *bilād al-sūdān* followed the routes of the expansion of Islam, with the earliest Muslim communities, and also most important trade hubs, Jenne being probably one of these first nuclei, which acted as poles for the diffusion of scholars who settled in newer locations and spread their knowledge. In later periods, from the 9th/15th

²⁸ V. *supra*, footnote 24.

²⁹ The mentions are especially abundant in the case of scholars from Tuwāt. See Voguet, É., "Tlemcen-Touat-Tombouctou: un réseau transsaharien de diffusion du Mālikisme (fin VIII/XIV^{ème}–XI/XVII^{ème} siècles)", *Revue des Mondes Musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, 141 (2017), 259–279. About the influence of North Africa, see Cuoq, J., *Histoire de l'islamisation de l'Afrique de l'Ouest*, 108–110; Levzion, N., *Ancient Ghana and Mali*, London: Methuen, 1973, 201–202. Also, Konate, D., "Les relations culturelles entre Fès et le Mali entre le XIV^{ème} et le XVI^{ème} siècles", in *Fès et l'Afrique. Relations économiques, culturelles et spirituelles*, Rabat: Publications de l'Institut des Études Africaines, 1995, 48–49.

century onwards, scholars also moved to other locations in order to learn from specific, more prestigious teachers, and this caused concentrations of scholarly households in places such as Timbuktu, with others such as Kābara probably before it, which later became the main hub in West Africa. From this city, the teaching networks in the *bilād al-sūdān* were extended to other locations, such as Kano or Katsina, following the direction of the consolidation of Islam in other West African territories. This was the case of some of the members of the Aqīt household, who became *qāḍīs* in Kano or Katsina.³⁰ Some places of learning were abandoned by the '*ulamā*' when their commercial importance declined: this was the case of Walāta, which flourished during the 9th/15th century, and lent its place to Timbuktu in the period that followed.³¹ Political upheaval was another cause of migration for West African scholars, as shows the episode of the escape of some of the Timbuktu scholarly households (we may assume that they were accompanied by relatives engaged in commercial activities) due to their persecution by the Songhay ruler Sonni 'Alī Ber in the early 10th/16th century. The notables moved back to Walāta for some time running away from his violent reprisals, then returned to Timbuktu. Quite surprisingly, the biographies featured in Aḥmad Bābā's *ṭabaqāt* works do not mention the intellectual activities that these scholars engaged in Walāta, nor anything related to the relevance of the tradition of learning of that town.

Timbuktu was also one of the main centers of the book trade of the *bilād al-sūdān* and of the book copying industry that "distributed" knowledge into the area. The mobility of manuscripts was also propitiated by trans-Saharan trade, as has been shown in studies of this domain.³² From what we can infer from the manuscript copies that have been preserved in public and private libraries south of the Sahara, works from every part of the Islamic world, early or late, were known and discussed by the elite of the '*ulamā*' in the *bilād al-sūdān*. A great amount of these works, especially in the domains of law and jurisprudence, came from the Maghrib. What has been described as the "core curriculum" of West African '*ulamā*' included the fundamental works of the Mālikī school of law, mainly from North African authors. However, this predominance

³⁰ About the diffusion of Islamic learning in the area of the Central Sahel, see Hamani, D., *L'islam au Soudan central*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007.

³¹ About this Saharan town in the Southwest of present-day Mauritania, see Cleaveland, T., "Timbuktu and Walāta: lineages and higher education", in Bachir Diagne, S., and Jeppie, S., *The Meanings of Timbuktu*, Cape Town: HSRC, 2008, 77–93. And from the same author, *Becoming Walāta. A History of Saharan Formation and Transformation*, Portsmouth (NH): Heinemann, 2002. Also Osswald, R., *Schichtengesellschaft und islamisches Recht. Die zawāyā und Krieger der Westsahara im Spiegel von Rechtsgutachten des 16.–19. Jahrhunderts*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1993.

³² Brigaglia, A., and Nobili, M., eds., *The Arts and Crafts of Literacy*, Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2017. Also Krätli, G., and Lydon, G., eds., *The Trans-Saharan Book Trade*, *op. cit.*

was accompanied by the central role of certain Eastern figures of this *madhhab*, such as Khalīl b. Ishāq and his *Mukhtaṣar*, which became the most popular legal work in the region. The *Mukhtaṣar*'s foremost place in *sūdānī* legal literature did not have any parallel in other genres, but many other Egyptian works made their way beyond the Sahara, their arrival being however hard to date.

