Islam in West African Politics: Accommodation and Tension between the ‘ulamā’ and the Political Authorities.
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Résumé
N. Levtzion — Islam et politique en Afrique occidentale : compromis et tensions entre les ulémas et l'autorité politique. L'influence islamique en Afrique occidentale a rencontré peu d'opposition parce que l'islam se présentait initialement comme un complément aux religions traditionnelles plutôt que comme un substitut de ces religions. Le plus souvent, les musulmans observaient une sorte de neutralité politique et guerrière à l'égard des sociétés où ils étaient installés. Les tarikh soudanais relatent cependant une forte tension politique entre les souverains songhai, surtout le sonni Ali Ber, et les ulémas de la mosquée Sankoré de Tombouctou. Les causes en sont vraisemblablement la volonté de ces ulémas de préserver le statut particulier de la ville, ce que le souverain songhai ne pouvait accepter pour des raisons économiques. Plus généralement, il apparaît que l'islam traditionnel maraboutique se prête mieux au compromis avec l'autorité politique que ne le font les tendances réformistes, telle celle d'Othman dan Fodyo.

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Early Islamic influences were more readily accepted in West Africa because Islamic beliefs and practices had at first been accommodated as a supplement to existing religious systems rather than as a substitute. Similarly, Islam and its early representatives—traders and clerics—presented no threat to social structures and values. Muslims were integrated into chiefly courts without undermining the political system. Islam which is prophetic, and therefore an exclusive, religion maintained a symbiotic relationship with African religions and indeed adopted something of their tolerance and open-endness. Adaptation to the local environment in the process of Islamization emphasized parochial and particularistic aspects at the expense of Islamic universalism. During the early stages of the process there had been a greater emphasis on the magical and ritual than on the legal aspects of Islam, and there was little or no articulation of the political content of Islam.

The adaptability of Islam, however, was counterpoised by another basic feature of Islam, which helped maintain the unity of Islam in the presence of many local forms emerging as Islam spread across cultures of great diversity. Islam has a fixed stable core, engraved into the rock of doctrinal and legal literature. It reached the farthest Muslim communities through the widespread network of Islamic education. Trade, pilgrimage and affiliation to šūfi masters and brotherhoods contributed to continuous communications between the centre and the periphery and radiated the message of Islamic universalism, gradually reducing the parochial aspects of Islam in the periphery. Such influences increased the commitment of the individual and the community to Islam by renouncing traditional beliefs and rituals and by adhering more closely to the shari’a. At the political level there was greater awareness of

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the political content of Islam with the emphasis on the State as the necessary framework for the accomplishment of true Islamic life. Accommodation to the existing political system gave way to tensions between the ‘ulamā’ and the political authorities as the former pressed for a radical restructuring of the State according to Islamic models.

The foregoing is an analysis of the process in abstraction, as it were, but historical realities were more complex. The interaction between the ‘ulamā’ and the political authorities was conditioned not only by the level of learning of the former or the degree of islamization of the latter. In the next part of this paper we shall elaborate, still in a general and comparative approach, some features and variants in the relationship between Muslims and chiefs in the pre-jihād States. We shall then proceed with a more detailed study of one of the best documented cases of the role of ‘ulamā’ in politics, that of the Sankore ‘ulamā’ of Timbuktu and their relationship with the political authorities of Songhay. Towards the end of the paper we shall briefly follow the theme of accommodation and tension between the ‘ulamā’ and the political authorities in the post-jihād and the colonial periods.

It is often said that in Islam religion and politics are one, as it is also attested by the example of Muḥammad who was a Prophet and a Statesman. But subsequent political developments prove that even during the time of the first Righteous Caliphs, and more so since the accession of the Umayyad, the political authorities left the ‘ulamā’ with little real political power. ‘Ulamā’ who cooperated with the political authorities did so in a subservient role, whereas other ‘ulamā’, known for their piety, preferred to withdraw from active political life. Some played the role of the intellectual critics while others renounced all interest in politics. For the latter any association with the political authorities implied compromising their religious piety, as rulers were equated with tyranny and injustice.¹

Such an attitude was adopted by the strictest Muslim scholars in Bornu, which by the 16th century had taken the outward forms of an Islamic State. These scholars, who criticised their colleagues for holding institutional offices of the State (as imām, qādī or wazīr), withdrew away from the centres of political power and established autonomous religious communities.²

