

THE WRITINGS OF WESTERN SUDANIC AFRICA
OVERVIEW

Western Sudanic Africa constitutes a large and diverse region. This volume only attempts to cover certain parts of it—those where sufficient research has been done, and where a strong manuscript tradition exists. To a large extent this also reflects the areas where Islamic scholarly and literary traditions have been most prominent.

One of the key centres of Islamic scholarship, from a millenium ago right down to the twentieth century, has been Timbuktu; and not only the city itself—though this was the inspirational heart—but also the neighbouring regions of Azawād, the semi-desert region to the north of the Middle Niger, and the western reaches of the Niger Bend from Gimbala down to Māsina. As Timbuktu established itself as a centre of commercial interchange between tropical Africa and Saharan and Mediterranean Africa during the fourteenth century, it began to attract men of religion as well as men of business—the two categories sometimes overlapping. The city was early settled by members of the Masūfa tribe of the Ṣanhāja confederation following the apparent dissolution of the Almoravid movement in sub-Saharan Africa. To what extent they brought with them the Mālīkī juristic tradition is not clear. When Ibn Baṭṭūṭa visited Timbuktu in 1352 he noted the predominance of the Masūfa, but had nothing to say about Islamic learning there. A century later, however, a Masūfa clan—the Aqīt—migrated to Timbuktu from Māsina, and they clearly brought with them a deep tradition of learning, especially in the sphere of *fiqh*. Muḥammad Aqīt's descendants, intermarried with another Berber, and possibly Ṣanhāja, family, provided the *qāḍīs* of Timbuktu over the next century and a half.

But such Saharan peoples were not the sole source of Islamic knowledge in Timbuktu at that period. In fact, the most celebrated member of the Aqīt clan, Aḥmad Bābā (1564-1627) had as his principal shaykh a Juula scholar from Jenne, Muḥammad Baghayogho. The Juula were undoubtedly among the first West Africans to acquire Islamic knowledge, being originally a merchant group who traded gold with North African merchants in Ancient Ghana. They may well have been influenced eventually by Almoravid Mālīkī teachings. At some point in time (perhaps after the break-up of

Ancient Ghana), some of them settled in the Māsina region, and by the fifteenth century had opened up a trade route southwards from Jenne for acquiring gold being mined in the Akan forests of what is now the Republic of Ghana. Some also moved into the central Niger Bend region, especially Timbuktu, whilst others moved eastwards to Hausaland. They played a significant role in bringing Islam to areas of what are now the Ivory Coast, and southern Burkina Faso. Another group of them, originally settled in Diakha in the Māsina region, dispersed westwards, and became celebrated as proponents of Islamic knowledge under the name Diakhanke (i.e. people of Diakha), better known as the Jahanke. Timbuktu distinguished itself from the sixteenth century onwards as a centre of study which attracted students from many parts of West Africa, and scholars of Saharan oases from Walāta to Awjila, and also from North African cities. The city’s educational reputation has led some people to speak of a Timbuktu university, beginning with Félix Dubois, who wrote of the “University of Sankore”.¹ While the Sankore quarter in the north-east of Timbuktu certainly was an area which attracted many scholars to live in it, nevertheless, there is no evidence of any institutionalized centre of learning. Teaching of some texts was undertaken in the Sankore mosque, and also in the Sīdī Yaḥyā mosque and the “Great Mosque” —*Jingere Bēr*—but teaching authorizations (*ijāza*) always came directly from the shaykhs with whom the students studied. Much of the teaching was done in the scholar’s homes, and individual scholars had their own personal research and teaching libraries. In terms of writings, Timbuktu was noted for its *fiqh* works right down to the twentieth century, and apart from anything else, there is a rich *fatwā* literature in the Timbuktu region. Timbuktu is also noted as a source of historical writing. One of the earliest such works, the *Jawāhir al-ḥisān* was a product of the sixteenth century written by one Bābā Gūru b. *al-ḥājj* Muḥammad b. *al-ḥājj* al-Amīn Gānū, of whom nothing is known, and whose book has never come to light, but is known of, since it was a source for the celebrated *Ta’rīkh al-fattāsh*, written by members of the Ka’ṭi family. A twentieth-century scholar, Aḥmad Bābēr (d. 1997), wrote a book with the same title designated to take the place of the lost sixteenth century work. The other great chronicle of Timbuktu and the Middle Niger region, the *Ta’rīkh al-*

¹ Félix Dubois, *Timbuctoo the Mysterious*, London: William Heinemann, 1897, 275.