From the 10th/16th century onwards, which is the first period to be dealt with in West African sources, the knowledge transfer from Eastern teachers takes place directly during the stay in Cairo of some of the West African 'ulamā' on the occasion of pilgrimage to Mecca. While the *Timbuktu Chronicles* mention that "a large number of scholars" accompanied Mansā Mūsā, ruler of the Mālian Empire, when he performed the *hajj*, this account does not specify nor the names, households or ethnic affiliation of these 'ulamā', neither if they learnt from Egyptian scholars, though we may suppose that they did.³³ Later travels, always related to pilgrimage to Mecca, are related by 11th/17th century West African sources in a much more detailed way, especially in Aḥmad Bābā's biographical works, but not with a broad scope from which we could infer how this phenomenon affected the *bilād al-sūdān* as a whole.³⁴ These works focus on scholars from Timbuktu or with a strong relationship to this city. In the case of Aḥmad Bābā's *ṭabaqāt* works, from which later West African historical and biographical works draw, they only refer to the intellectual development achieved during the stay in Cairo of members of the Aqīt household, or scholars that were very close to it, such as Muḥammad Baghayogho.³⁵ His account omits scholars from other prominent households of the city, and from other relevant places of learning, such as Walāta or Jenne, just to name two very important traditions of Islamic scholarship in the *bilād al-sūdān*, and makes it difficult to discern if the mobility of West African scholars towards Egypt was somehow encouraged or supported by political rulers. The mentions to royal expeditions in Imperial Mālī and Songhay with the participation of notable scholars in them may point at some degree of collaboration or economic support of travel *fī ṭalab al-ilm*, but this issue remains quite unclear.

³³ Al-Sa'dī, *Ta'rīkh al-sūdān*, ed. Houdas, 7-8; English translation by Hunwick, J.O., *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, 9-11.

³⁴ Eight out of the fifteen *sūdānī* scholars included in al-Tinbukti's *ṭabaqāt* spent some time learning in Cairo on the occasion of their pilgrimage to Mecca. See Novo, M.G., "Writing the History of Islamic Law in Africa", *op. cit.*

³⁵ The *Timbuktu Chronicles* draw on Aḥmad Bābā's *Kifāya* for their *tarājim* of some 'ulamā', but so do later works such as the biographical dictionary of al-Bartaylī, (Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr b. Šiddīq al-Walātī, d. 1805), *Faṭḥ al-shakūr li-ma'rifat a'yān 'ulamā' al-Takrūr*, ed. al-Kattānī, M.I., and Ḥajjī, M., Beirut, Dār al-gharb al-islāmī, 1981; French translation in El Hamel, C., *La vie intellectuelle islamique dans le Sahel Ouest-Africain*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2002; and is also the case of Muḥammad Bello's (d. 1837), *Infāq al-maysūr fī ta'rīkh bilād Takrūr*, Rabat: Institut des Études Africaines, 1996.

It is more evident that spending some time in Cairo could not have been a generalized practice in premodern *bilād al-sūdān* because of the economic resources that it implied, and still, shows to what extent the scholarly elites of premodern West Africa may have been wealthy. Although it is very possible that more scholars than those that appear in the sources did travel to Egypt, the effect of those who effectively stayed in Cairo was potentiated as their knowledge spread through the West African scholarly networks when they returned home. The knowledge that they obtained in the central lands of Islam, once again, was transferred for social capital, as these 'ulamā' became the most prestigious and revered teachers of the region, being sought after by scholars from their cities and other places in West Africa. In the case of the Aqīts, what we could define as their "Egyptian capital" coincides with their intellectual and sociopolitical century of grandeur, in which they monopolized the judgeship of Timbuktu. It is difficult to try to find out what came before, if their power or their knowledge, but it seems difficult that they would occupy the most prominent place in an environment that bustled with scholars if they wouldn't have overshadowed their neighbors, their rivals, with the distinction brought about by what they had learnt in the Orient. The scope of the Egyptian influence over West African 'ulamā' is also witnessed by the abundance of summaries, commentaries and works inspired by Egyptian authors that were produced in the *bilād al-sūdān*, as has already been brought up by several authors.³⁶