The Jakhanke might have followed the same scholarly traditions


when they established autonomous communities in Bambukhu, Bondu and on the Gambia. Among the Jakhanke the principle of non-involvement in politics was raised to a doctrinal level, which they considered essential to their communal cohesiveness and their clerical practice. The Jakhanke adhered to this principle not only when they lived in the midst of a non-Muslim society and under the auspices of a non-Muslim State, but also when they established their centre at Touba in Futa Jallon, which was then considered dār al-Islām. But, as Lamin Sanneh says, the Jakhanke who jealously maintained their pacifism and non-involvement in politics did not refuse to render their religious services to their chiefly patrons, by blessing their arms when they went to war and by offering prayers and amulets for their personal protection and the welfare of their States. In this respect the Jakhanke represent an adjustment of the general Islamic tradition of withdrawal from politics to the West African situation, in which Muslim clerics had to strike the balance between the need to establish communications with the dominating non-Muslim society and the desire to maintain autonomy and immunity.

The principle of neutrality and non-involvement in politics which is most clearly epitomised in the clerical ethos of the Jakhanke has a more general application throughout West Africa. Muslims, clerics and traders were expected to avoid taking sides in political competition within a State and to be strictly neutral when two States were at war. It is because of this neutrality that Muslim traders and itinerary clerics could move freely across political boundaries even in times of war. It was because of their non-involvement in politics that the Muslims enjoyed immunity of life and property. The aura of divine protection, enhanced by their magico-religious role, was effective only as long as Muslims posed no threat to the existing socio-political order.

From the Sahara to the fringes of the forest Muslims, or rather Muslim clerics, are clearly distinguished from chiefs and warriors. Warriors who exercise political authority, shed blood and indulge in drinking alcohol, though they may be professed Muslims, are not practising Muslims. There are traditions about Muslim clerics who were asked to accept territorial chieftaincy and refused to do so because it would have conflicted with their clerical vocation. A royal prince of Kano, who in his youth had been attached to the mallam and considered himself to be one of


4. By praying for the victory of a chief or by providing him protective amulets a Muslim cleric contributes to the war effort of one State. But in this respect his position is similar to that of members of the occupational groups, like the blacksmiths, who produce arms for their patron. If captured at war, a blacksmith is not enslaved but is taken into the service of the victorious chief, under the same clientship relations as he had with his former patron. The same applies to a Muslim cleric whose services would be greatly appreciated by other chiefs.
them, abdicated shortly after he had become sarki-n-Kano 'and spent the rest of his life in regret for his actions while he had been sarki'.

Muslim clerics could have hardly been conceived as warriors and chiefs, and the rise of Muslim warriors, in the 18th and 19th centuries, as part of the growing political militancy of Muslims, was a radical departure from the old patterns. Warrior chiefs particularly may have found it difficult to realistically assess the new situation of clerics who took up arms and claimed political authority. In the middle of the 18th century the satigi of Futa Toro sent an abusive letter to the almamy of Bondou, addressed ‘to my humble and loyal servant Maka Guiba, who dared to style himself “alimani”. His family comes from the Torodbe, who were destined to remain miserable and to live of .

Over a quarter of a century later the satigi himself was overthrown by the Torodbe.

During the civil war of Salaga in 1892 the Muslims came to join the chief of Kpembe in war. They were of Hausa origin, and some of them had even experienced military service under the British. But the chief of Kpembe ordered them to go back home because ‘fighting was the business of chiefs not of Muslims’. This was the image the Gonja chief had of Muslims, because in Gonja, as in other States of the Volta Basin, Muslim clerics are referred to as ‘wives of the chief’. In the enrolement ceremony of the Bolewura a mallam reminds him that Mallams were to chief as his wives. When the imám dies the chief is informed that he became a widower. The mallam, it is said, are considered wives of the chief because they depend on him for their food. But perhaps a more important reason though not explicitly articulated, is that Muslims cannot aspire to political office.

Political relationship is often expressed in terms of kinship relations. Subordinate chiefs are considered sons of the paramount and chiefs of equal status are considered brothers. In both cases the putative relationships carry elements of tension and competition for succession, and there are a series of avoidances. In Gonja princes and subchiefs are forbidden to sit on the chiefly skin, but the Sakpare Muslims (‘wives of the chiefs’) may sit on the skin because they do not pose any political threat as they cannot aspire to political office.

