

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The once-fabled city of Timbuktu holds a special place in the consciousness of people who are concerned with Africa, its past and its future. Particularly within the West African context, Timbuktu is one of several cities and states which affirm that the region had as much as any other, a long history of its own. For the historian, the special interest of Timbuktu lies in the fact that the city has left us a tolerably detailed record, not only of its own experience over several centuries, but also of the experience of its neighbours. This record derives principally from the well-known Arabic chronicles, or *tārikhs* of Timbuktu, which have come down to us from various periods, beginning as early as the late sixteenth century. The history of Timbuktu is known to us almost exclusively from these chronicles. Indeed, it is also of considerable interest that the history of the area, namely the West African Sudan, is known to us in greater detail from the Timbuktu chronicles than from any other corpus of source materials pre-dating the nineteenth century.

The place of Timbuktu in West African history must be a point of emphasis in any study on the city. This is particularly true of the present study, for in approaching Timbuktu from the standpoint of its Arabic sources and its Islamic traditions, we risk conveying to the reader the sense that the city has historically belonged to a realm other than the sub-Saharan or Black African. The risk is not contingent upon our approach *per se*, for Timbuktu conceived itself as an Islamic city throughout its history. Rather, the risk is contingent upon the widespread misunderstanding which still persists even in academic circles concerning both Islam and Africa. For one thing, we have to contend with the conventions of East and West (now West and 'non-West') which for a long time left Africa out of the world historical picture. Other conventions have tended to project even stronger barriers against the historical processes of interaction between cultures. We frequently encounter notions of 'cultural' antithesis (as between the 'Islamic' and African, or between the 'Islamic' and Indonesian) when the evidence points more strongly to synthesis. In our case, the synthesis of Muslim and African pertains to the West African

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Elias N. Saad

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 *Social history of Timbuktu*

Sudan generally rather than just Timbuktu. We must likewise remember that the division between northern Africa and sub-Saharan Africa (White and Black) is no more than a convention. Otherwise, we will fail to see how Timbuktu was at once Saharan and sub-Saharan, quite besides being at the same time African and Islamic.

Aside from the conventions mentioned above, or perhaps because of them, Timbuktu has long been the subject of an unusual lore of mystery and enigma. The name now often invokes the image of a remote, inaccessible place which never at all existed, anymore than the fabulous City of Brass of the *Arabian nights*. Horace Miner's ethnographic study of 1953, which characterized Timbuktu in the present century as an example of the so-called 'primitive city', certainly brought our subject closer to the realm of reality. Timbuktu was never the sumptuous or idyllic place which floated in the imagination of Europe up to the early nineteenth century. However, the place of Timbuktu in history is far from inconsequential. For here, just south of the great Sahara, was a substantial dynamic city by the sixteenth century when urbanization was still at a nascent stage in many parts of Europe. Moreover, the region of Timbuktu (or the Western Sudan) was remarkable for its large cities, including the metropolis of Gao, capital of the Songhai empire to the east, and the city of Jenne, the commercial centre of the Middle Niger Delta to the south. By the nineteenth century, these cities were no longer what they used to be, but to the historian at least they do not quite exemplify the theoretically formulated concept of the 'primitive city'.

The research of the past two decades has allocated to Timbuktu an important place in African history. The city is now famous as an ancient centre of commerce where a sophisticated tradition of learning flourished in the medium of classical Arabic, the language of Islam as a whole from Indonesia to Hausaland. Among the products of the Timbuktu tradition of scholarship, the best known are the chronicles because they have been widely utilized to reconstruct the outlines of early West African history. Although Timbuktu itself has not been the subject of concerted study, nonetheless the chronicles have contributed towards giving the city a new sort of fame more consistent with its real history than the earlier legends which circulated outside the area about Timbuktu.

The 'mystery' of Timbuktu

Our study approaches Timbuktu more from the standpoint of the chronicles and documentary records than of its legend or its present-day ethnography. Indeed, it might perhaps be said that the legend of Timbuktu and its mystery (including at the latest Miner's notion of the primitive city) pertain principally to the European approach to Timbuktu rather than to the actual history of the city. The history of European knowledge and exploration of Africa has been well written, and the 'discovery' of Timbuktu

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Elias N. Saad

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction 3

has received its share of attention. In the process, Timbuktu became famous for many things, ranging from its fabled slave-trade to its so-called Sankore University. However, any serious look at the city's legend will show that Timbuktu became famous merely for being 'famous'.