There is another relevant aspect in what refers to geographic mobility in Aḥmad Bābā's *ṭabaqāt*, which should be taken into consideration: the deportation of the author himself, and its consequences in his writings. Although the work *Nayl al-ibtihāj* was probably started before the Sa'dian invasion of the *bilād al-sūdān*, a great part of it, and probably some of the biographies of members of the Aqīt Household that were featured in it, were composed during the period of forced exile that he suffered in Marrakech, where he was taken along with other prominent members of his clan as a punishment for their opposition to Moroccan rule over the Songhay territories. In such a context, the *tarājim* of the Aqīts can be understood as his credentials to the learned elites of the Sa'did capital, who revered his vast knowledge, but really could not "contextualize" his social position. His omission of scholars other than those from his own household, which clearly obscures the trajectories of many other West African scholars, from Timbuktu and from other relevant locations, may have intended to emphasize his role as a reference on *sūdānī* matters for North African scholars. Some of the legal opinions that he issued for the Maghribian audience are related to trade affairs between North Africa and the *bilād al-sūdān*, of which his legal responses (*Ajwiba*) on slavery, forerunning his

³⁶ See Hall, B.S. and Stewart, C.S., "The historic "core curriculum"", *op. cit.*

renowned *fatwa*, the work *Mi'rāj al-ṣu'ūd*, are a paramount example.³⁷ The beginnings of the 11th/17th century witnessed a sharp increase of trade between the *bilād al-sūdān* and North Africa, which may also explain the author's popularity as an informed but unofficial *muftī*, who could authoritatively deliver legitimate opinions about a region that most North Africans very much ignored.

The context in which the works *Nayl al-ibtihāj* and *Kifāyat al-muḥtāj* were composed, that of Aḥmad Bābā's forced exile in Marrakech, as mentioned before, could explain his silence on the intellectual ties of the *bilād al-sūdān* and the Maghrib, in the sense that he may have intended to differentiate himself from the 'ulamā of Marrakech by highlighting the Egyptian background of his knowledge, while obscuring the one with a clear North African origin. However, it is also possible that his emphasis on his Oriental learning, although an effective way to distinguish himself from the 'ulamā of Marrakech, may also reflect the change of trend in the geographical mobility of scholars in premodern West Africa. While traveling to the Maghrib, where Fez was the main scholarly destination, took place in the earlier stages of the spread of Islam in West Africa, it is possible that the high economic levels reached in the Empire of Mālī and after it allowed wealthy households to travel to Egypt instead, where intellectual life could be considered as more attractive. If the relevance of the reference were not so little, perhaps it could be significant that a not so wealthy scholar, who used to work in order to make a living, Makhlūf al-Balbālī, was the only one of the *sūdānī* in Aḥmad Bābā's biographical works who traveled to Fez instead of Egypt.³⁸ Unfortunately, the available textual evidence does not allow to make any substantial conclusion about the mobility of West African 'ulamā up to the 11th/17th century.

Conclusions

Our knowledge of the intellectual life of West Africa before the turn of the 11th/17th century remains sketchy, although we may conclude that the processes of professionalization of Islamic knowledge were clearly those of a context of recent and ongoing Islamization, which were considerably less specialized in the periphery than in the central lands of Islam. It is tempting to identify the self-conscious attitude that emanates from Aḥmad Bābā's *tarājim* of West African scholars with the emergence of the Ṣanhāja and of the dominion of the *bīḍān* in the Sahel. The self-consciousness of the Timbuktu 'ulamā' is clearly distinguishable in the sources that have been reviewed in

³⁷ Aḥmad Bābā's *Ajwiba* on slavery were issued in the *zāwiya* of Tamgrout, in present-day Southern Morocco, where he stopped for an unknown period of time on his way back to Timbuktu, after being released from his forced exile in Marrakech in 1016/1607. The work *Mi'rāj al-ṣu'ūd* was finished in 1024/1616, almost ten years later.

³⁸ V. *supra*, footnote 24.

this chapter, and some details may point at an already existing divide among non-Berber *sūdān* and Berber *bīdān*, such as the almost complete omission of non-Berbers among the *sūdānī* scholars featured in Aḥmad Bābā's *ṭabaqāt*.³⁹ This occurs, too, but is much vaguer in the *Timbuktu Chronicles*, as has been mentioned above in this chapter. This could mean that self-consciousness of the elite of the '*ulamā*' as a body may have been stronger at the time than the ethnic divisions among the *jamā'a*.