Because they were themselves outside the field of political competition Muslim clerics were called in as arbiters, conciliators and peace-makers. Like the traditional priests they helped to ease tensions in the society, and the mosques, like the traditional shrines, were sanctuaries. Because

9. On the 14th-century Mali: ‘It is their custom there that they seek sanctuary in the mosque, or if that is not possible then in the house of the khatib.’ (Ibn
they were considered neutral, Muslims played part in the process of electing and installing chiefs. In Abuja, representing the pre-jihād Habe States of Hausaland, three of the five electors were māllām. They were expected to guide the elections against factional politics and to confer legitimacy on the elected ruler.10 Hence, Muslim clerics played different roles which had potential political power, and they were given those roles because they were expected not to be themselves involved in politics. Even the religious services rendered to the chief had political implications. By praying for the chief and producing amulets for his protection, the Muslim clerics of the court, together with the traditional priests, helped maintain the efficacy of political authority. In the magico-religious system which the Muslim clerics shared with the king (as in the case of a military bodyguard), those who are trusted to protect the king must be completely loyal to him, otherwise the king would have been extremely vulnerable.

Muslim clerics used their privileged position in the chiefly courts to exert political influence, as it is evident from reports of European visitors to the courts of non-Muslim chiefs.11 They advised their rulers about the conduct of their external affairs and endeavoured to secure favourable conditions for the trade of their fellow Muslims. For some time local clerics and Muslim residents seem to have had limited political objectives, and mainly to win the favour of the rulers towards the Muslims. Non-Muslim rulers, like the 11th-century king of Ghana, who had done just this, were highly commended in Muslim sources: ‘He led a praiseworthy life on account of his love of justice and friendship for Muslims.’12

Over a longer period, however, these clerics were responsible for the gradual introduction of Islamic elements into the court, thus enhancing their own role in the State. This was an evolutionary process of mutual adjustment between chiefs and Muslims, which produced a pattern of islamized kingdoms. These kingdoms certainly fell short of being Muslim States, which are expected to be guided by the shari‘a and to conform to the political theory of Islam.

The demand for more radical reform of the State came not from the local ‘ulama’ who continued to support accommodation and remained committed to the existing socio-political system but from ulama who had achieved a higher level of Islamic learning and had been exposed to some influence from the outside Muslim world. They did not participate

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(as local Muslims might have done) in the cultural life of the local society, and though they were physically removed from the court, they still had lines of communication with the rulers. In many cases they were also ethnically alien to the rulers and to the bulk of the population. This is true of the Torodbe in Gobir, who led the jihād in Hausaland and of the Sankore of Timbuktu, who provide what appears to have been the earliest documented case of tension between 'ulamā' and the political authorities in a West African State.

The tension between the 'ulamā' of Timbuktu and the Songhay rulers erupted dramatically shortly after sonni 'Ali had conquered Timbuktu. Sonni 'Ali is the one ruler in West Africa who has against him powerful and devastating documents: the ta'rikh of Timbuktu, al-Maghili's replies to the questions put to him by askiyā Muḥammad, and even a reference in the writings of the Egyptian scholar al-Suyūṭi. But, one may claim in his defence, sonni 'Ali was not worse than any of his predecessors in Songhay or than many other rulers in West Africa. He happened, however, to have been one of those kings in the Sudan who reigned during a period of growing Islamic militancy, in which the traditional pattern of accommodation between Muslims and chiefs was disturbed. This was not so much because of any change of mind or policy by the rulers, but because the 'ulamā' were up to bring about a radical change in the political structure and in the ideological outlook of the State.

When 'Uthmān dan Fodio agitated for reform in Gobir, and his preaching won him popular support, the king of Gobir reacted by introducing unprecedented restrictions on conversion to Islam, which 'involved not only a personal change of faith, but also a shift of [political] allegiance'. He also banned the wearing of turbans and veils 'in order to diminish the visual impact of the Muslim elite on the people'.13 Such restrictions on Muslim proselytizing and worship were rare in West Africa. When the confrontation with the shekhu escalated the new king of Gobir, Yunfa, who is said to have been tutored by the shekhu himself, allegedly attempted to kill him. In terms of the conventional attitudes towards Muslim men of religion in West Africa, which were shared also by the king of Gobir, Yunfa's action may be considered nothing less than a desperate act.