The mystery of Timbuktu is perhaps primarily the mystery of the full-fledged city which flourished south of the Sahara, in a continent which is not widely reputed for having historically had extensive urban centres. Secondly, the *real* mystery of Timbuktu pertains primarily to its relatively unknown origins and to the enigma of its early periods, when Timbuktu began acquiring the status of a metropolis which flourished almost in the desert, instead of at the centre of an agriculturally rich and well-populated region. Thirdly, and as far as the social scientist is concerned, the mystery of Timbuktu is that of the city which was not the modern European township, governed and thought to have been shaped by its municipal institutions, nor a mere conglomeration of villages, as some 'non-Western' cities have been described. Like many Asian and African cities yet to be studied seriously, Timbuktu was not necessarily shaped by the experience of a powerful kingdom, nor can its history be assimilated under that of the empires which successively controlled the area. Yet Timbuktu was a cosmopolitan city which attracted countless ethnic groups to become its sons and citizens.

Let us reaffirm at this point that Timbuktu is not historically the 'city' *par excellence* in sub-Saharan Africa. At most it can be said that no other town in sub-Saharan Africa has so far presented us with historical detail sufficient to make possible an internal view of the organization of the city over an extended period prior to the colonial era. The historian of urbanism in Africa may perhaps legitimately find more substantive basis for focusing on such major cases as Kano in Northern Nigeria, Jenne in the Middle Niger Delta, or Kumasi in modern Ghana. These settlements, too, are of great interest, for although they became the capitals of important kingdoms, we simply do not know whether city preceded state or *vice versa*. Other settlements of greater antiquity are attested by the remains of Zimbabwe in southern Africa, or by the art remains of Ife in Yorubaland. Remotely, the proliferation of ancient town-kingships affiliated to Ife by tradition may have a corollary in the phenomenon of city-states in the history of Hausaland. But in all these cases, and others, the research and documentation available so far has not yielded a body of evidence sufficient for a comparative approach in our study of Timbuktu. At most, we can readily arrive at comparisons with the nearby towns of Gao, Jenne and Walāta, all in the Western Sudan, though in these cases we have to rely to an appreciable extent on the documentation available in the Timbuktu chronicles.

Similarly, we should affirm that Timbuktu was not the Islamic city *par excellence* in sub-Saharan Africa. Here, we need hardly emphasize the differences between the various African Muslim towns and cities, a theme which is often reiterated by Islamicists concerning the cities of North

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Elias N. Saad

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 *Social history of Timbuktu*

Africa and the Middle East. Kano in Hausaland, Harar in Ethiopia and Kilwa on the East African coast have historically been different from Timbuktu and from each other. The role of scholar-notables was probably quite as strong in the case of Harar, an otherwise unique city which Richard Burton once described as the 'Timbuktu of East Africa'. What might be said of Harar need not be true of either Kano or Kilwa, though all three were Islamic cities and Islam played an important role in their history. Certainly, the Islamic factor was very strong in the organization of Timbuktu, and indeed one might even say that at times it loomed stronger than in the older cities of North Africa and the Middle East.