In what refers to the process of learning of the Islamic sciences, the sources include too few transmission chains, but they allow us to argue that in the premodern *bilād al-sūdān* Berbers and non-Berbers alike shared the same scholarly background, in whose creation many ethnic groups had participated. It is highly probable that the Timbuktu tradition on which Aḥmad Bābā prided himself before his Maghribian peers flourished from a prior non-Berber tradition, that must have had its origins in locations that he deliberately omitted from his account, such as Kābara, Jenne or Walāta. This tradition of learning had strong ties with the Maghrib, and Maghribian Mālikī jurisprudence remained at the core of the teaching of Islam in the premodern *bilād al-sūdān*. There are, again, too few references of the mobility of West African scholars towards the Maghrib, but it seems quite clear that the influence of the North African communities who settled in different locations south of the Sahara had a determining influence in the intellectual life of the *bilād al-sūdān*, to which, in later periods, a close contact with Cairene scholars would add specialized knowledge on logic and Sufism, among other subjects of study.

Early in his career, in the *opusculum* called *Jalb al-ni'ma*, Aḥmad Bābā started reflecting on the social and political circumstances around him, which were those of the violent strife of the descendants of Askya Muḥammad, which lasted for decades.⁴⁰ The situation may explain his interest in the nature of political power and social leadership, *riyāsa*, a term that occurs a number of times in his biographies of members of his household. Al-Tinbuktu's interest in the sociopolitical role of the '*ulamā*' may also have its origin in the very close relationships of Songhay rulers with the scholarly elites of Timbuktu, to which he belonged. We only know one side of this relationship, as what we can read in the *Timbuktu Chronicles* is certainly the view of the city's '*ulamā*'. So it is difficult to try to evaluate the extent to which they participated in the successional conflict of the Songhay princes, though some mentions indicate that they did

³⁹ See Hall, B., *A History of race in Muslim West Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, 55–68.

⁴⁰ V. *supra*, footnote 8.

collaborate with some of the throne pretenders.⁴¹ The Timbuktu notables had a history of getting involved in political conflicts, as was the case when Sonni 'Alī, first ruler of the Songhay Empire, came to power at the end of the 9th/15th century, the *jamā'a* of Sankoré had backed Akil, and therefore the Tuareg, in his conflict with the new power, probably by questioning the religious legitimacy of Sonni 'Alī. This was clearly reflected in the animosity with which the *Timbuktu Chronicles* portray the new ruler, almost as a pagan.⁴²

Despite the image of power and moral victory of the Timbuktu *jamā'a* over Songhay rulers that can be observed in Aḥmad Bābā's biographical works as well as in the Timbuktu *Tawārīkh*, the symbiosis that existed between the Empire and its preeminent scholars allowed for some independence on their behalf, though surely less than what we can read in the sources.⁴³ It is highly doubtful that the elite of the '*ulamā*', as a representative of the interests of the major households of Timbuktu, could directly challenge the rule of Gao and its intricate administrative organization and that responded to tax collection and the keeping of order and safety, especially in the trade routes that were fundamental for the economic functioning of the Empire.⁴⁴ A body of '*ulamā*', from scholars in religious positions to secretaries, and from *imāms* to the great *quḍāt*, was a fundamental structure for the political authorities, although their power, the symbolic capital derived from religious legitimacy, may have at times been hard to handle, since, as we have seen through the history of the Aqīt household, a knowledge career in 10th/16th century *bilād al-sūdān* could promote social advancement, even to the highest levels of sociopolitical leadership.

Bibliography

Sources

⁴¹ The Timbuktu '*ulamā*' took the side of one of the pretenders of the Songhay throne, Muḥammad al-Ṣādiq, whose rebellion is described in al-Sa'dī, *Ta'rikh al-sūdān*, 121–124; English translation in Hunwick, J.O., *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, 168–171.

⁴² See Gomez, M.A., *African dominion*, 183–184.

