

# *Probing the theological resources of a seventeenth-century Timbuktu tāriḫh: the Tāriḫh al-Sūdān and Ash‘arī kalām*

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## *Abstract*

The *Tāriḫh al-Sūdān*, the so-called *Tāriḫh al-fattāsh*, and the *Notice historique*, Timbuktu’s three famous seventeenth-century *tāriḫhs* (*chronicles*) piqued the interest of Western scholars, travellers and colonial officials since the mid nineteenth-century. The first Western written works began to be produced at the end of the nineteenth century and burgeoned over the twentieth century with several large projects continuing into the present century, as recent as 2015. These works were primarily, though not exclusively, concerned with the authorship, sources, political properties of the *tāriḫhs*, and Timbuktu’s social history. This article is interested in Muslim theology as a resource of the *Tāriḫh al-Sūdān*, one the three *tāriḫhs*. It focuses in particular on the precepts of *Ash‘arī kalām* (theology) of Sunni Islam as the key resource the author of the *Tāriḫh al-Sūdān*.

In 1853 Heinrich Barth obtained a copy of the *Tāriḫh al-Sūdān* and in 1896 Felix Du Bois<sup>1</sup> obtained a few fragments of the *Tāriḫh al-fattāsh* in 1896. Octave Houdas’ editions and translations of the two *tāriḫhs* into French were published in 1896 and 1913 respectively.<sup>2</sup> Over the next century several large projects burgeoned, in particular that of John Hunwick<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Felix Du Bois, *Timbuctoo the mysterious*, trans Diana White, New York, Longmans, Green, & Co, 1896

<sup>2</sup> Octave Houdas (ed. and trans.), *Tarikh es-soudan par Abderrahman ben Abdallah ben ‘Imran ben ‘Amir Es-Sa‘di*, 2 volumes (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1898–1900); Octave Houdas and Maurice Delafosse, eds. and trans., *Tarikh el-fettach par Mahmoud Kati et l’un de ses petit fils*, 2 volumes (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1913), both reprinted (Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1964 and 1981).

<sup>3</sup> John Hunwick, “Studies in the *Tāriḫh al-fattāsh* I: its authors and textual history”, *Research Bulletin, Centre of Arabic Documentation* 5 (1969), 57–65; “Studies in the *Tāriḫh al-fattāsh* II: an alleged charter of privilege issued by Askiya *al-hājj* Muḥammad to the descendants of Mori Hawgāro”, *Sudanic Africa* 3 (1992), 133–148; *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: al-Sa‘dī’s Tarikh al-Sūdān down to 1613 and other contemporary documents* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

Nehemia Levtzion,<sup>4</sup> Joseph Brun,<sup>5</sup> Madina Ly,<sup>6</sup> Elias Saad,<sup>7</sup> and Nobili & Mathee.<sup>8</sup> These works concerned themselves primarily with the sources, authorship and genesis of the *tārīkhs* advancing new theories especially of the so-called *Tārīkh al-fattāsh*, and Timbuktu's social history. Paulo F. de Moraes Farias has more recently drawn attention to the chronicles as political projects with certain motives. Moraes Farias shows that the tarikh authors were intellectual innovators and politico-ideological, not merely passive conduits of tradition.<sup>9</sup> Their historiography was not merely an objective narrations of events but one with a motive aimed at reconciling between three elites.

This article adds a dimension lacking from these previous modern studies. It brings into the discussion Muslim theology as a resource of the three *tārīkhs*—Songhay oralcy, Tuāreg folklore, sorcery accounts, accounts of trustworthy individuals older local written local histories, classical Muslim historiography, etc. were its other resources. The article looks, however, only at the *Tārīkh al-Sūdān*. More specifically, it identifies Ash‘arī *kalām* (theology), the main theological expression of Sunni Islam, as the theological resource of the *tārīkh*. I argue that the precepts of Ash‘arī *kalām* are so pivotal a resource of the *Tārīkh al-*

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<sup>4</sup> Nehemia Levtzion, “Was Maḥmūd Ka‘tī the author of the *Tārīkh al-Fattāsh*?” *Research Bulletin Centre of Arabic Documentation, University of Ibadan* 6–1/2 (1970), 1–12; “A seventeenth century chronicle by Ibn al-Mukhtār: a critical study of the *Tārīkh al-fattāsh*”, *Bulletin of the school of African and oriental studies* 34 no. 3 (1971), 571-593.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Brun, “Notes sur le tarikh el-fettach”, *Anthropos* 9 (1914), 590-596.

<sup>6</sup> Madina Ly, “-Quelques remarques sur le Tarikh el-fettach”, *Bulletin de l’Institut Fondamental d’Afrique Noire* 34 no. 3 (1972), 471–493.

<sup>7</sup> Elias Saad, *Social history of Timbuktu: the role of Muslim scholars and notables* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

<sup>8</sup>Mauro Nobili & Mohamed Mathee, “Towards a new study of the so-called *Tārīkh al-fattāsh*”, in *History in Africa* 42 (2015), 37-73.

<sup>9</sup> Paulo Fernando Moraes de Farias, *Arabic medieval inscriptions from the Republic of Mali: epigraphy, chronicles and Songhay-Tuāreg history* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). Moraes Farias summarized a section of this work in a book chapter, “Intellectual innovation and reinvention of the Sahel: the seventeenth-century Timbuktu chronicles,” in Shamil Jeppie and Souleymane B. Diagne (eds.), *The Meanings of Timbuktu* (Cape Town: Human Sciences Research Council of South Africa Press, 2008), 95–107.

*Sūdān* that it would be hard to imagine the writing of the *tārīkh* without them. I argue that Ash‘arī *kalām* as a resource of the *Tārīkh al-Sūdān* effectively allows for one to show the Timbuktu *tārīkhs*’ political properties Moraes Farias’ reading identifies. Hence the *tārīkhs*’ motives of reconciling between three elites is of central concern to this article.

### ***Tārīkh al-Sūdān***

This seminal source of West Africa’s pre-modern history presents a detailed history of the Songhay Empire, its rulers and internal workings, the founding of Timbuktu and its religious scholars, the Moroccan invasion of 1591, and the post-invasion developments. As Elias Saad notes, “Timbuktu never produced a monument to its own history equal in wealth and detail to al-Sa‘dī’s chronicle”.<sup>10</sup> In the words of John Hunwick,

The *Tārīkh al-Sūdān* deserves to be ranked as one of the great African chronicles and without it, our knowledge of the workings of one of Africa’s greatest pre-modern empires would be considerably diminished ... and our understanding of a notable Islamic civilization much impoverished. Indeed, the existence of his work helps Timbuktu to cease to be seen as just a legendary fantasy, and helps it to be recognized for what it really was—a spiritual and intellectual jewel inspired by the Islamic faith.<sup>11</sup>

### ***The Tārīkh’s Author***

‘Abd al-Raḥmān bin ‘Abd Allah b. al-Sa‘dī, the author of the *Tārīkh al-Sūdān*, was born in May, 1594 CE (Ramadan, 1001 *hijrī*), just three years after the Moroccan invasion. He was from the class of notables, Timbuktu’s urban patriciate. He was a religious scholar by training and hailed from a scholarly family. Thus he was a respected figure, highly literate, both well-connected and well-informed, and well acquainted with the Islamic

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<sup>10</sup> Saad, *Social history of Timbuktu*, 21.

<sup>11</sup> Hunwick, *Timbuktu & the Songhay Empire*, lxxv.

religious tradition, local history, and folklore which he employed in his chronicle. His social status allowed him to work as an administrator in the Arma state-bureaucracy in Jenne and Timbuktu. In 1626/7, he was appointed to the imamate of the Sankore mosque of Jenne. He died after 1656, the year whose events he terminated his chronicle with, although the exact date of his demise remains unknown. The *Tārīkh al-Sūdān* is his only known work.

### ***Scholars and holymen [‘ulamā’ wa awliyā’]*<sup>12</sup>**

Al-Sa‘dī had a deep regard for religion and held religious figures in high esteem as shown in the profound religious sensibility with which he wrote his *tārīkh*. In this vein, al-Sa‘dī devoted a substantial part of his chronicle to the ‘ulamā’ (scholars) of Timbuktu, Jenne and Songhay as a whole. Quite aptly, Mauro Nobili suggests that of Timbuktu’s seventeenth-century *tārīkhs*, the *Tārīkh al-Sūdān* is the *tārīkh* of the scholars.<sup>13</sup> Here is the introduction to his account of Timbuktu’s scholars and holymen:

This is an account of some of the scholars and holymen who dwelt in Timbuktu generation after generation—may God Most High have mercy on them, and be pleased with them, and bring us the benefit of their Baraka in both abodes—and of some of their virtues and noteworthy accomplishments. In this regard, it is sufficient to repeat what the trustworthy shaykhs have said, on the authority of the righteous and virtuous Friend of God, locus of manifestations of divine grace and wondrous acts, the jurist Qāḍī Muḥammad al- Kābarī-may God Most High have mercy on him. He said: “I was the contemporary of righteous folk of Sankore, who were equalled in their righteousness only by the Companions of the Messenger of God-may God bless him and grant him peace and be pleased with all of them.”