Given the importance of Islam in the history of Timbuktu, the risk is quite great that the city might somehow be seen as characteristically 'Arab' or more vaguely as 'Moorish'. We have already alluded to this problem, but we might perhaps further explain it when we recall that the Islamic cities of the East-African coast, for example, were thought until recently to have been the product of importation and settlement from southern Arabia and Persia. Indeed, writers on East Africa, till recent decades, tended to refer to African Muslims quite ambiguously as Arabs, just as the Portuguese, three or four centuries earlier, used to designate them 'Moors'. Fortunately, historians of West Africa have not had to contend with problems of nomenclatural ambiguity quite so commonly. For it was realized from an early date that Islam achieved an independent growth in West Africa, a fact which now increasingly appears to have been true of the mediaeval East-African coast as well. In both cases, one of the more significant findings of the historian is that we can identify no single event which accounts either for the introduction of Islam in mediaeval times nor for its subsequent growth locally. The 'mystery' in this case becomes in and of itself an important historical datum. It simply suggests that Islam was introduced gradually and informally as a result of processes of commercial intercourse whose origins would seem to pre-date the Islamic era in both cases. In East Africa, Islam remained for the most part restricted to the coastal regions, the area of Harar being an exception, while in West Africa Islam diffused widely, especially among mercantile communities of the Sahelo-Sudan. The process began long before Timbuktu came into being around 1100, and indeed even a full-fledged tradition of Islamic learning had witnessed considerable local development further to the south before the rise of Timbuktu to importance in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Indeed, the very growth of Timbuktu to importance cannot properly be understood without appreciating the scope and nature of the southern influence.

Niger, Sahara and Sudan

Timbuktu belongs in the middle between two worlds which elsewhere in the Sahelo-Sudan are more distinct from each other. One is the world of the

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Elias N. Saad

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction* 5

Sudanic black peoples of the Savannah belt of West Africa, who have been characteristically agriculturalists, while the other is the world of the nomadic pastoralists of the southern Sahara, the 'whites' of the Sudan, who ultimately owe their origin either partly or fully to a pre-historic (and pre-Islamic) migration from North Africa. These two worlds come together along the Sahelian belt which separates the Sahara from the Savannah. However, the two worlds nowhere come so close as they do in the region of Timbuktu. The main factor is the unusual course followed by the great Niger river in its archlike journey across the West African sub-continent.

Much as Egypt was long ago described as the 'gift of the Nile', so Timbuktu and the cities and states of its region may perhaps be described as the gifts of the Niger. From its sources far to the south, the great Nile of the Sudan (as the Niger used to be called by the Arab geographers) bears resemblance to the Nile of Egypt in that it flows due north towards the Sahara. In the process, the Niger brings the more thickly populated regions of West Africa into the southern Sahara and, hence, closer to North Africa. Timbuktu's indebtedness to the Niger will become apparent when we consider that the great river changes its course eastwards precisely in the region of Timbuktu. From there, it takes a long journey through territories which would have been barren and uninhabitable until, in the regions of Bourem and Gao, it changes its course again, southeastwards, and from there flows along the longest part of its journey via Hausaland and Nupe to the Atlantic.

Perhaps it could be said that the Niger attempts the formidable feat, accomplished by the Nile, of actually crossing the Sahara. Even as it dissipates its strength in its course northwards, the Niger produces an inland delta on a scale which has no match elsewhere. The Middle Niger Delta, as the region south of Timbuktu is called, is a vast floodplain seasonally transformed into an immense shallow lake by the Niger inundations. The result is historically one of the richest regions in Africa, both agriculturally and in fishery. The area has aptly been described as the bread-basket of the Sudan, but the full impact of the floodplain upon the history of West Africa is far from satisfactorily understood.

Timbuktu owed its existence, as well as its long historical *floruit* as a commercial town, largely to the Niger and its inundations. Certainly, the same must also be said of the ancient city of Jenne which, along with the two important towns of Dia and Kābura, flourished in the midst of the Niger floodplain. Similarly, the city of Gao owed much of its history to its location along the eastern bend of the Niger. Timbuktu itself enjoyed the advantage of being located precisely at a point where the Niger inundations reach furthest north into the Sahara. Hence, for a portion of each year, some of the outskirts of the town are transformed into a cultivable region. More importantly, the rise of the Niger for a few months each year

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Elias N. Saad

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *Social history of Timbuktu*

made it possible for boats of considerable capacity to navigate the river from Gao, *via* Timbuktu, to Jenne and beyond. Though not itself at the main course of the Niger, Timbuktu was nonetheless able, through its port at Kabara (to be distinguished from Kābura), to occupy an axial position in the commerce of the Niger bend area. The city linked various parts of the Niger with each other, besides standing at a particularly strategic location for linking the Sudan with the Sahara and, through the Sahara, with North Africa.