⁴³ In Aḥmad Bābā's biographical works, see the description of the author's father, Aḥmad b. Aḥmad b. 'Umar b. Muḥammad Aqīt (d. 991/1583), in Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbuktī, *Nayl al-ibtihāj*, ed. al-Harrāma, #144, 141–2; *Kifāyat al-muhtāj*, ed. Muṭī', I, #94, 137–9; Al-Bartaylī, *Fath al-shakūr*, VI, 29–30; Kaḥḥāla, 'U. R., *Mu'jam al-mu'allifin*, II, 33; Cherbonneau, M., *Essai*, 21–4. Also see Hunwick, J.O. (ed.), *Arabic Literature of Africa IV*, 15–17. See also in the biographies of the *qāḍīs* Maḥmūd b. 'Umar Aqīt and his son, al-'Āqib, v. *supra*, footnote 15. For the Timbuktu *Tawārīkh*, see Al-Sa'dī, *Ta'rikh al-sūdān*, 110; English translation in Hunwick, J.O., *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, 154. See also De Moraes Farias, P., "Intellectual innovation and reinvention of the Sahel: the seventeenth-century Timbuktu Chronicles", in Jeppie, S., and Bachir Diagne, S. (eds.), *The meanings of Timbuktu*, Cape Town: Human Sciences Research Council, 2008, 97. Also, v. *supra* the works of Stewart, C., and Hall, B., footnote 3.

⁴⁴ The institutions and authorities of Songhay administration were brightly described by Hunwick in "Songhay: an interpretative essay", the introduction of his *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*.

Novo, Marta G. 2021. "The Aqīt household: professional mobility of a Berber learned elite in premodern West Africa". En *Professional Mobility in Islamic Societies (700-1750): New Concepts and Approaches*, eds. Mehdi Berriah y Mohamad El-Merheb, 52-76. Leiden: Brill, Handbook of Oriental Studies-Section 1 Middle East Series. ISBN: 978-90-04-4672-0. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004467637_005.

‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Sa’dī, *Ta’rīkh al-sūdān*. Arabic text and French translation by O. Houdas (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1900). English translation in Hunwick, J.O., *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire. Al-Sa’dī’s Ta’rīkh al-sūdān down to 1613 and Other Contemporary Documents*, Leiden: Brill, 1999.

Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbuktī, *Kifāyat al-muḥtāj li-ma’rifat man laysa fī l-Dībāj*, intr. and ed. Mutī, M., Rabat: Wizārat al-awqāf wa-l-shu’ūn al-islāmiyya, 2000, vol. 2, 281.

----- *Mi’rāj al-ṣu’ūd. Aḥmad Bābā’s Replies on slavery*, Rabat: Institut des Études Africaines, 2000.

----- *Nayl al-ibtihāj bi-taṭrīz al-Dībāj*, ed. ‘Amar, M., Cairo: Maktabat al-thaqāfa al-dīniyya, 2004, 2 vols.; ed. al-Harrāma, ‘A. H., Tripoli (Lybia): Kulliyat al-da’wa al-islāmiyya, 2000; ed. on the margins of Ibn Farḥūn’s *al-Dībāj al-mudhhab*, Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-Ma‘āhid, 1932.

----- *Tuḥfat al-fuḍalā’ bi-ba‘ḍ faḍā’il al-‘ulamā’*, ed. Sāmī, S., Rabat: Institut des Études Africaines, 1992.

Al-Baghdādī, *Hādiyat al-‘arīfīn, asmā’ al-mu’allifīn wa-āthār al-muṣannifīn*, ed. Bilge, R. and Inal, M. K., Istanbul: Wikālat al-ma‘ārif, 1951–1955.

----- *Īdāḥ al-maknūn fī l-dhayl ‘alā kashf al-ẓunūn ‘an asāmī l-kutub wa-l-funūn*, ed. Yaltakaya, S., Beirut: Dār al-kutub al-‘ilmiyya, 1992.

Al-Bartaylī, *Fath al-shakūr li-ma’rifat a’yān ‘ulamā’ al-Takrūr*, ed. al-Kattānī, M.I., and Ḥajjī, M., Beirut, Dār al-gharb al-islāmī, 1981; French translation in El Hamel, C., *La vie intellectuelle islamique dans le Sahel Ouest-Africain*, Paris: L’Harmattan, 2002.

Al-Muḥibbī, *Khulāṣat al-athar fī a’yān al-qarn al-ḥādī ‘ashar*, Beirut: Dār Ṣāḍir, 1966.

Al-Qādirī, *Nashr al-mathānī*, ed. Ḥajjī, M. and Tawfīq, A., Rabat: al-Jama‘iyya al-maghribiyya li-l-ta’līf, 1986.