Throughout the *tārīkh*, al-Sa‘dī enumerates the spiritual feats, miracles, *baraka*, divine grace and clairvoyance of Timbuktu’s ‘ulamā’ cum spiritual luminaries. One apparently

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<sup>12</sup> Hunwick uses these terms as headings of Chapter 6 (‘Scholars and holymen of Jenne’) and Chapters 9 & 10 (‘Scholars and holymen of Timbuktu’) of his translation of the *Tārīkh al-Sūdān*.

<sup>13</sup> Personal communication.

saw God; the door to the Prophet's tomb opened by itself for one; they know the time of their own and others' death; they walked on water; they interpreted dreams prophesizing the future; one foretold, among other future events, the impending Moroccan invasion of 1591 on the very day the Moroccan army set forth from Marrakesh. They promised Paradise; they had healing powers, they were a protection against civil strife, they had bodies that were immune from arrows and fire, they saw angels, and they knew what was in peoples' hearts and minds.<sup>14</sup> Even the Prophet's Companions were not better than them, but only equaled them, despite the widespread Sunni Muslims position that the generation of the Companions were the best Muslims ever.

In addition to the '*ulamā*' spiritual stations, al-Sa'dī presents them as intellectuals of high learning and genius. They had an intuitive knowledge of human nature understanding how ordinary people act and think. They wrote commentaries on earlier and standard Islamic legal and theological works, all of which shows their academic prowess.

The Songhay kings, including the great *al-ḥājj* Askiya Muḥammad, stand in awe of the scholars, obey their commands and seek their company in the royal courts, which they nevertheless always refuse. Even Sunni/Sii<sup>15</sup> 'Alī, despite his reported bad treatment of the '*ulamā*', is made to say, 'Were it not for the scholars, life would not be pleasant or

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<sup>14</sup> Hunwick, *Timbuktu & the Songhay empire*, p. 24-26, 32, 38-40, 42, 43, 44, 48, 49, 58, 68, 73, 77, 80 and passim.

<sup>15</sup> *Sii* is another form of Sunni, the title of the pre-Askiya rulers (from 'Alī Kulun the founder of the dynasty to the last *Sii* Ali Ber who ruled from 1468-1493) of the Songhay dynasty used in the *Tārīkh al-Sūdān* and in modern writing about the dynasty. The *Tārīkh al-fattāsh* uses the form *Sh-y* (or *Shī*) while the *Notice historique* gives the title as *Su`i* or *Su`i`i*; *Sōnyi*, *s-ī*, *sh-ī* are other variant spellings of *su`i* and *su`i`i*, Hunwick, *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, p. 333-334. Throughout this article, I use this translation by John Hunwick of the *Tārīkh al-Sūdān* to reference my citations from the manuscript of 'Abd al-Raḥmān l-Sa'dī's *Tārīkh al-Sūdān*, ms 681, IHERI-AB.

agreeable.<sup>16</sup> The Songhay rulers visited them when they were sick. They interceded with the rulers on behalf of people for official pardoning. Members of the Moroccan ruling elite visited them.<sup>17</sup> They spoke the truth to power such as when *al-ḥājj* Askiya Muḥammad charged the jurist *al-Qāḍī* Abū Ḥafṣ Umar with sowing discord, the latter responded that the Askiya was the one sowing discord by appointing a *qāḍī* in Timbuktu and another *qāḍī* in Yindubu'u; the jurist then got up angrily and left.<sup>18</sup> They are presented as appearing harsh to the rulers who are ever humble toward them in return. Many acquire considerable wealth and gain temporal power.<sup>19</sup> Charlotte Bloom and Humphrey Fisher show *al-ḥājj* Askiya Muḥammad's experimenting relationship with the different identities of 'ulamā' of Gao and Timbuktu finally settling for the latter.<sup>20</sup>

Al-Sa'dī's praising of Songhay's scholars must, however, be appreciated in the context of his historiographical motive. He was not giving an account of the intellectual prowess and spiritual stations of the scholars and holymen merely for the sake of it. He was endowing them with a status of power to effectively enable reconciling between them, the Arma and

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Gomez challenges this idea of the Songhay ruling authority showing such obeisance and deference to Timbuktu's scholarly elite. He questions what he calls the *tārikh* authors' single perspective of the Timbuktu-Gao connexion that produced a parochial, Timbuktu-centric account of relations between the two nuclei, Michael Gomez, "Timbuktu under imperial Songhay: a reconsideration of autonomy", *Journal of African History* 31 (1990), 5-24.

<sup>17</sup> Hunwick, *Timbuktu & the Songhay Empire*, 75. This is another example that shows al-Sa'dī's political aim with his chronicle, in that he not only insists on the political clout of the scholars but also shows a gesture of reconciliation in the invading Moroccans' visit to Timbuktu's scholars as members of the urban patriciate.

<sup>18</sup> Hunwick, *Timbuktu & the Songhay Empire*, 39-40.

<sup>19</sup> Saad, *The social history of Timbuktu*.

<sup>20</sup> Charlotte Bloom & Humphrey Fisher, "Love for three oranges, or, the Askiya's dilemma: The Askiya, al-Maghili, and Timbuktu, c. 1500 AD", in *The Journal of African History* 34, 1, (1993), 65-91.

the Askiya lineages. However, as Moraes Farias points out, the reconciliation aimed only at a closer, less unequal political integration.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Ash‘arī kalām***

This sought-after political integration was conceptualized in line with precepts of *Ash‘arī kalām*. These include the divine predestination of all human affairs, a general historical trajectory towards moral degeneration, and the imperative for believers to submit to political authority even despotic.<sup>22</sup> The Ash‘arī School, founded by Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī (d. 936 CE/324 hijrī), is the dominant theological articulation of Sunni Islam including among the Mālikī legal school that predominated in Songhay (and still does).<sup>23</sup> As Hunwick points out, the qāḍīs, imams, khaṭībs, and other holymen of Songhay’s constituted religious estate bonded together by a common faith expressed through the Maliki law-school, the theology of Ash‘arī, and a broad Ṣūfī mystical understanding.<sup>24</sup>

Numerous locally-produced theological treatises<sup>25</sup> (most still in manuscript form) articulate the Ash‘arī discourse whose assumptions stand in contrast to *Mu‘tazilī*, *Shi‘ī*, or

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<sup>21</sup> A relationship, as Partha Chatterjee argues, is always marked by domination; the dominant groups, in their exercise of domination, do not consume and destroy dominated classes, for then there would be no relation of power, and hence no domination; quoted in Shahid, Amin, *Alternative histories: a view from India* (Calcutta: SEPHIS-CSSSC, 2002), 14.

<sup>22</sup> For a detailed outline (sketch) of the doctrine of the *Ash‘arī* School see the work of the founder himself, Al-Ash‘arī, Abū al-Ḥasan, *Al-ibāna‘an uṣūl al-diyāna*, ed. Fawqīyya Ḥusayn Maḥmūd (Cairo: Dār al-Anṣār, 1977), 20-25. The three centuries following al-Ash‘arī saw the development of Ash‘arī thought in more detailed and intricate works.

<sup>23</sup> According to the Ash‘arī historian cum theologian, ibn‘Asākir all Mālikīs are Ash‘arīs; al-Ghālī, Bul Qāsim, *Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī: ḥayātuhu wa arā‘uhu al-‘aqdiyya* (Tunis: Dār al-Turkī li-l-Nashr, 1989), 15.

<sup>24</sup> Hunwick, , *Timbuktu & the Songhay Empire*, lv

<sup>25</sup> *Al-minna fī i‘tiqād ahl-sunna* of al-Mukhtār bin Aḥmad bin Abī Bakr al-Kuntī (d. 1811); al-Mukhtār bin Aḥmad bin Abī Bakr al-Kuntī, *Al-shumūsh al-Aḥmadiyya fī al-aqā‘id al-Muḥammadiyya*, ms 8687, IHERI-AB; Al-Sharīf Himā Allāh, *Taḥṣīl al-bayān wa al-ifāda fī sharḥ mā taḍammanathu kalimāt al-shahāda*; Abū ‘Abd-Allāh ibn Maḥmūd Baghayogo, *Manzūma fī al-tawḥīd*, ms 3505, IHERI-AB; Al-Zaydī, al-Ḥasan bin Aghbadī, *Tuḥfat al-ṣibyān fī al-tawḥīd*; al-Fullānī, Muḥammad al-Wālī, *Manhal al-adhb fī ṣifāt asmā‘ al-Rabb*; Muḥammad bin Aḥmad bin Maḥmūd bin Abī Bakr al-Wangharī, *Al-qalā‘id fī ‘aqa‘id*, ms 3274, IHERI-AB; Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad Baghayogho bin Muḥammad Gordo, *Taḥṣīl ḥusn al-maqāṣid fī sharḥ qalā‘id al-aqa‘id*, ms 3459, IHERI-AB.