Similarly, when in the last quarter of the 18th century, excited by the success of the Torodbe jihād in the Futa Toro, the clerical community of Kayor assumed a hostile attitude towards the court and even took up arms, they were attacked by the damel. Some were killed and others were sold into slavery. 'Selling them into slavery was a violation of the clerical immunity from slavery which usually was carefully respected by the kings.'14

It is in the light of such examples that we have to examine the persecution of the ‘ulamā’ of Timbuktu by sonni ‘Ali, who rightly claimed that these ‘ulamā’ ‘were close friends of the Tuareg’. The Tuareg, who had lost control of Timbuktu, continued to be a threat to the newly conquered territories of Songhay. The friendship of the ‘ulamā’ might have been more than a sheer sympathy towards the Tuareg, and sonni ‘Ali considered them as a fifth column, ready to aid the Tuareg to reconquer the town. By becoming actively involved in a political struggle, supporting the enemies of the ruler, those ‘ulamā’ violated their own immunity as clerics.

It is clear that sonni ‘Ali persecuted only one group of the ‘ulamā’ of Timbuktu and that he favoured others, as al-Sa’ādī who was the most fierce critic of the Songhay ruler admitted: ‘Notwithstanding all the wrong and pains that sonni ‘Ali inflicted upon the ‘ulamā’, he acknowledged their eminence and used to say: “Without the ‘ulamā’ the world would be no good.”’ He did favours for other ‘ulamā’ and respected them.

Sonni ‘Ali’s conflict with a powerful section of the ‘ulamā’ of Timbuktu precipitated the coup of askiyā Muḥammad, who pursued an Islamic-oriented policy of greater cooperation with the ‘ulamā’. Yet tension between the ‘ulamā’ of Timbuktu and the political authorities of Songhay continued, and more so under the reign of some of askiyā Muḥammad’s sons and successors. Compared to the reserved relationship between the ‘ulamā’ of Timbuktu and the askiyā, there were closer and more intimate relationship between the askiyā and Muslim clerics in the capital of Gao, who were more directly linked to the court. These local clerics followed the old established pattern of accommodation and therefore enjoyed those privileges, which we have described above, such as giving sanctuary.

Before his death, in 1549, askiyā Išāq placed his son ‘Abd al-Malik at the sanctuary of the house of the khaṭīb of Gao, because this son was hated by the people and the dying askiyā wished to guarantee his safety. Also, when in 1588 one of the supporters of the revolt of Balma Sādiq was led through the streets of Gao, he ran away to seek the sanctuary of the Friday mosque. The imām pleaded on his behalf and he was pardoned by the askiyā.

The mosques of Timbuktu were also sanctuaries and its ‘ulamā’ pleaded for mercy and moderation. But, when in 1528 askiyā Mūsā was on his way to fight his brothers in the western provinces, who had challenged his right to the throne, he was met by the qādī Maḥmūd b. ‘Umar of Timbuktu who sought to make peace. Askiyā Mūsā did not lend his ear to the qādī’s pleading. When following the askiyā’s victory one of his defeated brothers sought the sanctuary of the qādī’s home in

17. Ibid.: 99.
18. Ibid.: 130.
Timbuktu, *askiyā Mūsā* refused to respect the sanctuary and made his brother come out and be executed. Al-Sa‘dī reports that *askiyā Mūsā* said that he would have respected the sanctuary of the qādī’s home in any other case except that one. But it appears that the *askiyā* made exception to the sanctuary of the qādī’s home because of the greater involvement of the ‘*ulamā*’ of Timbuktu in the politics of the dynasty. Indeed when he had first met *askiyā Mūsā* the qādī turned his eyes away, saying that he could not look at him who had deposed the caliph, expressing his disapproval of *askiyā Mūsā*’s plot who had deposed his father *askiyā al-Ḥājj Muḥammad*.

Whenever the conflict within the *askiyā* dynasty was between princes who held office in the western provinces of Songhay and those in Gao and the eastern provinces of Songhay, the ‘*ulamā*’ of Timbuktu supported the former, though an overt support is positively mentioned only in one case, that of the rebellion of Balma‘ Śādiq (in 1588). Significantly, it was an accomplice in this revolt that was granted the sanctuary of the Friday mosque in Gao. Perhaps it was not so much the question how dangerous to the ruler was the one who sought refuge, but the place of sanctuary. In 1582, at the death of *askiyā Dāwūd* his senior son Kurmina Fārī Muḥammad Benkan, whom the deceased *askiyā* had considered his successor, was away in Tendirma, capital of the western provinces. In his absence the princes and the dignitaries of Songhay in Gao elected another son, al-Ḥājj, as *askiyā*. Muḥammad Benkan, who was about to lead his army against Gao, changed his mind and decided to give up political ambitions and to reside in Timbuktu as a student of the Islamic sciences. The qādī of Timbuktu wrote to the *askiyā* on his behalf, but at the advice of his army commanders *askiyā al-Ḥājj* ordered the arrest of Muḥammad Benkan, because—it was said—he would have become the focus of political intrigues in Timbuktu.