Bello, M., *Infāq al-maysūr fī ta’rīkh bilād Takrūr*, Rabat: Institut des Études Africaines, 1996.

Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Tuḥfat al-nuẓẓār fī gharā’ib al-amṣār wa-‘ajā’ib al-asfār*, ed. Defrémery, C., and Sanguinetti, B.R., Paris: Anthopos, 1968, IV, 394-5 and 397-8.

Maḥmūd Ka’tī Ibn al-Ḥājj al-Mutawakkil, *Ta’rīkh al-fattāsh fī akhbār al-buldān*, Arabic text and French translation by Houdas, O., and Delafosse, M., Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1913.

Studies

Bivar, H.D., and Hiskett, M., "The Arabic Literature of Nigeria to 1804: a provisional account", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 25, 3 (1962), 110–1.

Brigaglia, A., and Nobili, M., eds., *The Arts and Crafts of Literacy*, Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2017.

Brockelmann, C., *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur*, Leiden: Brill, 1937–1942.

Novo, Marta G. 2021. **"The Aqīt household: professional mobility of a Berber learned elite in premodern West Africa"**. En *Professional Mobility in Islamic Societies (700-1750): New Concepts and Approaches*, eds. Mehdi Berriah y Mohamad El-Merheb, 52-76. Leiden: Brill, Handbook of Oriental Studies-Section 1 Middle East Series. ISBN: 978-90-04-4672-0. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004467637_005.

Castries, H. de, "La conquête du Soudan par Moulaye Ahmed el-Mansôur", *Hespéris*, III (1923), 438–88.

Cherbonneau, M., *Essai sur la littérature arabe au Soudan d'après le Takmilet-ed-dibadje d'Ahmed Baba, le Tombouctien*, Constantine-Paris: Abadie, A. Leleux, 1861.

Cleaveland, T., "Timbuktu and Walāta: lineages and higher education", in Bachir Diagne, S., and Jeppie, S., *The Meanings of Timbuktu*, Cape Town: HSRC, 2008.

Cleaveland, T., *Becoming Walāta. A History of Saharan Formation and Transformation*, Portsmouth (NH): Heinemann, 2002.

----- "Timbuktu and Walāta: lineages and higher education", in Bachir Diagne, S., and Jeppie, S. (eds.), *The Meanings of Timbuktu*, Cape Town: HSRC, 2008, 77-94.

Cuoq, J., *Histoire de l'islamisation de l'Afrique de l'Ouest*, Paris: Geuthner, 1984.

De Moraes Farias, P., "Intellectual innovation and reinvention of the Sahel: the seventeenth-century Timbuktu Chronicles", in Bachir Diagne, S., and Jeppie, S. (eds.), *The Meanings of Timbuktu*, Cape Town: HSRC, 2008, 95-108.

García Novo, M., "Islamic law and slavery in premodern West Africa", *Entremóns. UPF Journal of World History*, 2 (2011), 1-20.

----- "Writing the history of Islamic law in West Africa: scholars from the *bilād al-sūdān* in Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbuktī's biographical works", *Die Welt des Islams* (forthcoming).

García-Arenal, M., *Aḥmad al-Manṣūr. The Beginnings of Modern Morocco*, London: Oneworld, 2009.

Gomez, M.A., *African Dominion: A New History of Empire in Early and Medieval West Africa*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019.

Hall, B., *A History of race in Muslim West Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

----- "Rethinking the place of Timbuktu in the Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa", in Green, T., and Rossi, B., (eds.), *Landscapes, Sources and Intellectual Projects of the West African Past*, Leiden: Brill, 2018, 239–258.

Hamani, D., *L'islam au Soudan central*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007.

Hunwick, J.O., "Aḥmad Bābā and the Moroccan invasion of the Sudan (1591)", *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 2/3 (1962), 311–328.

----- "A new source for the biography of Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbuktī (1556–1627)", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 27, 3 (1964), 568.

----- "Further light on Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbuktī", *Research Bulletin, Centre of Arabic Documentation*, 1, 2 (1966), 19–31.

----- "Studies in the *Tārīkh al-fattāsh* I: Its Authors and Textual History," *Research Bulletin – Centre of Arabic Documentation*, 5 (1969), 57–65.

Novo, Marta G. 2021. **"The Aqīt household: professional mobility of a Berber learned elite in premodern West Africa"**. En *Professional Mobility in Islamic Societies (700-1750): New Concepts and Approaches*, eds. Mehdi Berriah y Mohamad El-Merheb, 52-76. Leiden: Brill, Handbook of Oriental Studies-Section 1 Middle East Series. ISBN: 978-90-04-4672-0. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004467637_005.