Kharijī *kalām*. Consequently, as a religious scholar, al-Sa‘dī would have been trained in the Ash‘arī-Mālikī religious-intellectual tradition that predominated, and was taught, in Timbuktu.

In the Introduction of the *Tārīkh al-Sūdān*, al-Sa‘dī praises God in the following words,

Praise be to God, to whom alone belongs dominion, eternity, power and praise, who encompasses with His knowledge all things. He knows what was and what will be, and if something were to be, how it would be. No atom's weight [of what occurs] on earth or in heaven escapes Him. 'He gives power to whom so He wishes, and takes it away from whom so He wishes Unique is He, a powerful, mighty, and victorious Sovereign, who has mastery over His servants through death and annihilation. He is the First, without there being a beginning, and the Last, without there being an end.

Al-Sa‘dī carefully and deliberately chose the attributes of God’s eternity, His sovereignty, His omnipotence, His omniscience, and His knowledge of all that has passed and *are yet to transpire* (emphasis mine) to highlight human impotence, lack of agency and temporality of human power. They hint at the Ash‘arī notion of God’s power over and control of human destiny. In other words, this opening contrasts God to Songhay who do not enjoy any of these attributes. As the absolute sovereign, only God grants power but also removes it, and He imposes death on his creation, whether individuals or empires such as Songhay.<sup>26</sup> Al-Sa‘dī’s aim was to demonstrate that Songhay’s defeat at the hands of the Moroccans was the decree of God, however unjust the invasion may have been. The

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<sup>26</sup> The Introduction of the *Tārīkh al-fattāsh* in its praising of God similarly refers to God who in His omniscience and omnipotence makes some kings and others subjects. However, from the outset—and more explicitly than the *Tārīkh al-Sūdān*—it links the destruction of worldly rule directly to the arrogance and injustice of kings and their rejection of the counselling of God’s prophets; Al-Qunbilī, Maḥmūd Ka‘t bin al-Mukhtār, *Tārīkh al-fattāsh fī akhbār al-buldān wa al-juyūsh wa akābir al-nāss wa dhikr waqā‘i wa a‘āzīm al-umūr wa tafriq ansāb al-‘abīd min al-aḥrār*, Bamako, Institute des Hautes Etudes et de Recherches Islamiques Ahmed Baba, 2015, p. 40; ms 3927, IHERI-AB.



following two passages demonstrate that the Sa‘dian invasion and conquest of Songhay were in the foreknowledge of God, by His will and power.

They went back on it for only God most High had foreknowledge that their [Songhay’s] kingdom would wane and their state disappear, and none can reverse His decree or hinder His judgement

[T]hat [Moroccan army] was a mighty army that could not be confronted and defeated except by one aided and supported by God Most High ... acting under the power of God whose command no one can reverse and whose judgment no one can hinder ... divine favour is wherever God places it ... but God most High spared them (the Moroccan army) from this perfidious plot through the foresight of Ba Ḥasan Firīr ... and he informed them how much territory his army would subdue, according to certain divinatory prognostications he had come across

As the eleventh-century CE Ash‘arī thinker Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) says, “It is necessary to know that the divine presence encompasses everything in existence and that there is nothing in existence except God and His actions.”<sup>27</sup> However al-Sa‘dī was not a “pure” theologian; his theology or rather his application of Ash‘arī *kalām* served his political motive of his historiography.

The two passages also reflect the Ash‘arī notion of time. Time, in the Ash‘arī view, is not an independent substance with its own power, as that would make it comparable to God, which is religiously problematic. It does not frame events, but coexists with them. Furthermore, time, or events, is atomized as a series of discontinued moments interspersed with non-being. However, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210 CE), the Ash‘arī *mutakallim* (theologian) and philosopher (d. 606) held the view that although time did not change, being within time changed and that time conditions change and not vice versa.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī, *Ijām al-‘awām ‘an ‘ilm al-kalām*, 12; *Kitāb al-arba‘īn fī uṣūl al-dīn* (Jeddah: Dār al-Bashīr, 2003), 33.

<sup>28</sup> Ali Mabrook, “Al-zaman al- Ash‘arī: min al-untuluji ilā al-aydiyuluji”, *Alif: Journal of comparative poetics*, 9 (1989), 156-170.

Coupled to this Ash‘arī precept is the Ash‘arī notion of time as a trajectory toward moral degeneration. Souleymane Bachir Diagne cites the *Tārīkh al-fattāsh’s* mentioning of the extreme limit of immorality, the worst crimes, the open committing of the most disagreeable deeds to God’s sight, the display of the ugliest deeds and links it to al-Sa‘dī’s reference to the Qur’ānic phrase, “Innā lillāhi wa innā ilayhi rāji‘ūn”,

This Qur’ānic quote by which al-Sa‘dī concludes his lament summarises the underlying philosophy of time and history pervasive in his chronicle: the course of human events carries with itself, as by some immanent justice, its divine sanction, and the inobservance of the laws of God inevitably leads to decline and chaos”.<sup>29</sup>

Diagne then reads in Timbuktu’s seventeenth-century *tārīkhs* a philosophy of history, of chaos and decline. This is exactly an Ash‘arī reading of time and history. This Ash‘arī notion of time insofar as it sees the flow of time i.e. the future as a move away from the ideal, the better stands in marked contrast to *Shi‘ī* and *Mu‘tazilī* notions of time, history and the future. For the *Shi‘ī* doctrine of time, the best/ideal moment in history has not yet been achieved *absolutely* as history is ascending movement toward the ideal, which is to be achieved in the future. In *Mu‘tazilī kalām*, history is neither decline nor ascent per se, but an open horizon.<sup>30</sup>

This Ash‘arī notion of a progressive decline in morals among human beings with the passage of time toward the future is shown in the second paragraph of the Introduction

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<sup>29</sup> Souleymane Diagne, “Toward an intellectual history of West Africa: the meaning of Timbuktu”, in *The meanings of Timbuktu*, Shamil Jeppie and Souleymane Bachir Diagne, eds., (Cape Town: Human Sciences Research Council of South Africa Press, 2008), 22.

<sup>30</sup> Ali Mabrook, *Al-imāma wa al-siyāsa wa al-khiṭāb al-tārīkhī fī ilm al-‘aqā’id*, (Cairo: Markaz al-Qāhira li Ḥuqūq al-Insān, 2002), 12.

of al-Sa'dī's *tārīkh*. Al-Sa'dī shows a stark contrast between Timbuktu's—and Songhay's—earlier and later generations.

We understand that our forefathers used mainly to divert one another in their assemblies by talking of the Companions and the pious folk—may God be pleased with them, and have mercy upon them. Then they would speak of the chiefs and kings of their lands, their lives and deaths, their conduct, their heroic exploits, and other historical information and tales relating to them. This was what they most delighted in telling, and what they most desired to speak of among themselves. Then that generation passed away. In the following generation, there was none who had any interest in that, nor was there anyone who followed the path of their deceased ancestors, nor anyone greatly concerned about respect for elders. If there were indeed any such, then they were few “and finally the only folk remaining were those whose motivations were base, and who concerned themselves with hatred, jealousy, back-biting, tittle-tattle, scandal-mongering, and concocting lies about people God preserve us from such things for they lead to evil consequences.”<sup>31</sup>

Al-Sa'dī's above account appears to contradict the degenerationist notion of history insofar as it presents the pioneer generations of Timbuktu as equal to the Companions of the Prophet which preceded them by generations. The degenerationist notion of history is rooted in the view that the earlier generation (the Companions) was the best, i.e. better than the pioneering generations of Timbuktu that came long after it. This may suggest that degeneration is not entirely unilineal but also happens in cycles. Does it then not compromise my claim that the *Tārīkh al-Sūdān* employs Ash'arī *kalām*? Is it not a departure from Ash'arī thought or maybe just a general idea that can be invoked at any moment in history in relation to relevant generations without indicating a larger historical pattern?<sup>32</sup>

The observation is correct, but only apparently and superficially. It is only correct if we read al-Sa'dī as engaging in “pure” theology passively applying the precepts of Ash'arī

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<sup>31</sup> Hunwick, *Timbuktu & the Songhay Empire*, 1-2.

