

RECENT BOOKS

TA^ʾRĪKH AL-SŪDĀN

Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: al-Sa^cdī's Ta^ʾrīkh al-sūdān Down to 1613 and Other Contemporary Documents, by John O. Hunwick. Leiden: E.J. Brill (Islamic History and Civilization. Studies and Texts) 1999. lxx, 412 pp. ISBN 90-04-11207-3

Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire is a source book for the history of Songhay to that point in time when, some twenty or so years after the Moroccan invasion of 1591, resistance came finally to an end, and the new Arma administration based on Timbuktu was firmly in place. Eagerly awaited as a new translation into English of the seventeenth-century chronicle, *Ta^ʾrīkh al-sūdān*, this important study is both more and less than that. Hunwick translates most but not all of the *Ta^ʾrīkh*, adds four other short pieces, and prefaces all with an interpretative essay of 44 pages that draws upon these sources but also on a wide range of more recent historical, ethnographic, linguistic and archaeological materials.

The translations from al-Sa^cdī's *Ta^ʾrīkh al-sūdān* take up pages 1 to 270 of *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*. Hunwick uses the Arabic text published by Octave Houdas from Paris in 1898-1900, but checked other available manuscripts for variant readings of significance (which turn out to be relatively few). Acknowledging his debt to 'Houdas's pioneering work', Hunwick comments, 'nevertheless, I felt that his interpretation of the cumbersome text of al-Sa^cdī could, in many places, be improved upon, whilst his sparse annotation could be much expanded in the light of subsequent

research' (xv). Accordingly, he offers the reader translations of Chapters 1 to 27 and 30 of the 38 chapters into which Houdas conveniently divided al-Sa^cdī's chronicle, and thereby focuses attention on the period before power shifted decisively from the Askiyas to the Arma.

This reviewer is one of many who will take Hunwick's renowned command of Arabic as guaranteeing the accuracy of the new translations. Accuracy, however, had to be combined with readability. Hunwick tells us that he wished to make al-Sa^cdī's writings 'accessible as much to the dedicated general reader, as to the specialized student of African history' (xvii). He was, therefore, obliged to take some liberties with the text, not least in matters of punctuation. In point of fact al-Sa^cdī wrote in a style that, as Hunwick gently comments, 'was sometimes inadequate for the task before him'. It was wooden and repetitive, lacked elegance, and was often grammatically incorrect (xvii, lxiv). In the interests of readability many of al-Sa^cdī's stylistic infelicities might legitimately be eliminated from the translations, but an elegance that is not present in the original should not be imported into them. It is to Hunwick's credit that he does not do this. By way of contrast with the down-to-earth quality of al-Sa^cdī's prose, however, the reader may like to make a comparison between it and Hunwick's fine rendering of a poem by Aḥmad Bābā b. Aḥmad of Timbuktu (vii, 316). In exile in Morocco from 1593 to 1608, that virtuoso addressed a traveller who was about to proceed across the desert:

O traveller to Gao, turn off to my city.
 Murmur my name there and greet all my dear ones,
 With scented salams from an exile who longs
 For his homeland and neighbours, companions and friends ...

To the *Ta'rikh al-sūdān* Hunwick adds four other items of relevant provenance, first, a new translation of the description of the Middle Niger, Hausaland and Bornu by Leo Africanus; second, translated extracts from selected letters having to do

with Mulāy Aḥmad al-Manṣūr's invasion of the region of the Middle Niger; third, a translation of passages from al-Ifrānī's chronicle that also relate to the Sa[°]dīan conquest; and finally, the account of the same events by an unidentified Spaniard who was resident in Marrakesh in 1591. Hunwick acknowledges the excellence of Houdas and Delafosse's 1911-12 French edition of what is now usually described as Ibn al-Mukḥṭār's recension of Maḥmūd Ka[°]ti's *Ta' rīkh al-fattāsh*. He does not, accordingly, present extended translations from this important source, but does make many references to it in his glosses on the *Ta' rīkh al-sūdān*.

In his interpretative essay Hunwick confronts major problems that have to do with early Songhay history. It is remarkable that even the Songhay language still defies definitive classification. Within the last two decades one and the same investigator has identified it as a Manding language and as a Tamasheq creole. The history of the first Songhay kingdom, presumably that of the Zuwā dynasty, remains largely speculative. Hunwick suggests that it was the achievement of two groups of migrants, both moving upriver from Dendi. The Sorko travelled by water, the others—horsemen who were to nurture the dynasty—by land. Kukiya, on the bend of the Niger, may have been the principal location of these early settlers. If so, it was probably expansion of the caravan trade from North Africa and Egypt that led the Songhay to establish a commercial capital further north, near the junction of the Tilemsi valley and the Niger. It became known in the literature as Kawkaw, that is, the modern Gao.