----- "A contribution to the study of Islamic teaching traditions in West Africa: the career of Muḥammad Baghayogho, 930/1523–4", *Islam et Sociétés au Sud du Sahara*, (1990), 149–62.

----- "Studies in the *Ta'rīkh al-fattāsh* II: An Alleged Charter of Privilege Issued by Askiya al-Ḥājj Muḥammad to the Descendants of Mori Hawgāro," *Sudanic Africa*, 3 (1992), 133–148.

Hunwick, J.O. (ed.), *Arabic Literature of Africa IV*, Leiden: Brill, 2003.

Kaḥḥāla, 'U. R., *Mu'jam al-mu'allifīn. Tarājim muṣannifī al-kutub al-'arabiyya*, Damascus: al-Maktaba al-'arabiyya, 1957–1961.

Konate, D., "Les relations culturelles entre Fès et le Mali entre le XIV^{ème} et le XVI^{ème} siècles", in *Fès et l'Afrique. Relations économiques, culturelles et spirituelles*, Rabat: Publications de l'Institut des Études Africaines, 1995, 48–49.

Levtzion, N., "A Seventeenth-Century Chronicle by Ibn al-Mukhtār: A Critical Study of *Ta'rīkh al-fattāsh*," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 34, 3 (1971), 571–593.

----- *Ancient Ghana and Mali*, London: Methuen, 1973.

Levtzion, N. and Pouwells, R., *The History of Islam in Africa*, Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000.

Makhlūf, M., *Shajarat al-nūr al-zakiyya fī ṭabaqāt al-mālikiyya*, Cairo: 1930.

Nobili, M., *Sultan, Caliph, and the Renewer of the Faith: Ahmad Lobbo, the Tārīkh Al-Fattāsh and the Making of an Islamic State in West Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

Norris, H. T., "Ṣanhājah Scholars of Timbuctoo", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 30, 3 (1967), 634-640.

Osswald, R., *Schichtengesellschaft und islamisches Recht. Die zawāyā und Krieger der Westsahara im Spiegel von Rechtsgutachten des 16.–19. Jahrhunderts*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1993.

Pianel, G., "Les préliminaires de la conquête du Soudan par Moulaye Ahmed el-Mansour, d'après trois documents inédits", *Hespéris*, XL (1953), 185–97.

Saad, E.N., *Social History of Timbuktu. The role of Muslim Scholars and Notables, 1400–1900*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Sadki, Ḥ., *Makḥṭūṭāt Aḥmad Bābā al-Tinbuktī fī-l-khazā'in al-maghribiyya*, Rabat: Institut des Études Africaines, 1996.

Stewart, C., "Calibrating the scholarship of Timbuktu", in Green, T., and Rossi, B., (eds.), *Landscapes, Sources and Intellectual Projects of the West African Past*, Leiden: Brill, 2018, 220–238.

Novo, Marta G. 2021. **“The Aqīt household: professional mobility of a Berber learned elite in premodern West Africa”**. En *Professional Mobility in Islamic Societies (700-1750): New Concepts and Approaches*, eds. Mehdi Berriah y Mohamad El-Merheb, 52-76. Leiden: Brill, Handbook of Oriental Studies-Section 1 Middle East Series. ISBN: 978-90-04-4672-0. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004467637_005.

Stewart, C., and Hall, B., “The historic “core curriculum” and the book market in Islamic West Africa”, in Krätli, G., and Lydon, G., eds., *The Trans-Saharan Book Trade*, Leiden: Brill, 2011, 109-174.

Van Dalen, D., *Doubt, Scholarship and Society in 17th-Century Central Sudanic Africa*, Leiden: Brill, 2016.

Voguet, É., “Tlemcen-Touat-Tombouctou: un réseau transsaharien de diffusion du Mālikisme (fin VIII/XIVème–XI/XVIIème siècles”, *Revue des Mondes Musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, 141 (2017), 259–279.

Wilks, I., “The transmission of Islamic learning in the Western Sudan”, in Goody, J. (ed.), *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968, 162–197.

Zouber, M., *Aḥmad Bābā de Tombouctou (1556/1627): sa vie et son œuvre*, Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1977.