Suspicious against Timbuktu and its ‘*ulamā*’ were stronger under the reign of *askiyā* who had encountered opposition to their succession from princes in the western provinces. These were in most cases *askiyā* who had the support of the dignitaries of Songhay (referred to in the *ta’rikh* as ‘*ahl* Songhay’). Under the leadership of the Dendi fārī and the hi koi they represented the more traditional elements in the government of Songhay.

But under the two greatest *askiyā*—*askiyā al-Ḥājj Muḥammad* and *askiyā Dāwūd*, who represented the legitimacy of the caliphate—relations with the ‘*ulamā*’ were quite different. These two *askiyā* gave generous grants to the ‘*ulamā*’ of Timbuktu, honoured them and sought their advice. But, the qādī Maḥmūd b. ‘Umar and his son the qādī al-‘Aqīb, who officiated during the reign of *askiyā al-Ḥājj Muḥammad* and *askiyā Dāwūd*, respectively, deliberately maintained a high level of tension with

19. Al-Sa‘dī : 82-83.
their rulers. This is best illustrated by the way askiyā Dāwūd had to humiliate himself before the qādī al-ʿAqīb and by the well-known dialogue between askiyā al-Ḥājj Muḥḥammad and the qādī Maḥmūd b. ʿUmar Aqīt:

‘Askiya Muḥammad: I have sent my messengers to look after my business. Are you ruling in my place in Timbuktu that you have sent away my messengers, and prevented them from carrying out my orders? Did not the king of Mali rule over Timbuktu?

The qādī: Yes, he did.
— Was it not there a qādī at that time?
— Yes, there was.
— Are you better than that qādī, or was he better than you?
— He was better and greater than me.
— Did that qādī prevent [his ruler] from acting freely in Timbuktu?
— No, he did not prevent him.’

It is clear from this short dialogue, that there was a radical change in the attitude of the 'ulamā' of Timbuktu towards their rulers between the middle of the 14th and the middle of the 15th century. This change is certainly to be associated with the growth of Timbuktu as the principal terminus of the Saharan trade and as a centre of advanced Islamic learning. Both processes are fairly well documented and took place in fact exactly at that period. This, however, is not enough to explain the politicisation of the 'ulamā' in Timbuktu, because those 'ulamā' who were responsible for the development of scholarship in Timbuktu, mainly Sudanese, were not involved in the confrontation with sonni 'Ali, who did favours to them and respected them. Also scholars from North Africa or from the oases of the northern Sahara fared well in Timbuktu under the rule of sonni 'Ali. The former, learned as they were, conformed to the old pattern of relationship with the political authorities, whereas the latter accepted their position as foreigners, at least for one or two generations, and refrained from intervention in politics.

Those persecuted by sonni 'Ali, and who are responsible for the politicisation of Islam in Timbuktu, were the Sankore 'ulamā', members of the Aqīt clan and their associates in the clans of And-ag-Muḥammad and al-qādī al-Ḥājj. How can we explain the introduction of a new strand of Islamic militancy by the Sankore, and particularly the Aqīt clan?