Seen from the vantage point of the Sahara, Timbuktu itself could perhaps be described, though in a special sense, as a 'port-town'. It is relatively well known that the mediaeval Arabs looked upon deserts as seas, and indeed the great Sahara separating northern Africa from the rest of the continent came to be known as *the* desert (*al-sahrā*). That is precisely why the two belts immediately to the north and south of the Sahara earned the name Sahel (*sāhil*, literally coast). Timbuktu was as much a port-town along the West African Sahel, as Kilwa was a port-town along the coasts of East Africa. The main difference appears to be the fact that, while Kilwa interacted principally with other coastal regions, Timbuktu interacted most with, and probably owed much of its origin to, areas further 'inland' or further south.

The origins of Timbuktu are obscured in part by the scantness of the evidence, but they are perhaps more thoroughly overshadowed by certain conventions which have evolved around the earliest periods in West African history. Foremost among these conventions is a tendency to see history in the Sudan as proceeding from north to south, as it were, from North Africa, via the Sahara, to the Sudan. Among other things, it is quite widely stated that the early great empires of the Sudan, including ancient Ghana, Mali and the Songhai, owed their wealth and greatness predominantly to the stimulus of the trans-Saharan commerce in gold with North Africa. Indeed, we ourselves set out from the standpoint of a similar assumption about Timbuktu (especially in view of the predominantly commercial character of the city), but it soon became clear that the origin of the town, much like its continued existence today, rested upon a local commerce, mainly between the Middle Niger Delta, on the one hand, and between the pastoralists of the Sahara. We need not de-emphasize the role of the trans-Saharan trade in stimulating the further growth of Timbuktu, especially during the sixteenth century when the city became the emporium for West Africa *par excellence*. Nonetheless, there is a distinction between the influences which gave rise to Timbuktu (including the impact of the salt-mines in the middle of the Sahara) and between those which gave added prosperity and importance to the city during long periods of its history. This distinction has not been observed by writers on the Sudanic empires with the result that even the origins of state-formation are associated with the influence of trans-Saharan commerce and, indeed, with

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Elias N. Saad

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction* 7

a 'civilizing mission' said to have been exerted on the Sudan by the southern Saharans.

Technically speaking, the central difficulty which has emanated from this sort of approach pertains to our inability to determine the location of the earliest kingdoms of the Sudan (as mentioned by the Arab geographies) and most especially the kingdom of Ghana. This ancient kingdom was the first in the area to assume an imperial stature, but neither its original core nor the extent of its expansion is known with precision. Most frequently, the core of the kingdom, known in local traditions as Wagadu, has been associated with a rather tenuous Sahelian location skirting the Sahara in the region of Walāta and Kumbi Saleh, some 400 miles to the west of Timbuktu. There, the kingdom may well have participated directly in the trans-Saharan commerce, as is frequently suggested, but there exists equally as much evidence that Ghana was located in or along the Niger floodplain. Indeed, it would appear quite possible that the commerce of Ghana was instrumental in giving rise to Timbuktu as an emporium (much as earlier in the case of Kumbi Saleh) from somewhere around 1100 onwards.

For the most part, we have avoided the complexities surrounding the history of ancient Ghana largely because they fall outside the scope of this study. Nonetheless, the reader should take note of a detail (in Chapter 2), for example, that the people of Wagadu (ancient Ghana) were among the earliest merchants to come trading at Timbuktu. The seventeenth-century chronicler, al-Sa'di, who records this information, also attributed Timbuktu's rise to prominence to its commerce with the city of Jenne, in the Niger floodplain. The interesting feature about both details lies in the fact that al-Sa'di confused the town-kingdom of Jenne, in an early phase of its history, and the kingdom of Ghana. Indeed, similar confusion is to be discerned in the sixteenth-century text of Leo Africanus, a source which exaggerated the extensiveness of the territories of Jenne while describing the town as Genni, Ghenoa and Ghinea.

