

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

Askiya Muhammed

Contributed by Prof. Dr. Nazeer Ahmed, PhD

Very few thinkers have influenced the history of West Africa as has the Algerian scholar Al Moghili who lived in the second half of the 15th century. Great ideas resonate through history much like the echo of drums between chains of mountains. Each reverberation provides fresh impetus for action. When ideas are implemented through great men and women, history is transformed and human affairs are reshaped. Al Moghili's ideas, implemented through Askiya Muhammed (also known as Askiya the Great) fundamentally changed the course of West African history and provided the inspiration for reformist movements in, Mali and Sene-Gambia in modern times.

In the mid-15th century, the empire of Mali disintegrated and Songhay emerged as the largest and most powerful of West African states. It was an ancient kingdom that had maintained its independence through the Mali period. Al Yaqubi, writing in the 9th century, describes Songhay as an important African kingdom ruled by a Muslim. Another historian, Al Bakri maintains that when the ruler of Songhay ascended the throne in 1068, he was presented with a copy of the Qur'an and a shield from the Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad as a symbol of his royal authority.

The capital city of Songhay was Kukiya, situated about 60 miles south of the important trading center of Gao on the Niger River. Askiya Muhammed moved the capital city to Gao in 1497. Ibn Batuta visited the city of Gao in 1352 and described it as the most important city in the Sudan. There were two main mosques, one for the royal court and the other that served as the Jami' Masjid. The population was punctual in performing the daily prayers. In the bazaars, the local population mingled with merchants from Morocco, Egypt and beyond. Further south, the important trading center of Jenne was also Muslim. With Jenne as their base, African merchants were able to propagate Islam all the way to the borders of the tropical forest region.

Although Songhay existed as a kingdom well before the year 1000, it was during the reign of Sunni Ali that its borders expanded in every direction. Sunni Ali added Timbaktu and Jenne to his conquests thereby consolidating the extent of the empire from the edge of the Sahara in the north to the fringes of the tropical forests in the south. At its height, the Songhay empire was as large and powerful as the Mali empire, embracing an area of more than half a million square miles and controlling all the north-south and east-west trade routes from West Africa.

Sunni Ali was a far-sighted monarch, using tact and compromise to forge an empire. He was a courageous man, a shrewd statesman and an able administrator who used religion to forge trade links but did not allow it to hinder his political ambitions. The capture of Timbaktu brought him into conflict with the powerful Tuaregs who had hitherto controlled that city. Many of the *ulema* in his own empire were Tuaregs. Consequently, there was always a degree of tension between Sunni Ali and the *ulema* whom he suspected of being sympathetic to the Tuaregs. For this reason, some Muslim writers have accused Sunni Ali of being anti-Muslim but this charge is not supported by historical facts.

After Sunni Ali, Songhay entered a period of instability. His son, Sunni Barou, refused to declare himself a Muslim and was therefore deposed by an army officer, Muhammed Turi, in the year 1493. Turi ruled Songhay as Askiya Muhammed I, from 1493-1528. Askiya Muhammed was a pious man, a noble soldier, a superb administrator and a man of learning. He encouraged scholars from North Africa, Egypt and beyond to migrate to Songhay. During his days, the cities of Gao, Timbaktu and Jenne became important centers of learning known throughout the Islamic world. Askiya the Great appointed Islamic scholars to important government positions in the departments of justice and administration. He listened to them and followed their advice in matters of state. One such scholar who had immense influence with Askiya Muhammed was the Algerian Al Moghili.

Al Moghili was a proponent of purity of faith. He was against the commercialization of religion and opposed the appointment of ill-informed and self-proclaimed scholars as jurists. Religion was too serious a matter to be left in the hands of illiterate salesmen. He held that Islam should not be packaged and sold like a product in the market, or be bent and reshaped to suit the needs of a ruler. It was to be the eternal message for the spiritual and material well-being of mankind, as was taught by the Prophet.

Al Moghili maintained, as did earlier scholars in Islam, that at the turn of every century a great reformer would arise to bring it back to the model established by the Prophet. Askiya Muhammed believed that he was one such reformer. He sought Al Moghili's advice and ruled in accordance with it. He appointed jurists of repute and ensured their independence through generous grants. He encouraged education and honored scholarship. He believed that Islam was the vehicle not just for establishing commercial links and furthering trade, but was a universal mechanism for literacy, culture, law and justice. During his period, Islam spread far and wide in Africa, from the Atlantic coast in the west to the pasturelands of northern Nigeria.

Faith is that one central stream that binds Islamic history together. Over time, this stream gets polluted just as a stream gets polluted as it runs through inhabited terrain. The reformers wage a struggle to clean up this stream, purify it and bequeath its waters to those who live downstream. Al Moghili's ideas have had a major impact on later Islamic movements in Africa. Uthman dan Fuduye (d. 1817), the great Islamic reformer in West Africa, drew his inspiration from the ideas of Al Moghili and carried his struggle in the model of Askiya Muhammed.

Askiya the Great was deposed in 1528 because he lost his eyesight in his old age and was unable to rule. Following a brief period of instability, Songhay experienced a second period of peace and prosperity from 1539 to 1591. However, disputes over the issue of succession in the 1580s weakened the empire and it became prey to invaders. Towards the end of the century, Portuguese slave traders carried their raids into Songhay territory. In 1591, following border skirmishes over control of the salt mines, a Moroccan army under Judar Pasha invaded Songhay, captured Gao and brought the territories around the bend of the Niger River under Moroccan rule. The Moroccan invasion hastened the disintegration of local Muslim power. Instability ensued, making it easier for the European predators to raid further into West Africa in search of slaves. The great Atlantic slave trade had just begun.

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