<sup>32</sup> I thank Joseph Hill for these observations he made in his editing of this article. I incorporated them after receiving my penultimate draft from him.

*kalām* in his *tārīkh*. However, al-Sa‘dī was not a primarily a theologian, but primarily a historian with a motive. His knowledge of Ash‘arī *kalām* allowed him read and apply it, perhaps even manipulated it, in the service of his historiographical aim. As Moraes Farias says, he was an intellectual innovator, and a politico-ideological doer.

Nevertheless, al-Sa‘dī’s point is that unlike the earlier generations, Timbuktu and Songhay’s later generations do not value history nor do they appreciate the feats and exploits of the ancestors. They lack interest in history and even lack respect for elders. This description of Timbuktu/Songhay’s later generations reflects the Ash‘arī notion of time/history as a retrogressive movement toward the worse. Al-Sa‘dī then links this attitude toward history and the glory of the past, among Songhay’s later generations to society’s behavior and morals.

Al-Sa‘dī’s mention of base motivations, hatred, jealousy, back-biting, tittle-tattle, scandal-mongering, and lies of later generations further tie in with the Ash‘arī notion of time as decline.<sup>33</sup> According to Ash‘arī *kalām*, hatred, jealousy, tittle-tattle, backbiting, scandal-mongering, concocting of lies denote more than just impious, trivial, and banal traits of everyday human behavior. Rather, these traits and acts indicate the Ash‘arī view of history: the inevitable and pre-determined degeneration in peoples’ morals and behaviour. With the progress of time, morals and intellect decline. A well-known Prophetic tradition articulates this theology,

The best [generation] of my umma is my generation then those [of the generation] who follow them then those [of the generation] who follow them. Imran b. Ḥuṣayn said, I do not know whether he said after his generation two generations or three. Then [he said] after you [will come] people who will [eagerly] testify though not

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<sup>33</sup> Hunwick, *Timbuktu & the Songhay Empire*, 1-2.

asked to testify; they will betray and not be entrusted; they will make vows but not fulfil them. And obesity will appear.<sup>34</sup>

The ḥadīth shows that moral retrogression in behaviour is a given for the generations following the first three generations of Muslims: the Prophet with his Companions, the Companions after the Prophet's demise with the Successor generation<sup>35</sup>, and the Successors after the demise of the last Companion. Thus the best, most sublime (*taḥaqquq al-afḍal*) was already realized with the first three generations of Muslims. Later generations do not and cannot enjoy the same status in knowledge, piety, selflessness, honesty, and other good qualities as the first three generations of Muslims.<sup>36</sup> Every generation will be worse in behaviour and less in faith and intellect than earlier generations including its immediate preceding generation. The retrogression continues across the generations of Muslim from the fourth generation to the end of time.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Al-Bukhārī, Muḥammad bin Ismā'īl, *Al-jāmi' al-ṣaḥīḥ*, Cairo, Al-Maktaba al-Salafiyya, undated, 3<sup>rd</sup> volume, pg. 6, ḥadīth number 3650. There are numerous similar narrations (versions) of this prophetic tradition, with slight differences/discrepancies in their wording.

<sup>35</sup> The Successor generation is the generation that immediately follows (*tābi'ūn*) the generation of the Companions (*Ṣaḥāba*), but after the demise of the Prophet Muḥammad. They saw and interacted with the Companions.

<sup>36</sup> This view of degeneration in morals with the passage of generations appears not to be unique to *Ash'arī*—Sunni theology. In her book, *St. Paul: the misunderstood apostle*, Karen Armstrong cites Horace lamenting, "Our grandparents have weaker heirs; we have degenerated further and soon will beget offspring more wicked yet; and that with time comes corruption (in fact, time is qualified/described as corrupting) that diminishes everything." Karen Armstrong, *St Paul: The Misunderstood Apostle* (London: Atlantic Books, 2015), 101-102.

<sup>37</sup> Again, al-Sa'dī's portrayal of Timbuktu pioneer generations as equal to the Ṣaḥāba is apparently at loggerheads with the *Ash'arī* precept of continual retrogression of the trajectory of time toward the future. In other words, is al-Sa'dī's description of the retrogression of Timbuktu's later generations contingent and specific to that time period, and that he therefore hoped that society could get better; that in general matters do get worst but that a later generation could fix things and create a better society? In short, can we apply ibn Khaldūn's reading of history as cyclical, i.e. recurring moments of piety and political strength throughout history? The simple answer to all these possibilities is no. Not because that was not thinkable for al-Sa'dī (we cannot rule out such a possibility), but because al-Sa'dī's historiographical motive does not make allowance for such a possibility. His immediate aim with writing a history of Songhay at that moment was reconciliation between elites not fixing of Songhay's society or even hoping for it. Besides, al-Sa'dī is describing the immoralities of Songhay's society prior to the Moroccan invasion, not exactly his generation.

My reference to Ḥadīth should not be read that I am switching from Ash‘arī *kalām* to Ḥadīth as the resource at work in the *Tārīkh al-Sūdān*. (Al-Sa‘dī does not even cite prophetic ḥadīths in his *tārīkh*). Rather, my reference to the ḥadīth is insofar as it is a “container” of the Ash‘arī doctrine of time as a move away from the ideal reality and a retrogression in human behaviour. It shows a relationship between *kalām* and Ḥadīth insofar as the former was often the *raison d’être* of the latter, i.e. of many individual ḥadīth reports. The relationship between the science of ‘*ilm al-kalām* (theology) on the one hand and Ḥadīth and the other sciences<sup>38</sup> of the Muslim religious-intellectual tradition on the other hand is interesting. ‘*Ilm al-kalām* enjoys centrality vis-à-vis the rest of the sciences of the Muslim intellectual tradition impacting their final epistemic character as Ali Mabrook shows.<sup>39</sup>

The *Tārīkh al-Sūdān* gives a vivid and forceful portrayal of the degeneration in the morals and behaviour of Songhay’s later generations—coupled to their neglect and non-appreciation of history.

This Sa‘dian army found the land of the Sudan at that time to be one of the most favoured of the lands of God Most High in any direction, and the most luxurious, secure, and prosperous, thanks to the *baraka* of the most auspicious, the divinely-favoured Commander of the Faithful Askiya al-ḥājj Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr, because of his justice and the strictness of his all-encompassing authority, which was as effective at the borders of his kingdom as it was in his palace—from the limits of Dendi to the end of the land of al-Ḥamdiyya, and from the limits of Bendugu to Taghāza and Tuwāt and what lies within them. All of this changed then security turned to fear, luxury was changed into affliction and distress, and prosperity became woe and harshness. People began to attack one another

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<sup>38</sup> *Tafsīr, fiqh, uṣūl al-fiqh* and the linguistic sciences: *balāgha, naḥw, ṣarf*,

<sup>39</sup> Mabrook makes a distinction between the chronologic and epistemic priority of the sciences of the Muslim intellectual tradition. A science may be chronologically prior to another, however, epistemically second to it crystallized post this chronologically later science. Thus, for example, Muslim theology as a discipline laid the epistemic foundation for Muslim legal theory (‘*ilm uṣūl al-fiqh*) notwithstanding that the latter achieved its methodological completeness prior to Muslim theology doing so, Ali Mabrook, *Markaziyyat ‘ilm al-tawḥīd fī al-thaqāfa al-islāmiyya*, unpublished paper, 20.

throughout the length and breadth of the kingdom, raiding and preying upon property, [free] persons and slaves. Such iniquity became general, spreading, and becoming ever more serious and scandalous. Since the time when the *amīr* Askiya al-ḥājj Muhammad had ruled the land of Songhay none of the rulers of neighbouring territories had attempted to invade them, because of the strength, toughness, bravery, courage, and awe-inspiring nature that God Most High had endowed the Songhay with. On the contrary, it was they who sought out other rulers in their lands, and God gave them victory over them on many an occasion, as has been related in their traditions and stories. They continued this until close to the demise of their dynasty. Then as their kingdom came to an end, they exchanged God's bounties for infidelity, and left no sin against God Most High that they did not commit openly, such as drinking fermented liquors and fornication—indeed, they were so given over to this latter vice that it looked as if it were something not forbidden. Nothing gave them so much pride or social status as fornication, to such an extent that some of the sons of their sultans would commit incest with their sisters.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Hunwick, *Timbuktu & the Songhay Empire*, 192-195.