22. Ibid.: 60. It appears that one reason for the tension between the Sankore 'ulamā' and the askiyā was the former's attempt to assert the complete autonomy of Timbuktu. They wished that Timbuktu would have a similar status to that of Muslim autonomous towns like Gunjur which 'was the town of the qādī of that region and its 'ulamā', no warrior enters it and no tyrant resides there'. Or like Dia'ba, which though it was 'in the middle of the land of Mali [...] the sultan does not enter it' (ibid.: 179-180). It appears that because of the commercial and strategic importance of Timbuktu the askiyā could give it only restricted autonomy.
The Aqît were members of the Massûfa tribe, and their origin was in all probability from Tichitt in the Sahara. From Tichitt they migrated to Massina, where they stayed for some time. Early in the 15th century the number of Fulbe pastoralists in Massina increased, and Muḥammad Aqît who loathed the idea that his offspring would intermarry with the Fulbe left Massina and moved to Walata. Walata, which in the 14th century was a prosperous Massûfa town, declined at that time as many of its traders and scholars moved to Timbuktu. Muḥammad Aqît also wanted to settle in Timbuktu, so he left Walata and pitched his encampment in the Sahel between Walata and Ra’s al-Mâ. He could not have gone farther into Timbuktu or its region because of an old feud with Akillu the chief of the Maghsharen Tuareg, who was then ruler of Timbuktu. When a mediator approached Akillu to bring about reconciliation, Akillu refused and took out a shield torn by sword and spear, saying: ‘Look what he has done to me.’

If Muḥammad Aqît could have so badly humiliated the powerful Tuareg chief in some kind of a military skirmish, he must have been a warrior himself. Indeed, it would appear that he was not a scholar, because his son ‘Umar and later his celebrated grandsons studied with established ‘ulama’ in Timbuktu and Walata, and it was they who initiated a new tradition of scholarship in the clan. But, by the time Muḥammad Aqît sought to settle in Timbuktu he had lost much if not all his former vigour. The mediator who pleaded on his behalf before Akillu said: ‘How far he is now from what you have known him. He has changed, and he is now miserable (miskin) and has to support a large family.’ Akillu eventually was ready to reconcile and let Muḥammad Aqît settle in Timbuktu.

Perhaps the story of Muḥammad Aqît may be seen as describing a process in which a clan of Şanḥâja nomads, who had left the desert for the pastures of Massina, lost their warlike characteristics. As they were unable to support themselves, their leader opted to renounce completely his nomadic way of life and to settle in a commercial town, first Walata and then Timbuktu. Indeed, it is likely that one condition that Akillu might have made before reconciling with his old enemy was that the latter should completely surrender his arms and become a marabout. (It is not impossible, in fact, that this clan had some maraboutic heritage, which in this early period, in the 14th and 15th centuries, had not yet been so boldly marked and engraved as it was later after the arrival of the Banû Ḥasan and the evolution of the rigid structure of southern Saharan society.)

It was in order to assume this new role as marabout that Muḥammad

27. Ibid.: 36.
Aqît sent his son 'Umar to study with the best scholars of the day, and that he intermarried with the And-ag-Muḥammad family, which had a longer tradition of learning. The transformation of the Aqît clan from the nomadic to the sedentary way of life, from some kind of warriors to fully committed marabout, was so quick that by the time of the conquest of Timbuktu by sonni 'Ali, just over a generation after they had settled in the place, their children were unable to ride a camel, because their parents prevented them from playing.  

It appears also that after they had settled in Timbuktu under the patronage of Akillu, the Aqît became the marabouts of Akillu and his Maghsharen. They owed him allegiance and expected his protection. Indeed, Akillu is reported saying that the fuqahā' of Sankore concerned him more than anything else.

The first conflict of the Sankore 'ulamā' with the Songhay authorities was as allies, perhaps even as marabouts, of the Tuareg. Having been Ṣanhāja themselves, this conflict appears to have been on an ethnic more than on an ideological basis. But, as in other cases of Islamic militant movements in West Africa, an ethnic (or an economic and political) conflict which involves Muslim scholars may turn ideological by drawing inspiration from the political content of Islam.

The Sankore 'ulamā', we have already said, studied in Timbuktu and Walata from masters who, though celebrated scholars themselves, seem to have never pressed the political leverage of Islam, and were content with the creation of an Islamic ambience in Timbuktu, Jenne and other centres of trade and Islam. But the Sankore were not moulded in the socio-political pattern of the Western Sudan. They represented a more militant strand of Islam (of the southern Sahara) and were also exposed to the teaching of 'ulamā' from Egypt and the Maghrib.

The askiya revolution in Songhay contained both the ethnic and ideological tensions. Askiya Muhammad, especially after his pilgrimage, sought to give a stronger Islamic imprint to his State. With the legitimacy he gained from the sharīf of Mecca or the 'Abbasid caliph in Cairo (or both) he became also more acceptable to the 'ulamā'. Though as proved during the reign of his successors the Islamic reform was rather superficial, the 'ulamā' were not only given their place of honour but were also invited to give their advice. Askiya Muhammad made the qāḍī Maḥmūd b. 'Umar Aqît his mentor, to guide him so that he might be saved from hell.