One of the more fruitful lines of research pursued in this study concerns the chains of transmission of Islamic learning in the Sudan, a technical field of research (see Chapter 3) whereby the precise chains of transmission can be traced for many generations from teacher to student. We discovered that the chains of transmission at Timbuktu led us backwards, at the earliest, to a certain Muḥammad al-Kāburi, a black scholar who along with others bearing a Kāburi *nisba*, originated in the town of Kābura in the Niger floodplain. Beyond this scholar, the precise origins of Islamic learning in the Sudan are still not known. At most, the researches of Ivor Wilks (and partly those of Lamin Sanneh and Tom Hunter) have shown that many West-African Muslim clerics traced lines of transmission of learning which converge backwards upon a semi-legendary figure known as Sālim al-Suwari (Suware). It is of considerable interest that the origin of

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Elias N. Saad

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 *Social history of Timbuktu*

this scholar is associated with the town of Dia (Diakha, also Zāgha), a town near Kābura, where Ibn Baṭūṭa noted the existence of an Islamic learned tradition of long standing, already in the mid-fourteenth century. Remarkably, Suware is sometimes identified as son (almost certainly a putative son) of the Soninke founder-ancestor Dinga (Dinya) of ancient Ghana. Indeed, the traditions of ancient Ghana which are extant among the Soninke begin with relating the saga of travel for Dinga whereby the first places in which he resided in the Sudan are identified as Jenne and Dia (cf. Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana and Mali*, especially p. 15). This perhaps suggests that the ancient kingdom of Ghana flourished in the Niger floodplain or at least that it left an important legacy there at Jenne, Dia and Kābura. Timbuktu inherited the legacy to the extent that even its tradition of masonry is sometimes said to have been introduced from Jenne, a town which in turn is said to have been founded from Dia. There is no question that Dia was once a major metropolis, for it is indeed especially associated with masons and masonry, besides being an ancient centre of Islamic learning. Hence, although the evidence is neither complete nor fully reliable, it seems that the influences received by Timbuktu from the Niger floodplain had considerable impact upon the character of the city from its earliest periods.

The southern background of Timbuktu has been of interest to us in this introduction because it helps to amplify the African background of Timbuktu's traditions, including its tradition of Islamic learning. The world to which Timbuktu belonged did not see things in terms of a sharp distinction between Saharan and sub-Saharan, or between Black and White. Indeed, nor did it see civilization or history in terms of a movement from north to south. The traditionists of Timbuktu believed, for example, that the town of Tuat, across the Sahara in North Africa, was founded by Malinke from the empire of Mali. For all we know, the traditions may be correct, because the twelfth-century geographer, Abu'l-Ḥamīd al-Gharnāṭi, counted the town of Ghadāmis, also an emporium north of the Sahara like Tuat, as among the countries of the Sudan (*Sūdān*, Black people). Indeed, it is remarkable that people from Ghadāmis and Tuat have always been represented by settlers at Timbuktu. Other settlers from North Africa established themselves in the city at various times, but none contributed permanent settlers as much as the people of Tuat and Ghadāmis.

Perhaps the most interesting feature about Timbuktu historically is the great variety which characterized its settlers and its inhabitants. This factor is no longer apparent in the city today, because the majority speak the Songhai language. Indeed, Horace Miner saw Timbuktu as a *city* (albeit in his view a 'primitive city') because it was a multi-ethnic entity of Songhai, Arabic and Tamashagh speakers. In practice, the Songhai-speaking groups include Fulānis and Wangara besides Soninke and Sanḥāja. Other groups

who have gradually lost their ethnic identity include a variety of Tuareg and Hassāni settlers, besides Songhai and Ruma. We may note that southern Saharan ‘whites’ became more strongly associated with the northern Sankore quarter. However, it is interesting that other ‘whites’ from across the Sahara, including settlers from Tuat and Ghadāmis, historically settled in the southern parts of the city, at Jingerebir and Sarekeina.