من القوة والمثرو النجدة والشجاعة والمهابة التي خضع لهم  
 تجلي بها بلهم الله يبريغده ونال المرأة في بلدة انهم بيندهم  
 الله عليهم غير مامنة كما امرت في اخبارهم وقصصهم  
 الرفرة ان غرر صرح وتطمع وزوال ممل كمنطق تبة فوانع الله  
 كعبوا واطنر كوا مشيتا مر معاصي الله تعالى الاوار تركبوا  
 جبهة امر شتبا الخمر وركبة الذكور وانما الزني وهو اكبر علمهم  
 حتى جمع بينهم كانه غير محفور ولا ليع فخر وزيينة الابهة  
 وحتى يجعلها بعض اولاد مسلا كمينهم باخوانهم وفيل انه صرث  
 في اخر مئة السلطان العدل امير المرينين اسمي الحاج محمد  
 وولده يوسف كني هو الخدي ابي عمه فلهما سر صه غضبا غضبا  
 شديدا ثم عني عليه الا يصحبه في كسرة الرحا الاخرة واجبات  
 الله تعالى عونه فيهم وانفد مع منه بعلية والعبادة بالله ثم ان  
 الم عوة نالت ابنة ابنه والد تشكي يخفوه وانفد مع  
 فم كنه له في اخر عمره بتلة العلة ولطفه انتم الله سبحانه  
 منهم بهنزة المحلنة المنصورة فمراهم بها من مسافة بعيدة  
 ومكابدة شديدا فاجتنت عرووفهم مراصلاها وكفوا  
 باصحاب العبرة واهلها ولن جمع الى الخلاه في تساع في الصلح  
 فلما بلغ المر سوال يشوكة على العجم عنه السلطان مولاي احمد  
 وهو اول من اتاه فخر فتح ارض الشوكة من فمراهم له الكتاب غضب

عضب

واجتنت

بلغ القادسية

غضب شديدا

The degeneration in the morals and behaviour of Songhay led to a change in its fortunes from ease, security, safety, prosperity, abundance, and *baraka* in its early days to woe,



harshness fear, hardship affliction, and distress in its later days and eventual collapse. Pagans sacked and plundered its once secure lands. Songhay's people began to attack one another throughout the length and breadth of the kingdom, raided and seized others' property, laid to waste land, murdered at will, and enslaved free people. Tyranny and highhandedness pervaded Songhay.<sup>41</sup> The *Tārīkh al-Sūdān*'s sibling chronicles too record injustice, inobservance of God's laws, arrogance of the elite, and crime being pervasive in Songhay.

It is sexual debauchery in Songhay that al-Sa'dī highlights most. Sodomy and fornication were so widespread that they were no longer seen as vices forbidden by Islam and even socially. Worse, fornication was a mark of pride and social status to the extent that some of the sons of Songhay's sultans would commit incest with their sisters. The *Tārīkh al-fattāsh* and the *Notice historique* concur. Sexual immorality reached such extreme limits; the most disagreeable actions to God's sight were openly committed. An officer was designated to attend to issues of adultery with a drum specially made for him; different parties presented to him their cases against one another.<sup>42</sup> The three *tārīkhs* also concur on these events occurring during the last days of the Songhay Empire, i.e. the reign of Askiya Ishāq II. However, elsewhere al-Sa'dī dates the decline in Songhay's morals to the end of *al-ḥājj* Askiya Muḥammad's rule, long before the reign of Askiya Ishāq II.

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<sup>41</sup> Hunwick, *Timbuktu & the Songhay Empire*, 33.

<sup>42</sup> Ibn al-Mukhtār, *Tārīkh al-fattāsh*, p. 205

Sexual immorality was not only consensual but also by force. Free women were taken as concubines meaning they were enslaved and coerced into sex. In fact, al-Sa‘dī shows that the violation of women was not only a problem of Songhay toward the end of its empire. The Tuāreg violated women when they raided homes; Jenne fell into the hands of Sunni ‘Alī exactly at the moment a senior army commander of its army abducted the wife of a defenceless man, took her as his own and, it appears, raped her.

However, al-Sa‘dī highlighting of sexual immorality in Songhay was that of Songhay’s royal family and ruling elite only, not Songhay society as a whole.<sup>43</sup> Hence he singles out Yūsuf Koi, a son of the pious *al-ḥājj* Askiya Muhammad as the first one to commit sexual debauchery already during the lifetime of the righteous *al-ḥājj* Askiya Muḥammad.

People say that this happened towards the end of the reign of the just sultan, the Commander of the Faithful Askiya *al-ḥājj* Muhammad, and that it was his son Yūsuf-Koi who first committed such acts. When Askiya Muhammad heard of it, he became enraged, and cursed him, praying that his male member should not accompany him to the other world. God Most High answered his prayer, for Yūsuf’s member was detached from his body as the result of an illness-may God preserves us from such a fate! The curse passed on to his son Arbinda, father of Yunki Ya‘qub and his member was likewise detached from his body late in life through the same illness.<sup>44</sup>

Muḥammad Bonkana, a son of Askiya Dāwūd is recorded of having missed a military campaign as a result of falling ill with syphilitic sores.<sup>45</sup> His contraction of the disease suggest sexual promiscuity. Nevertheless, on hearing of Yūsuf Koi’s sexual debaucheries, *al-ḥājj* Askiya Muhammad cursed Yūsuf Koi with the severing of his penis. But *al-ḥājj* Askiya Muhammad’s curse also afflicted Yūsuf Koi’s son Arbinda and it appear his

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<sup>43</sup> Karen Armstrong suggests that St. Paul’s lambasting of sexual perversions in Rome (the wicked scheming of women) arguably targeted the imperial household. *St Paul*, 102.

<sup>44</sup> Hunwick, *Timbuktu & the Songhay Empire*, 192-195.

<sup>45</sup> Hunwick, *Timbuktu & the Songhay Empire*, 154.

grandson Yunki Ya‘qūb, although these two are not shown as being guilty of sexual debauchery. In other words, the curse was perpetual, not confined to Yūsuf Koi, the perpetrator.

According to the *Tārīkh al-fattāsh* and the *Notice historique al-ḥājj* Askiya Muḥammad cursed his son Askiya Mūsā with the exposure of his genitals. This happened when Askiya Mūsā fell from his horse in front of his soldiers exposing his genitals. Mūsā overthrew the old Askiya, ejected him from the palace and took his concubines and slave girls for himself.<sup>46</sup> It is not clear from the *Tārīkh al-fattāsh* wording that Mūsā used the concubines for sex. It does, however, appear to be the case according to the wording of the *Notice historique*, “On dit même qu’il dissimula plusieurs des femmes de son père et cohibita avec elles” ending with the Qur’ānic quote, “réfugions-nous auprès de Dieu” indicating diabolicalness.<sup>47</sup> The *Tārīkh al-Sūdān* mentions that Mūsā only removed the old Askiya. In fact, contrary to the *Tārīkh al-fattāsh*, it says Mūsā stayed in his own house while the deposed Askiya remained in the palace; it also makes no mention of slave girls and concubines.<sup>48</sup> Rather it lists Mūsā’s crime as killing his brothers after assuming power.

According to the *Tārīkh al-fattāsh*, Sunni Ali asked *al-ḥājj* Askiya Muḥammad and Umar Komadhiakha to kill Askiya Muḥammad Bonkana on the night of latter’s birth. Sunni ‘Alī predicted that the child would cause harm to *al-ḥājj* Askiya Muḥammad; he heard a

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<sup>46</sup> Ibn al-Mukhtār, *Tārīkh al-fattāsh*, p. 139

<sup>47</sup> *Notice historique* attached to the Octave Houdas and Maurice Delafosse French translation of the *Tārīkh al-fattāsh* as *deuxième appendice* (Paris: Ernest le Roux, 1913), 340-341.

<sup>48</sup> Hunwick, *Timbuktu & the Songhay Empire*, 117.

scream on the night of Askiya Muḥammad Bonkana's birth and the baby was born with a full set of teeth. They did not. The Sunni's "divination" came to pass for on becoming Askiya, Muḥammad Bonkana removed *al-ḥājj* Askiya Muḥammad from Gao, imprisoned him on the island of Kangāga, forced the old Askiya's daughters to uncover themselves in front of him and had a *griotess* sing that he was better than a hundred sons of *al-ḥājj* Askiya Muḥammad.<sup>49</sup> Sunni 'Alī's divination would, of course, have no religious imperative given his presentation in the *tārīkhs* as a disbeliever, evil tyrant and practitioner of witch craft.

Why, one may wonder, did *al-ḥājj* Askiya Muḥammad, the just and righteous Muslim ruler, curse Yūsuf Koi rather than punish him in accordance with the Islamic penal code for sexual impropriety? A curse best served al-Sa'dī's historiographical motive. Yūsuf Koi, his son and grandson's (his offspring's) penises are a symbol of the continuity of the royal lineage of Songhay. Their severed penises therefore symbolizes the demise of Songhay. Without a penis Songhay could not produce the offspring necessary for the continuation of the Songhay Empire. *Al-ḥājj* Askiya Muḥammad's curse of Yūsuf Koi can be seen as foretelling the demise of the Songhay Empire. And who better to announce the destruction of the Empire than its God-fearing and just ruler? The sexual debauchery of only one son of *al-ḥājj* Askiya Muḥammad was sufficient to warrant the destruction of the entire Empire.