Sūdān of °Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sa°dī, was written at about the same time as the *Ta°riḫ al-fattāsh*, (mid-1650s), while roughly a century later an anonymous chronicle, *Dīwān al-mulūk fī salāṭīn al-sūdān*, recorded the history of Timbuktu and its region under the rule of the Moroccan forces from 1591 onwards. The Timbuktu chronicle tradition appears to have spread far and wide over West Africa. In what is now the Republic of Ghana there has been a strong chronicling tradition, beginning with the *Kitāb Ghanjā* in the early eighteenth century. Following the Moroccan conquest of Timbuktu in 1591, many of the city’s scholars dispersed, and it is known that some went as far south as the Volta river basin. That region (called in Chapter 12 “The Greater Voltaic Region”) was also a meeting point for scholars from east and west. From the west came Juula scholars, from the time of the establishment of the trade route from Jenne, leading down to the town of Begho just north of the Akan forests. Others established themselves in towns of the northern Ivory Coast such as Bonduku, Buna, and Kong, and eventually in Ghanaian polities such as Wa and Gonja. From the east, in the late seventeenth century, merchants from what is now northern Nigeria began to pursue their trading activities in the Greater Voltaic basin, while in the late nineteenth century such activity brought in trader-scholars such as *al-ḥājj* °Umar b. Abī Bakr, originally from Kebbi, who settled and made his scholarly reputation in Salaga.

In a very broad sense, Arabic writings of Western Sudanic Africa may be classified under four headings: historical, pedagogical, devotional, and polemical. Historical writings help Muslim communities to establish and confirm their identities, a necessary exercise for those living in remote areas surrounded largely by non-Muslim peoples, but also valuable in terms of community solidarity for those dwelling in recognized centres of Islam, such as Timbuktu, Arawān, or Jenne. Only occasionally, in the twentieth century (and under the influence of European colonial administrators), do we find a broader, and what might be called more “secular”, approach to history. A notable example of this is the celebrated *Zuhūr al-basātīn* of the Senegalese writer Mūsā Kamara (d. 1943 or 1945), a broad history of the lands and peoples of Futa Toro and its neighbours; some writings of *al-ḥājj* °Umar b. Abī Bakr of Kete-Krayke in Ghana (d. 1934) also fall into this category. He also wrote works in verse that are of historical significance, including an account of the 1892 civil war in Salaga, and commentaries on colonial intrusions into the Volta region. The historical writing tradition of what is now

the north of the Republic of Ghana is very rich. As Bradford Martin (1966, 83) wrote: “If this material could be used for research it would contribute very greatly to a rewriting of the history of this region, which is so badly needed”.

Pedagogical writings arise from the need for students to have text books. Whilst texts from outside of West Africa circulated within the region, teaching shaykhs often abridged some of them, wrote commentaries on them, or versified them so as to make them easier for students to memorize. This was especially true in great educational centres such as Timbuktu, but is also characteristic of the Greater Voltaic region, where, no doubt, copies of texts from elsewhere were rather more difficult to obtain, due to the remoteness of the region from the trans-Saharan trade networks. Noteworthy among such teachers was *al-Ḥājj* Marḥabā (d. 1401/ 1981), who wrote treatises on aspects of the Arabic language, but who was also noteworthy for his writings on Muslim communities of the region.

Devotional writings are common throughout West Africa, written both in Arabic and in local languages, such as Fulfulde. Both al-Mukhtār al-Kuntī (d. 1811) and his son Muḥammad (d. 1241/ 1825-6) wrote a considerable number of prayers which have been preserved and recopied over the past two centuries. Al-Mukhtār also wrote a major work on devotion for the Prophet, *Nafḥ al-ṭīb fī 'l-ṣalāt 'alā 'l-nabī al-ḥabīb*, which was commented on by his son, who himself wrote a collection of panegyrics of the Prophet, *al-Sitr al-dā'im li'l-mudhnib al-hā'im*. Poems in praise of the Prophet, and seeking his intercession are indeed a popular form of writing. Aḥmad Bamba (d. 1927), the Senegalese Sufi leader, wrote dozens of such poems, and these are recited by members of his *ṭarīqa* in chanting fashion rather like the singing of hymns in Protestant Christian communities. Paper copies of many of these are available in the form of market editions reproduced in Dakar. In the other widespread Sufi *ṭarīqa* of the Senegambia region, the Tijāniyya, there is a considerable volume of writing, especially poetry, in praise of the originator of the *ṭarīqa*, Aḥmad al-Tijānī, and beseeching him to bless, and intercede on behalf of, his adherents. The most famous writer of such works was the Senegalese Tijānī leader Ibrāhīm Niasse (d. 1975), whose *al-Kibrīt al-aḥmar* is entirely made up of such poems. He also wrote and published a collection of six *dīwāns* totalling nearly 3,000 verses, but these were in praise of the Prophet Muḥammad. Ibrāhīm Niasse himself became an almost legendary figure in West Africa, and was regarded as a saint by many of his

numerous followers. As a result, many writers in the region wrote poems honouring him.