What, then, of the chronology of these events? There is as yet little hard evidence from which to work. We know that by the late tenth century, if not earlier, the ruler of Gao was a Muslim. Al-Sa[°]dī begins his history of the Songhay with a section on the Zuwā dynasty—'the first of the kings who ruled over it'. He identified the fifteenth as the first to convert, and the thirty-second as in power when Songhay fell under Malian hegemony. It would seem highly risky to draw any conclusions from a regnal list of this kind, and Hunwick

wisely refrains from doing so. The problem is that even if the accuracy of al-Sa^cdī's list is assumed—and this is no mean assumption—the fact still remains that lengths of reigns are a function of the system of succession, and it is not known which system was favoured in early Songhay.

If the first conversion of a Zuwā ruler is assigned (as al-Muhallabī reports) to the later tenth century, and the end of the dynasty is placed in the later thirteenth century, then, following al-Sa^cdī, there were seventeen rulers in that approximately three hundred year period. This yields an average length of reign of some 18 years, which would presuppose a strong preference for sons over brothers in the determination of succession. Such, however, is not characteristic of societies in the region of the Middle Niger and the Niger Bend. As Hunwick notes with reference to the Sunni dynasty that followed the Zuwā, the tendency was to exhaust sequences of brothers before dropping to the generation of the sons (xlv), and surely enough the average length of reign of the Sunni rulers comes out at about 7 years. Date-guessing can be suggestive if it is not taken too seriously and, in that spirit, two observations may be made. First, that if the high figure of an average 18 years reign *is* applied to the earlier (pre-Muslim) section of the Zuwā dynasty, then a date of around 700 (plus/minus goodness knows how much!) is obtained for its beginnings. Second, if the seemingly more plausible figure of 7 years is applied, then the origins of the dynasty should be sought rather in the late ninth century. In fact, this second date is too late. Al-Khwārizmī makes the earliest (known) reference to Kawkaw in the first half of the ninth century, and in 872-3 al-Ya^cqūbī could refer to it as the most important and powerful of the kingdoms of the Sudan and one that was, moreover, already an imperial power.

‘The first Songhay kingdom’, Hunwick writes, ‘could flourish because it lay at a crossroads of trade routes leading on the one hand to North Africa and on the other to Egypt’ (xxxiv), and in fact Ibn al-Faqīh, writing at the beginning of the tenth century, specifically referred to the route from Old

Ghana to Egypt by way of Kawkaw. Why then, did Songhay fail to sustain its momentum and finally fall under the authority of the kings of Mali in the late thirteenth century? Hunwick does not address this problem, but the answer may lie in the fact that by the time Ibn al-Faqīh wrote, the route had already been abandoned. The circumstances are those described by Ibn Ḥawqal in the mid-tenth century: heavy storms that left caravans buried, and attacks by brigands. As a result, in the time of Aḥmad b. Ṭūlūn in Egypt, 868-84, many long distance traders switched their business to the route from the Maghrib to Old Ghana via Sijilmasa.¹ Gao found itself, as it were, in the wrong place at the wrong time.

A major concern running through Hunwick's interpretative essay has to do with the vexed question of ethnicity, a concept that was originally promoted to replace the anathematized 'tribe', but which has since become feral. 'Our knowledge of the history of the various ethnic groups of the Middle Niger region is slight', Hunwick observes, and wisely takes out an insurance policy. 'Rather than attempt any historical reconstruction of specific groups', he writes, 'the following discussion will look at ethnicity through the lens of environment and occupation'. The discussion that follows is exemplary and cautious, or perhaps exemplary because cautious.