The mention of Yūsuf Koi shows al-Sa'dī's political motive. He features only in the *Tārīkh al-Sūdān*. Both the *Tārīkh al-Sūdān* and the *Tārīkh al-fattāsh* give the names of

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<sup>49</sup> Ibn al-Mukhtār, *Tārīkh al-fattāsh*, 140; Hunwick, *Timbuktu & the Songhay Empire*, 126.

thirty four sons of *al-ḥājj* Askiya Muḥammad, the same names, although according to both *al-ḥājj* Askiya Muḥammad had more sons. Secondly, Yūsuf Koi does not feature prominently in the in the *Tārīkh al-Sūdān*, whether in the Songhay state bureaucracy or as one of the contenders for the throne, before or after the Moroccan invasion. On the other hand, the *Tārīkh al-fattāsh* describes Mūsā's action as fickleness, not as immoral behaviour per se.<sup>50</sup> In other words, the *Tārīkh al-fattāsh* does not make a link between Mūsā's undutiful behaviour and God's wrath and the destruction of Songhay. Exposure of genitals is only embarrassment of an individual, while detachment of the penis denotes the demise of an empire.

The following prophetic ḥadīths on sexual immorality as a cause of apocalypse (political collapse) are helpful to appreciate al-Sa'dī's employing of Ash'arī *kalām* to achieve a political motive,

When adultery/fornication (*zinā*) and usury become apparent [among the inhabitants] of a town then they have brought on themselves the wrath and punishment of God.<sup>51</sup>

The thing I most fear for my *umma* (nation) after my demise is the doing [sodomy] of the people of [Prophet] Lūṭ. Alas, then let my *umma* anticipate the wrath and punishment of God ...<sup>52</sup>

How will you fare when five things become rampant? I seek refuge in God that [the five things] be with you or you encounter them [in your lifetime]. Whenever obscenity proliferates among people and is openly practiced among them, plague and calamity will afflict them in a manner not witnessed by their predecessors. When people refuse to pay the *zakāh* (alms tax), they will have no rain except the rain [falling] for animals. Whenever people cheat in the measure and weight [when selling], they will be afflicted with years of hardship, scarcity of supplies and the tyranny of the ruler. When their rulers rule by other than that which has been revealed [in the Qur'an], God will impose their enemies on them so that they will

<sup>50</sup> Ibn al-Mukhtār, *Tārīkh al-fattāsh*, 139.

<sup>51</sup> Al-Ḥākim Muḥammad bin 'Abdallāh, *Al-mustadrak 'alā al-ṣaḥīḥayn*, volume 1 (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifa, 1998).

<sup>52</sup> Aḥmad bin al-Ḥusayn Al-Bayhaqī, *Al-jāmi' li shu'ab al-īmān*, volume 7 (Riyāḍ: Maktaba al-Rushd, 2003), 273-274; Abī al-Ḥasan Al-Ḥanafī, *Ḥāshiyā al-Sindī 'alā ibn Māja*, 2 volumes (Beirut: Dār al-Jil, n.d.).

only salvage some of what is in their possession. And when they suspend the Book of Allah and the *Sunna* (the moral behaviour) of His Messenger [Muḥammad], God will make their wrath among them.<sup>53</sup>

The Moroccan invasion and conquest of Songhay was thus God's punishment for Songhay royals' indulgence in adultery, sodomy, usury, mutual cursing, the drinking of alcoholic drinks, etc.<sup>54</sup> Al-Sa'dī is explicit: 'Hence God the Sublime wrought vengeance upon them through this victorious expeditionary force, striking them with it from afar. He inflicted severe loss on them, so their roots were cut off at their base, like those mentioned in the above example and their ilk.'<sup>55</sup>

Al-Sa'dī shows that tyranny and other injustices were likewise the cause of the collapse of Mali, Tuāreg rule of Timbuktu, and the fall of the city of Jenne to Sunni Ali—all three prior to the Songhay Empire. Mali's tremendous power and extraordinary might strength led its rulers and army commanders to highhandedness and the violation of people's rights. God therefore punished them through an army in the form of human children who decimated them within a single hour. The Tuāreg raided homes and dragged its occupants out by force.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Aḥmad bin al-Ḥusayn Al-Bayhaqī, *Al-jāmi' li-shu'ab al-īmān*, volume 5 (Riyāḍ: Maktabat al-Rushd, 2003), 22-23. The ḥadīth (report) is recorded in other Ḥadīth Collections with some differences in the wording.

<sup>54</sup> That misfortune and calamity are a result of sexual perversion is found in many cultures of the Near East for millennia. For example, according to Leviticus 18, the *goyim* were removed from the land for committing sexual abomination; Ham's mere staring at Noah's nudity brought on Noah's curse of Canaan to perpetual servitude; see, Edwin Yamauchi, "The curse of Ham", *CTR*, 6, 2, (2009), 45-60. On ancient Middle-Eastern sex omens, see Ann Kessler Guinan, "Auguries of hegemony: the sex omens of Mesopotamia", *Gender & History*, 9, 3 (1997), 462-479.

<sup>55</sup> Hunwick, *Timbuktu & the Songhay Empire*, 194-5.

<sup>56</sup> Hunwick, *Timbuktu & the Songhay Empire*, 15.

## ***Theistic pre-determination***

According to Ash‘arī *kalām*, everything, good or bad, happens by the will and power of God. Human beings do not have any choice in the face of God’s will, knowledge and power. God alone decrees and determines the vicissitudes of history. As the fourth/tenth-century Ash‘arī scholar, Abū Bakr al-Bāqilānī says, “All contingencies [in history] are created by God: beneficial and harmful, belief and disbelief, obedience and sin.” Nothing runs in this world, in history except by the will of God; a believer believes and a disbeliever disbeliefs only by the will of God; no aim escapes His wish, etc.<sup>57</sup>

Ash‘arī dismisses views that deny that sins are created by God as the false belief of Mu‘tazilīs and other heretical sects. Zaydī cum Mu‘tazilī,<sup>58</sup> and Twelver Shi‘ī<sup>59</sup> scholars argue that human beings are the authors of their actions. Interestingly the famous Ḥasan al-Baṣrī<sup>60</sup>, later claimed by Sunni Islam, in a letter to the Umayyad Caliph‘Abd al-Mālik refuted the doctrine of theistic pre-determination.

Indeed numerous passages in the *Tārīkh al-Sūdān* show that all that transpired was by God’s power and will and in his knowledge

Whilst en route back to Gurma a torrent overtook him [the tyrant Sunni Ali] at a place called Kuna, bringing about his death, through the agency of the Mighty and Powerful One. God Most High made his [*Al-ḥājj* Askiya Muḥammad] kingdom prosper, giving him powerful help, and granting him signal conquests. The

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<sup>57</sup>Abū al-Ḥasan Al-Ash‘arī, *Kitāb al-luma‘ fī al-radd ‘alā ahl al-zaygh wa al-bida‘* (Cairo: Maṭba‘at Miṣr Sharika Musāhama Miṣriyya, 1955), 69-79; Abū Bakr Al-Bāqilānī, *Al-inṣāf fī mā yajib ‘itiqāduhu wa lā yajūz al-jahl bih*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Cairo: Al-Maktaba al-Azharīyya li al-Turāth, 2000), 41, 151-159; Abū Bakr al-Bāqilānī, *Kitāb tamhīd al-awā‘il wa talkhīṣ al-dalā‘il* (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-Kutub al-Thaqāfiyya, 1987), 341-342.

<sup>58</sup>Al-Qāsim Al-Rasī, “Kitāb al-‘adl wa al-tawḥīd: wa nafy al-tashbih ‘an Allāh al-wāḥid al-ḥamīd”, in *Rasā‘il al-‘adl wa al-tawḥīd*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Imāra (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1988), 130-148.

<sup>59</sup>Al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā, “Inqādh al-bashr min al-jabr wa al-qadr”, in *Rasā‘il al-‘adl wa al-tawḥīd*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Imāra (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1988), 282-341.