The ethnic diversity of Timbuktu is historically the outcome of the fact that the city belongs to one of the most ethnically diversified regions in Africa. The Middle Niger Delta has historically been the home of Soninke and Malinke, Wa’kuri and Wangari, while Fulānis have figured prominently in the history of the region, alongside southern Saharan Sanhāja Berbers. Arabs and North African Berbers might well have settled in the region, as individual merchants or merchant families, since the eleventh century when al-Bakri wrote the first detailed account of the countries of the Sudan. The area was likewise home for Songhai, not to mention other less-powerful groups, like the Bozo fishing communities and the semi-nomadic Zaghrānis. Owing to long processes of intermarriage, the colour lines in the region of Timbuktu are not clear-cut any more than elsewhere in the Niger bend area. By tradition, the Soninke, Fulāni and Songhai belong as much to a Sahelian as to a Sudanic background. What appears to be quite sharp, in any single period at least, is a distinction between settled townsmen and nomadic pastoralists. The latter in the expanse of the Sahara region adjoining Timbuktu are today divisible into Tamashagh-speaking Tuareg and into Hassāni Arabic speakers, often identified as Moors, Arabs or, earlier, as Barābīsh. Historically, both Tamashagh and Hassāni speakers owe their origin to the Berbers of the southern Sahara who are first known as Masūfa, Lamtūna and Judāla and who later make their appearance as Maghsharen, Kel Aghlāl, Kel Antasar, Kel al-Sūq, Barābīsh, Kel Tadmekkat *etc.* In the chronicles, these groups are identified by their clan and confederation names, rather than by any linguistic, ethnic or cultural criteria. Over the centuries Timbuktu has received (and indeed ‘naturalized’) settlers from all these groups, but more from among the settled peoples of the Niger than from among the pastoral southern Saharans.

The ‘history’ of Timbuktu

Conventionally, the history of cities, and especially of non-Western cities, is assimilated under the history of states, dynasties or empires which founded these cities, incorporated or dominated them. In regions which witnessed the rise and fall of several empires, like the Western Sudan, North Africa or the Middle East, this approach has the effect of projecting an idea of city (and especially of the ‘Muslim city’) as an entity whose

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Elias N. Saad

Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *Social history of Timbuktu*

character changes periodically. No one would seriously suggest that Mamluk Cairo was fundamentally different from Ottoman Cairo, but the studies available approach Cairo more from the standpoint of Mamluk and Ottoman than from the standpoint of factors which were constant and stable in the organization of the city. At most, the factors of stability are implicitly assimilated under the vague notion of changelessness which is said to characterize 'traditional societies'.

A good example of the emphasis on state, even in studies on the city, is Le Tourneau's *Fez in the age of the Marinids*. Fez has historically been an important North African city which could be an adequate subject for comparisons with Timbuktu, first because of the common factors of Islamic learning and Māliki jurisprudence, and secondly because of comparable economic features on both sides of the Sahara. Le Tourneau's study is one of a few important contributions in the field of Islamic (and indeed 'non-Western') urban history. The difficulty is that the work purports to study mediaeval Fez under the Marinids when, in fact, it is equally as frequently documented on the basis of much later data and, indeed, on the basis of contemporary observation of the organization of the city in the present century. Is it that Fez has remained the same over the centuries (in which case we should be interested in the factors of stability), or is it that Fez has remained Marinid?

In our own study we faced the difficulty that the entire corpus of historical data which is available on Timbuktu, though quite substantial by the standards of other sub-Saharan African cities, is nonetheless quite limited in comparison to the documentation available on North African, Middle Eastern or European cities during a comparable span of time. Particularly problematical is the fact that much of our information comes from the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, while the best details available on the commerce of Timbuktu, for example, pertained to the nineteenth century. It was quite tempting from the beginning to focus on one particular period while drawing upon data from other times. However, it proved quite important to focus precisely on the factors of stability over an extended period of time. Indeed, it was found more feasible to generate data around the theme of stability (and persistence of traditions) than around any other theme which could have constituted an adequate synthetical framework for a historical study of Timbuktu.

If we were to identify Timbuktu with one of the powers which controlled it over the centuries, the obvious choice would be the Songhai empire. The period of the Songhai empire was a relatively short one (c. 1468–1591), but it lies at the fulcrum of the city's own consciousness of its history, not only because the people of Timbuktu speak mainly the Songhai language today, but also because the sixteenth century was unquestionably the city's golden age. The difficulty is that the achievements of Timbuktu at that time cannot be credited to the Songhai empire, any more than the achievements