



*Sultan, Caliph, and the Renewer
of the Faith*

The *Tārīkh al-fattāsh* is one of the most important and celebrated sources for the history of pre-colonial West Africa, yet it has confounded scholars for decades with its inconsistencies and the questions surrounding its authorship. In this study, Mauro Nobili examines and challenges existing theories on the chronicle, arguing that much of what we have assumed about the work is deeply flawed. Making extensive use of previously unpublished Arabic sources, Nobili demonstrates that the *Tārīkh al-fattāsh* was in fact written in the nineteenth century by a Fulani scholar, Nūḥ b. al-Ṭāhir, who modified preexisting historiographical material as a political project to legitimize the West African Islamic state known as the Caliphate of Ḥamdallāhi and its founding leader, Aḥmad Lobbo. Contextualizing its production within the broader development of the religious and political landscape of West Africa, this study represents a significant moment in the study of West African history and of the evolution of Arabic historical literature in Timbuktu and its surrounding regions.

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Sultan, Caliph, and the Renewer of the Faith

Aḥmad Lobbo, the *Tārīkh al-fattāsh*
and the Making of an Islamic State
in West Africa

MAURO NOBILI
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign



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*To Adama Ba and Mohamed Diagayeté,
who made me love, in very different ways,
the history of the Fulani*

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Notes on Orthography and Other Conventions

Transliteration

For transliteration from Arabic I have used the system employed by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, except for the *alif maqṣūra* (ﺀ), which is transliterated as *à* instead of *ā*. Another exception to standard transliteration in English regards the word “chronicle” (تاريخ). Notwithstanding the common transliteration in Western scholarship of the Arabic term as *ta’rīkh*, the infinitive of the second form, the most correct one, which I use in my book, is *tārīkh*, with the long *a* instead of the *hamzat al-qat’* (see Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘arab* [Cairo, Dār al-Ma‘ārif, n.d.], vol. 1, 58).

As for the Fulfulde, I use the transliteration standards found in Donald W. Osborn, David J. Dwyer, and Joseph I. Donohoe, *Lexique Fulfulde (Maasina)–Anglais–Français: une compilation basée sur racines et tirée de sources existantes suivie de listes en Anglais–Fulfulde et Français–Fulfulde = A Fulfulde (Maasina)–English–French Lexicon: A Root-Based Compilation Drawn from Extant Sources Followed by English–Fulfulde and French–Fulfulde Listings* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1993).

Toponyms

Place names follow the conventions of respective countries. For instance, Malian places will normally follow French standards, whereas Nigerian ones follow English spellings. However, a few exceptions have been made, i.e. Timbuktu in place of Tombouctou, Masina for Macina, Azawād in place of Azaouad. In the cases of toponyms in Arabic manuscripts that no longer exist, or that I could not locate, I use the transliteration from the Arabic.

Names of People

Referring to names of people from sources written in many languages and different standards of spelling and transliterations represents a challenge. Trying as much as possible to avoid inaccuracies and inconsistencies, and for sake of identification and searchability, I have used for names of known Muslim scholars from West Africa the form recorded in the reference work John O. Hunwick et al., *The Arabic Literature of Africa*, 5 vols. (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 1993–) in the first instance, and later on in abbreviated forms. Regarding names of scholars from the larger Islamic world, for the same reasons, I use the form of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition, edited by P. J. Bearman et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1954–2007).

Two names require special attention: those of the two most referred characters of the book, Aḥmad Lobbo and Nūḥ b. al-Ṭāhir. Aḥmad Lobbo's full name appears in *The Arabic Literature of Africa* as Aḥmad B. Muḥammad Būbū b. Abī Bakr b. Sa'īd al-Fullānī. In the Middle Niger Aḥmad Lobbo is normally referred to as Seeku Aamadū, an adaptation of the Arabic title *shaykh* in Fulfulde and the rendering in the same language of the name Aḥmad. I have preferred the form Aḥmad Lobbo, which is the most widespread in the English literature on West African history. As for Nūḥ b. al-Ṭāhir, locally referred as Alfa Nuhu Tayrou, from the honorific title *alfa* and the Fulfulde rendering of his Arabic name, I have preferred to keep his name in Arabic, Nūḥ b. al-Ṭāhir, in line with the form that appears in the manuscripts and also approximating the form in *The Arabic Literature of Africa*.

For names that do not appear in *The Arabic Literature of Africa* and in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, I have employed the forms that is available in the Arabic manuscripts I refer to. An exception was made for the name Gelaajo, which figures with a very unstable form in the Arabic sources which struggle to reproduce Fulani names. The form “Gelaajo” follows my choice of spelling Fulani names that do not appear in Arabic sources according to the norms of transliterations referred to in the abovementioned *Lexique Fulfulde (Maasina)*.

Dates

I have normally only used Gregorian dates, except when citing a source that is dated according to the Islamic calendar. In this latter case I use both dates, with the Islamic calendar first, followed by the appropriate conversion in Gregorian.

Translations

I have consistently used available translations into English of texts from other languages. Mine are the translations from texts that are not available in English.

References to Manuscripts

Referencing manuscripts that normally show different systems of foliation or pagination is problematic. I used the existing references, to either folios (f.) or pages (p.) when available in the manuscript. In the absence of existing foliation or pagination, I have numbered myself the pages, starting with the one that includes the incipit of the text (thus not numbering frontispieces).

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