<sup>60</sup>Ḥasan Al-Baṣrī, “Risāla fī al-qadr”, in *Rasā‘il al-‘adl wa al-tawḥīd*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Imāra (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1988), p. 113-119

sorcerer said, 'Come forth to me', and there emerged from the water, by the power of God Most High, a man resembling the Aribanda-farma in shape and appearance. Were it not that fate has compelled me [Askiya *al-ḥājj* Muḥammad bin Askiya Dāwūd] to sit on this throne today, I would not do so. At that people were very afraid, but God dispersed that army through hunger and thirst, and they scattered hither and thither. The remainder returned home, having through the power of the Creator accomplished no part of [the Moroccan *sultān*] al-Manṣūr's plan. Mūlāy Aḥmad told them that that land [of Songhay] would be excised from the kingdom of the *Sūdān*, and he informed them how much territory his army would subdue, according to certain divinatory prognostications he had come across. For God most High had foreknowledge that their [Songhay] kingdom would wane and their state disappear, and none can reverse His decree or hinder His judgement. That was a mighty army (the Moroccan army) that could not be confronted and defeated except by one aided and supported by God Most High. Acting under the power of God whose command no one can reverse and whose judgment no one can hinder, he [Askiya Iṣḥāq II] made for Tinfini in the land of the Gurma pagans. When the Songhay folk outside the tents realised what had happened, they fled, and those for whom God had decreed safety escaped and reached a secure place with their companions. Those whose hour had come succumbed to shot and sword. Sublime is He, the Living, the Everlasting, whose reign has no ending and to whose duration there is no limit. God Most High gave victory to Qā'id al-Muṣṭafā, and the Tuāreg forces were defeated and fled. God opened the gates of misery upon it.<sup>61</sup>

God then predetermined Songhay's immoral behaviour then punished them for their deeds. Songhay had no independent will and power to act; even sorcery, regarded in Islam as the third major sin after *shirk* and murder, is linked to God's power. God changed Songhay's prosperity into misery and insecurity and finally the destruction of their empire at the hands of the Moroccan army.

Yet al-Sa'dī's careful and detailed account of Songhay's sexual immorality and other acts and the change in their fortune suggest that he proportioned them with responsibility. That al-Sa'dī does admit of human agency can be seen from another account when Hugu-koray-koi Kamkuli said to Askiya Dāwūd, 'Is the *amir* lying? I swear by God, it was not God who showed you this, but yourself." Askiya Dāwūd claimed that no one other than God had shown him to appoint Bukar 'Alī Dūdu as Hi Koi, "Tell this assembly, I

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<sup>61</sup> Hunwick, *Timbuktu & the Songhay Empire*, 100–254



[have asked God Most High for a decision as to whom I should give charge of the people of Dendi".<sup>62</sup>

Elsewhere in the *Tārīkh al-Sūdān*, the jurist Kātib Mūsā, the *imam* of Timbuktu's Grand Mosque, ascribes his good health to never sleeping in the open air, always oiling his body, always taking a warm bath and never missing breakfast. The jurist makes no reference to God's will or power; he explains his good health in a manner understood as just human. Al-Sa'dī makes the link between the jurist's good health and God. In other words, even as al-Sa'dī powerfully evokes God's knowledge, power and will, he appears to attribute actual power to history and time, i.e. agency to human beings to shape their political and social experience in history. But does this not contradict the Ash'arī notion of time, the negation of human power and free will?

The conundrum of God's all-imposing will and power over His creation on the one hand and Songhay agency, i.e. time's potency should be read through al-Sa'dī's historiographical motive and the Ash'arī doctrine of *kalām* to effect change on the other hand. Showing that what transpired in Songhay was according to the will of God, in His knowledge and by His power, while assigning agency to human beings, al-Sa'dī afforded his motive of reconciling between the three elites palatability. Stability was much needed in the aftermath of the social-political upheavals caused primarily by the Moroccan invasion followed by the intra-Arma rivalry over power and the anti-Arma

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<sup>62</sup> Hunwick, *Timbuktu & the Songhay Empire*, 146.

resistance of the Askiya lineages (although the armed resistance lasted until 1613). In short, al-Sa'dī he had to be “contradicting” and he was quite probably aware of it.

We now consider Ash'arī *kalām's al-kasb* (doctrine of or acquisition). *Kasb* literally means to earn, for example, a human being earning her livelihood. For Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī the essence of *al-kasb* is earning one's actions though not creating it because of a force created or instilled in the person by God.

“The reality/essence of *al-kasb* is when a matter transpires at the hands of the earner [of the happening of the matter] via a power installed in him/her.” In other words, human beings are not the authors of their actions, however, they earn their actions, i.e. the consequences of their actions. “To the servant [belongs] the earning [of an action founded by God]; s/he is not coerced, but the earner of his/her deeds, both obedience and sin.”<sup>63</sup>

Some later Ash'arīs explain *al-kasb* as not a negation of the human being's ability to act, but that s/he is unable to create that act from non-being (*al-'adm*), i.e. bring the act into existence from non-existence. The effect of the human being's agency then is earning what God has created and brought into existence from non-being. Human capability and ability are therefore linked only to a contingent existence through earning and not creating.<sup>64</sup>

The Moroccan invasion and defeat of Songhay were Songhay's earning of their sexual debauchery, raiding, usurpation of people's properties, selling of free persons into

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<sup>63</sup>Abū al-Ḥasan Al-Ash'arī, *Kitāb al-luma' fī al-radd 'alā ahl al-zaygh wa al-bida'* (Cairo: Maṭba'at Miṣr: 1955), 76; Al-Bāqilānī, *Al-inṣāf*, 43.

<sup>64</sup>Ibn Kamāl Bāsha, *Al-masā'il al-khilāfiyya bayn al-Ash'ariyya wa al-Māturīdiyya*, unpublished treatise, 10; al-Bāqilānī, *Kitāb Tamhīd*, 323-324; Al-Ījī, 'Abd al-Raḥmān bin Aḥmad, *Al-Mawāqif fī 'ilm al-kalām* (Beirut: 'Ālam al-Kutub, n.d.).

slavery decreed by God.<sup>65</sup> Songhay's royals had no choice nor will or power to avoid committing these sins. Mu'tazilī, Shi'ī, or Kharijī theological discourses and some early Muslim scholars reject any notion of God predestining human action and human beings not having choice.

But all this may not explain how Songhay—and human beings throughout history—“earned” the consequences of their sins despite the fact that God pre-determined their sinful deeds. What must be understood, is that we are dealing with the application of a theological discourse that aimed at making sense of political realities, often in ways that are quite clearly contradictory. But politics and logic do not always go hand in hand.

### ***Rebellion against the Arma***

As the number of people wounded by the [Arma] musketeers increased, the notables complained to the jurist *Qāḍī* Abū Ḥafṣ Umar who consulted men of sound judgement about this. Some counselled that they should be repelled by force, if necessary, while others advised caution and restraint. Meanwhile the harm they [the Arma musketeers] were causing continued to get worse. One night Qāḍī 'Umar sent Amar, the legal assistant to the communal leader of those of mixed descent, 'Umar al-Sharīf asking him to announce at once that people should not risk their lives and should be wary of the Arma. Unknown to the Qāḍī, Amar was one of the most iniquitous people in his time, and he changed his (the Qāḍī's] words, saying, Qāḍī 'Umar orders you to conduct a *jihād* against them.<sup>66</sup>

In Safar of that year [1592] the jurist, Qāḍī Abū Ḥafṣ 'Umar sent a letter asking the divinely favoured Shaykh Sidi 'Abdallāh b. Mubārak al-'Ānī to seek pardon for them from the amir Mūlāy Ahmad for the revolt against Qā'id al-Muṣṭafā that they had been responsible for. He was also directed to state that it was the Arma who set it off, and that they were in obedience to God and His Prophet, and thereafter to Mūlāy Ahmad.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī *Al-ibāna*, 65-67; Abū Ja'far Al-Ṭahāwī, *Matn al-'aqīda al-ṭahāwīyya: bayān 'aqīdat ahl al-sunna wa al-jamā'a* (Beirut: Dār ibn Ḥazm, 1996), 22; Al-Juwaynī, 'Abd al-Mālik, *Kitāb al-irshād* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānājī, 1950), 189-192.

<sup>66</sup> Hunwick, *Timbuktu & the Songhay Empire*, 205.

<sup>67</sup> Hunwick, *Timbuktu & the Songhay Empire*, 217.

The Qāḍī's instruction, the description of 'Amar, and Qāḍī'Umar's seeking of Mūlāy Aḥmad's pardon indicate a non, in fact, anti-revolt position in line with Ash'arī *kalām*. Elsewhere al-Sa'dī has the notables of Jenne reject the anti-Arma rebels' demand that the people of Jenne pledge allegiance to the Askiya as both impossible and contrary to the *sharī'a*.<sup>68</sup> The *Ash'arī* School proscribes rebellion against political authority even a sinful and unjust Muslim ruler including one who assumed power through force by overthrowing the incumbent authority. This as long as the ruler does not prevent the performance of the daily prayers.<sup>69</sup>

The Arma rulers of Timbuktu were unjust and sinners as al-Sa'dī clearly shows and, in fact, their invasion and destruction of the Muslim Songhay authority was unlawful; however, they did not prevent the people of Songhay from praying. Al-Sa'dī's anti-revolt writing was not a simplistic application of Ash'arī *kalām*. In fact, al-Sa'dī was not concern with theology but primarily with politics: his politics of reconciliation.