One of the problems is that of the reference of such terms as 'Bambara', 'Dyula', 'Malinke', 'Pul', 'Songhay', 'Soninke', 'Wangara', and so on and so forth. Is 'Bambara' an ethnicity? It is often used to mean, pejoratively, 'pagan'. Is 'Dyula' an ethnicity? It is often used to mean, descriptively, 'trader'. What bond was there, if any, between the Pul (or Fulani) 'clerics' of the urbanized centres of Hausaland, and the pastoral nomads of the desert fringes who referred to themselves by the same name? Granted the cosmopolitan nature of a city such as Timbuktu, what was the teacher of the

1 Nehemia Levtzion and J.F.P. Hopkins (eds.), *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*, Cambridge 1981, 45.

famous Aḥmad Bābā b. Aḥmad *doing* when he described himself not only as ‘Baghayogho’, a common enough Malian patronymic, but as if to put matters beyond dispute, also as ‘Wangara’? Or, conversely, what was his student *doing* by describing himself as descended from Muḥammad ‘Aqīt’, so seemingly invoking specifically Ṣanhāja rather than Malian origins? It is worthy of note that such matters as these engaged the attention of scholars four centuries ago. Thus the author of the *Ta’rīkh al-fattāsh* addressed the question of the designations ‘Malinke’ and ‘Wankara’, and found occupation rather than descent to be crucial:

If it is asked what difference there is between Malinke and Wankara [Wangara], know then that the Wankara and Malinke are of one origin. Malinke is used to mean the soldiers among them, whereas Wankara refers to those who engage in trade and travel from one horizon to another.

Hunwick offers a brief but very useful account of the period of Malian hegemony in Songhay history, and allows that the Sunni dynasty had roots of some sort or another in Manden. Indeed, he argues a Maninka etymology for the very word, ‘Sunni’, and inclines to the view that the founder of the dynasty, °Alī Kulun, was a Malian official who rebelled. But, Hunwick urges, this does not necessarily imply that he was himself a Malian (i.e. Malinke), and suggests that he may have been a Zuwā prince chosen to govern his domains on behalf of the Malian central administration (xxxvii). If so, his case was probably not exceptional. Hunwick points more generally to the retention of such Maninka titles as *farma* and *fari* as being indicative of Songhay’s debt to Mali in the field of imperial administration (xxix). Moreover, Askiya Muḥammad, who overthrew the Sunni dynasty in 1493, was himself apparently a Soninke by patrification. In the context of the times he would presumably have associated himself in some sense or other with Manden, and he is known to have received powerful support in his bid for highest office from

peoples of western Mali. Yet, as Hunwick remarks,

Askiya Muḥammad was part of the Songhay governing elite, and seems to have thought of himself as being part of a long line of Songhay rulers stretching back into the past, since in his questions to al-Mahgīlī he refers to his forefathers having conquered the land [of Songhay] and parcelled it out among themselves. [xl]

There is an appearance of paradox in this, unless one allows that Manden as a culturally hegemonic force survived Mali's eclipse as an imperial power (for which the collapse of Roman Britain or of British India might make useful comparisons).

One of the most evocative parts of Hunwick's interpretative essay is that having to do with what he terms 'the religious estate' in Songhay. Much emphasis was placed upon the teaching of the Qur'ān, *ḥadīth*, and Mālikī law, and, to a lesser degree, theology. In sixteenth-century Timbuktu rhetoric, logic, prosody, astronomy, and Arabic grammar and syntax were also available to the student but, as elsewhere in the Islamic world, history had no place in the curriculum. 'It was', Hunwick writes, 'a "wordly" subject, one which a well-educated scholar might be expected to have some knowledge of, but it was not seen as knowledge leading to salvation' [lxi]. It is therefore somewhat ironic that the scholars of Timbuktu are today best known for writings that effectively chronicle the history of Songhay. 'Al-Sa^cdī', Hunwick comments,

though he rarely alludes to his sources, must have gathered the detailed information that went into his history from an existing Timbuktu tradition of historiography, again partly oral and partly written, which included material going back to the early fourteenth century, and even, though sketchily, before. [lxii]

One wonders whether al-Sa^cdī originally wrote for his own satisfaction, or was perhaps required to serve as annalist by the Askīyas and their successors, the Arma. One cannot fail

to note how very sparse is his knowledge of the history of Mali. The famed pilgrimage of Mansa Mūsā, ‘the first sultan to rule Songhay’, is derived from literary sources, but no mention is made of Sunjata, the founder of Imperial Mali, about whose exploits the griots must already have been singing.

Hunwick’s interpretative essay will surely much influence the ongoing direction of Songhay historiography, perhaps as much by the range of questions carefully posed as by possible answers carefully considered. His translation of al-Sa^cdī’s *Ta’rīkh al-sūdān* is unlikely ever to be superseded. Students of West African history are once again much indebted to John Hunwick, whose *Sharī‘a in Songhay* published in 1985 established new standards in the field.

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