As for polemical writing, that is mainly a feature of the rivalry between the Qādiriyya and the Tijāniyya *ṭarīqas*, which surfaces in the mid-nineteenth century, or under the influence of Wahhābī teachings, attacks on Sufism as a whole, generally in the second half of the twentieth century as the Saudi Arabian impact on Muslim Africa increased. In the nineteenth century the Kunta scholar Aḥmad al-Bakkāʾī (d. 1865) was a leading anti-Tijānī polemicist, not least because his authority over the Timbuktu region was challenged by the Tijānī conqueror *al-hājj* ʿUmar (d. 1864). Some of his sharpest conflict was with a Qādirī “convert” to the Tijāniyya, generally known as Yirkoy Talfī (or in Arabic [translation] Wadīʿat Allāh), whose strong response was to “make al-Bakkaʾī weep”—*Tabkiyat al-Bakkāʾī*. Aḥmad al-Bakkaʾī not only attacked local Tijānīs, but even entered into polemic with a Moroccan Tijānī, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad Akansūs (d. 1877), to whom he addressed the treatise *Fath al-Quddūs fī ʾl-radd ʿalā Abī ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad Akansūs*, as a rebuttal of the latter’s *al-Jawāb al-muskit*. In the twentieth century a leading early figure in such polemics was ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Yūsuf al-Ifrīqī (d. 1957), a Malian scholar who studied in Saudi Arabia, and who wrote *al-Anwār al-Raḥmāniyya li-hidāyat al-firqa al-Tijāniyya*, an attack on the Tijāniyya, and encouragement to its adherents to abandon it. Very recently in Senegal there has been a sharp controversy over Sufism. Muḥammad Aḥmad Lo, a scholar with Saudi connections published his *Taqdīs al-ashkhāṣ fī ʾl-fikr al-sūfī* in Riyāḍ in 1996, to which Shaykh Tijān Gaye wrote as a response, *Kitāb al-taqdīs bayn al-talbīs waʾl-tadlīs waʾl-tadnīs*. Most recently (1997) Muḥammad Aḥmad Lo published (evidently in Saudi Arabia) his doctoral thesis with the title *Jināyat al-taʾwīl al-fāsid ʿalā ʾl-ʿaqīda al-Islāmiyya* which constitutes an attack on many interpretations of Islam, including both Twelver and Ismāʿīlī Shīʿism, and Islamic philosophers, and culminates with an attack on Sufism. Western Sudanic Africa is not, of course, the only locus of such polemics. Anti-Sufi writing and responses thereto are also to be found in Central Sudanic Africa, specifically Nigeria (see *ALA II*, chapter 13).

In addition to the abundant Islamic literature written in Arabic in Western Sudanic Africa, there are also Islamic literatures in African languages. The best known of these (and perhaps the most abundant) is the Fulfulde literature of Futa Jallon in Guinea (see Chapter 10).

Fulfulde was also written in Futa Toro in Senegal, but little is known of it other than the famous *qaṣīda* of Muḥammad °Alī Cam (or Mohammadou Aliou Tyam), a supporter of *al-ḥājj* °Umar, whose poem is about the latter's life and work. In Senegal there is also writing in Wolof, using the Arabic script (see, for example Serigne Mūsā Ka), but it has not been possible to incorporate much of that literature into the present volume. In Mali the Songhay language has also been written in Arabic characters, and some Songhay devotional poems are preserved in the Centre Ahmad Baba in Timbuktu, but again, it has not been possible to list such material. Finally, it must be pointed out that some Muslim writers of the twentieth century have composed works in French, or translated some of their Arabic writings into French. Noteworthy among such writers is Sa°d b. °Umar b. Sa°id Jeliya (known as Saad Oumar Touré), director of a school in Segou, who has written five works in French as well as twenty-one in Arabic. The Senegalese founder of the Union Culturelle Muslumane, Cheikh Touré (b. 1925) has written mainly in French - eight books and some twenty articles. The practice of writing in English in an anglophone country such as Ghana appears to be less common. The only clear example is a bi-lingual work by Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Kāmil (b. 1936), a disciple of Aḥmad Bābah al-Wā°iz, and director of the school he founded in Kumase. That work is his *Bayān niṣāb al-zakāt al-ḥawlī li'l-dhahab wa-qīmat rub° al-dīnār al-shar°ī fi °umlat sīdī al-ghānī. Notes on Zakat and Dowry in Islam*, a bi-lingual publication on the minimum amount of capital upon which *zakāt* is to be paid, calculated in Ghanaian cedis, and the lawful minimum dowry payment in cedis.

The future may well see an increase in the amount of bi-lingual Islamic literature in both francophone and anglophone countries, as the *madrassa* system continues to expand. More and more Islamic schools are being established, many of them combining traditional Islamic teaching in Arabic with elements of "Western" disciplines taught in either French or English. What will be interesting will be to see to what extent more Islamic literature is written and published in African languages—a phenomenon that certainly grew during colonial rule in Guinea. Some authors, however, even use traditional Arabic verse styles to deal with contemporary political (even non-Muslim) figures, or to comment on modern issues. Prominent among these is the Senegalese scholar and Arabic schools inspector Shaykh Tijān Gaye, who has written poems about President Léopold Senghor and Nelson Mandela, and another verse work on Islam and

humanitarian organisations.