Al-Sa'dī presenting Qāḍī'Umar Abū Ḥafṣ as not supporting rebellion against the Arma even as they oppressed the people of Timbuktu, i.e. al-Sa'dī's anti-revolt writing should be juxtaposed to him presenting the Qāḍī as a resistance figure. Thus al-Sa'dī presents Qāḍī'Umar Abū Ḥafṣ refusing to meet with Jawdar Pasha, the commander of the Moroccan force, when the latter requested a meeting, thereby refusing the Arma

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<sup>68</sup> Hunwick, *Timbuktu & the Songhay Empire*, 210.

<sup>69</sup>For a detailed account on the question of rising up against and removal of the unjust, sinful Muslim ruler, see, 'Abdallāh Al-Dumayjī, *Al-imāma al-'uẓma 'inda ahl al-sunna wa al-jamā'a* (Riyad: Dār al-Ṭība, 2009), 502-518. Al-Dumayjī discusses in detail the discrepant views of the Muslim theologians and jurists. The overwhelming number of Ahl al-Sunna scholars, mostly *Ash'arī*, were against rebellion declaring it not permissible.

hospitality. The *Qāḍī* sufficed with sending the *muezzin* Yahma to meet with Jawdar. According to the *Tārīkh al-fattāsh*, Jawdar Pasha met *Qāḍī* Abī Ḥafṣ in the latter's house, kissed the *Qāḍī's* head and feet and set humbly in front of him.<sup>70</sup> Al- Sa'dī's writings shows a duality: pragmatism (reconciliation of the three elites) and simultaneously his resistance to Arma rule.

Numerous passages in the *Tārīkh al-Sūdān* show pragmatism from al-Sa'dī's writing on the one hand and resistance from his writing on the other hand. For example, the *khaṭīb* Maḥmūd Darāmī welcomed Jawdar's forces and honoured them with a magnificent banquet; the two conversed at length, and the *khaṭīb* showed him the greatest respect and deference.<sup>71</sup>

However, Maḥmūd Darāmī disapproved when two sons of Askiya Dāwūd wanted to swear allegiance to Pasha Maḥmūd; he instructed them to return and join their brothers and people in the anti-Arma resistance.<sup>72</sup> Various other scholars display a spirit of resistance.<sup>73</sup>

## ***Conclusion***

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<sup>70</sup> Maḥmūd Ka't, *Tārīkh al-fattāsh* (Bamako: Imprimerie Mangane et Fils, 2015), 208.

<sup>71</sup> Hunwick, *Timbuktu & the Songhay Empire*, 192.

<sup>72</sup> Hunwick, *Timbuktu & the Songhay Empire*, 202.

<sup>73</sup> John Hunwick's translation of the *Tārīkh al-Sūdān* has as epigraph by Aḥmad Bābā al-Sūdānī conveying salutations to the people of Timbuktu via travellers going to Gao from his exile in Morocco. Aḥmad Bābā sending his greetings to Timbuktu via Gao was an act of resistance. In other words, he could have sent salutations directly to Timbuktu as people travelled directly to Timbuktu as well. His sending greetings via Gao, the political seat of the defeated Songhay Empire, indicates Aḥmad Bābā's continued allegiance to the Songhay State and Askiya lineages. Hunwick, *Timbuktu & the Songhay Empire*, vii.

For al-Sa‘dī, history was praiseworthy and a means to salvation. Already in the introduction of his *tārīkh*, al-Sa‘dī speaks about its importance and indispensability. He laments Songhay’s later generations, including his own, for not appreciating history. Their neglect of history scared al-Sa‘dī and propelled him into writing a history of Songhay.

Now when I saw that branch of learning fading away and disappearing, and its coinage being debased—though recognizing it to be of great benefit, and to contain many gems [of wisdom], since it instructs a man about his native land, his ancestors, their differing generations, their chronologies, and the dates of their decease—I sought the help of God –Sublime is He—in recording the stories and historical traditions that have been handed down about the kings of the Sūdān, the Songhay folk, their conduct, and their military exploits, recounting the foundation of Timbuktu, the kings who ruled it, and some of the scholars and pious folk who settled there, and so forth ...

But writing a *tārīkh* was not simply about nostalgia for Songhay’s glorious days gone by or even about the moral lessons to be learned from the changes (though there may be elements of all that). He wrote Songhay’s history as a trajectory of decline from a glorious past to decline and misery in order to salvage the present he lived in. A present marked and marred by social and political upheavals caused by the Moroccan invasion of Songhay. There was a need for stability amidst the chaos that pervaded seventeenth-century Songhay. Here lies his motive. The motive was political; concerned the making of Songhay’s history in the troubled seventeenth century. The Kātib’s ascribing of his good health to mundane every day measures such as breakfast, oiling of his body, etc. was a private and social matter meaning it had no political significance and during the good prosperous days of Timbuktu and Songhay. There was “no need” for God’s intervention.

Al-Sa‘dī employed, among many resources, Ash‘arī *kalām*. He did not dabble in ‘pure’ theology; he did not wear his theology on his sleeves. He was not Franz Fanon’s initial

fatalist colonized native who removes all blame from the (Moroccan) oppressor and attributes the misfortunes (of the Moroccan invasion) to God, as God is Fate.<sup>74</sup> His usage of Ash‘arī precepts such as *kasb* was to realize a political motive in his historiography, to reconcile between the three elites. The defeat of Songhay and Moroccan takeover and occupation had to be ordained by God otherwise it would be neither possible, permissible nor desirable for al-Sa‘dī to reconcile between the old Songhay royals and the new Moroccan conquerors.

Al-Sa‘dī’s ascribing of the destruction of Songhay to God, his refusal to rebel against Arma rule, the whole project of reconciliation may be construed as his support and sanction of the Moroccan invasion and occupation of Songhay. This would be a mistake. His detailed and favourable account of Songhay’s protracted resistance against the Moroccan occupation up to 1613 is indicative of opposition to the Moroccan invasion.<sup>75</sup> His accounts of the scholars’ response to the Arma show resistance. It was however, a ‘passive’ resistance.

In line with Moraes Farias’ suggestion that “The *tārīkh* writers were in fact inventing a new idea of the Sahelian past”<sup>76</sup>, Yūsuf Koi’s sexual debauchery can with plausibility be viewed as a creation of al-Sa‘dī’s historiography. He may even not have been a son of al-ḥājj Askiya Muḥammad. I would go further to suggest that the whole narrative of the

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<sup>74</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The wretched of the earth* (Paris: Grove Weidenfeld, 1973), 54.

<sup>75</sup> Askiya Muḥammad Gao began the military resistance against the Arma. His brother Askiya Nūḥ continued it following the former’s treacherous murder at the hands of the Arma during peace talks. Some of the Askiya lineages accepted Arma rule such as Sulaymān appointed Askiya of Gao by Pasha Maḥmūd Zarqūn; Hunwick, *Timbuktu & the Songhay Empire*, p. 200-212. For more on Songhay’s resistance, see Lansine Kaba “Archers, musketeers, and mosquitoes: the Moroccan invasion of the Sudan and the Songhay resistance 1591-1612”, *Journal of African history* 22 (1981), 457-475.

<sup>76</sup> Moraes Farias, *Intellectual innovation*, 96.

Songhay royals' sexual debauchery is al-Sa'dī's invention, or at least an embellished reconstruction. Or as with the carnivorous horses, Yusuf Koi and the Songhay royals' sexual debauchery may have been a product of pagan orality that al-Sa'dī reworked. Timbuktu's seventeenth-century historians aimed at reinforcing the symbolic capital of the Askiya lineages deploying writing strategies that prevented narrative breaks where evidence was missing.<sup>77</sup> Al-Sa'dī was not Voltaire's Jesuitical historian, who could never tell a true tale, much less write a true history.<sup>78</sup> He skilfully and elegantly practiced the historian's craft.<sup>79</sup> Premodern historiography practiced the art of telling stories.<sup>80</sup> Al-Sa'dī was a story teller.

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<sup>77</sup> Moraes Farias, *Intellectual innovation and reinvention*, 96.

<sup>78</sup> Quoted in, Partha Chatterjee, *The black hole of empire: history of a global practice of power* (Ranikhet Cantt: Permanent Black, 2012), 44-45.

<sup>79</sup> The good historian, according to pre-modern Muslim historian al-Mas'ūdī, is like a woodpecker. Quoted in Khalidi, Tarif, *Islamic historiography: the histories of Mas'ūdī* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975), 5-6.

<sup>80</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The practice of everyday life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 81.