The ethnic tensions were also contained under askiya al-Hajj Muḥammad when the Tuareg, who had been a threat to sonni 'Ali, found it more beneficial to be part of the Songhay imperial system as allies of the askiya. The Maghsharen koi was given a daughter of askiya al-Ḥājj Muḥammad, and a generation later the incumbent Maghsharen koi married a daughter.

29. Ibid.
of Askîyâ Dâwûd. It was with the cooperation of the Tuareg that the askîyâ secured control over the salt mines of Taghaza, and the Tuareg proved their loyalty to the askîyâ during the escalating conflict with the Moroccans over the control of these resources of the Sahara. But, when the Maghsharen became involved in the internal politics of the dynasty they, like the 'ulama' of Timbuktu, supported princes who had their base west of the Niger bend. 31

John Hunwick has shown that the 'ulama' of Timbuktu did not accept the rigid militancy of al-Maghîlî and seemed to have favoured the milder approach of al-Suyûtî. 32 Indeed, as they established their position in Timbuktu and within the imperial framework, the 'ulama' of Timbuktu were not really concerned so much with dogmatic problems, such as that of takfîr (which was so important in the teaching of al-Maghîlî). There is also no evidence that they agitated for any radical changes in the political or administrative structures of the State. What they did was to support those political elements within the empire and the dynasty which could serve better the cause of the Muslims and protect the interests of Timbuktu (often against the champions of Songhay traditionalism).

By the end of the 16th century the 'ulama' of Timbuktu became so committed to the Songhay State that they did not respond to the caliphal call of the Moroccan sultan and sharîf al-Mašûr on the eve of the Moroccan invasion. Both politically and ideologically they became accommodated to a partially reformed African State. Islamic religious revivalism and political militancy in the 18th and 19th centuries were not a sequel to the scholarly tradition of Timbuktu. It was the more militant message of al-Maghîlî, which the 'ulama' of Timbuktu had not accepted, that inspired 'Uthmân dan Fodio.

'Uthmân dan Fodio, like al-Maghîlî, had at first attempted to bring about reform through the existing rulers. But al-Maghîlî was only a visitor to the courts of the Hausa and Songhay rulers, and after he had left them with his advice they hardly followed it. 'Uthmân dan Fodio was there to press for a realization of his reform program, and at the same time he preached around to win over popular support. He posed a threat to the existing system and created a tension which soon escalated. In his writings 'Uthmân dan Fodio fiercely attacked 'the vile 'ulama'' ('ulama' al-sû'), who may be described as those clerics who opposed the jihad because they preferred the status quo and accommodation. Leaders of almost all the other jihad movements also faced opposition from clerics committed to the existing socio-political system.

In the post-jihad States 'ulama' assumed political authority, and a new pattern of relationship developed between these rulers of scholarly

background and the ‘ulamā’ who had to adjust themselves to their role in what was then a Muslim State. A detailed analysis of this new pattern may reveal some parallels to the role of the ‘ulamā’ in the Muslim State, to which we have referred very briefly at the beginning of this paper.

Following the establishment of colonial rule the majority of the Muslim ‘ulamā’, sometimes reluctantly, reached accommodation with the new political authorities. The French colonial authorities, who were more sensitive to the political reaction of Muslims, soon discovered that accommodation and cooperation were easier with marabouts who had a parochial view of Islam. They were more apprehensive of a group of young Muslims who had studied in al-Azhar. In their advanced Islamic education, knowledge of Arabic and contacts with Islamic centres outside Africa, they represented the universal outlook of Islam and were aware of its political content.

These young reformists, sometimes referred to as Wahhābī, created new tensions and faced the opposition of the traditional Muslim leadership (who in the 19th century had opposed also the jihād movements). Indeed, the reformists threatened the position and authority of the traditional leadership and were out to undermine the socio-political order in which African Islam developed. In their agitation they threatened also that same order which became accommodated to colonial domination. The colonial authorities, particularly the French, came out to support the traditional leadership, restricted the activities of the reformists and even persecuted them.33

We resist the temptation to follow up this theme into the post-colonial period, but we may conclude by referring to recent studies on politics in Northern Nigeria, which once again raise the issue of traditionalism v. reformism, and whereas the former was associated with stability and accommodation the latter created agitation and tensions.34