

# While Europe Was In Dark Ages-- The Story Of Timbuctoo's Astounding Civilization

## Center Of Muslim Learning In Ancient Africa, Respected Throughout World

By JOHN HENRIK CLARKE

When Ibn Battuta, the great Arab traveler and writer, visited Timbuctoo in the year of 1353, this legend-shrouded city was already well known in Europe. It was the greatest city during the Golden Age of the Western Sudan. When Europe was emerging from the Dark Ages, Timbuctoo was a center of great learning and commerce. The people of Timbuctoo lived in a society where university life was highly regarded and scholars were beheld with reverence.

In the years when Timbuctoo was the great intellectual nucleus of the Songhay Empire, African scholars were enjoying a renaissance that was known and respected throughout most of Africa and in parts of Europe. At this period in African history, the University of Sangore was the educational capital of the Western Sudan. In his book, "Timbuctoo the Mysterious," Felix DuBois gives us the following picture:

"The scholars of Timbuctoo yielded in nothing to the saints in their sojourns in the foreign universities of Fez, Tunis, and Cairo; they astounded the most learned men of Islam by their erudition.

That these Negroes were on a level with the Arabian savants is proved by the fact that they were installed as professors in Morocco and in Egypt. In contrast to this, we find that the Arabs were not always equal to the requirements of the Sankamore."

**Author of Note**

Ahmed Baba, one of the outstanding scholars of this period, stands out as a brilliant example of the sweep of Sudanese erudition. An author of more than 40 books on such diverse themes as theology, astronomy, ethology, and biography, Baba was a scholar of great depth and inspiration.

He was in Timbuctoo when it was invaded by Moroccans in 1592, and he protested against their occupation of the country. His collection of 1,600 books, one of the richest libraries in existence at this time, was lost during his expatriation from Timbuctoo. Ahmeed Baba, although the most conspicuous, was only

one of the great scholars of the Western Sudan.

There was a time when the main roads in Africa led to Timbuctoo. Mansa Musa, the famous King of Mali, stopped at Timbuctoo on his way from his celebrated journey to Mecca in the year 1324.

**Great Black Kings**

From the history of Timbuctoo we learn of the great age of the black kings who built and ruled it. The greatest of these kings was Mohammad Abu Bekr El-Tourti, the founder of the Askia dynasty and the builder of the greatest days of the Songhay Empire. He was born on an island in the Niger River. He was a full-blooded black from a family of high status.

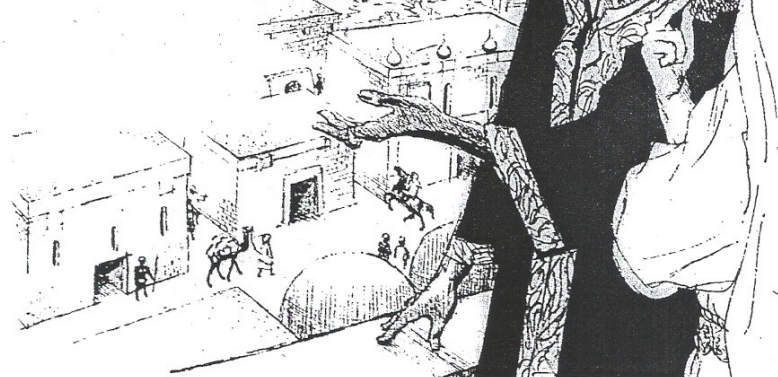
As he grew up, he joined the army of Sonni Ali, then King of Songhay. In time he rose to be a general and was later made Prime Minister. As Prime Minister he served for nearly 30 years and was a most able assistant and friend of Sonni Ali, one of the most renowned soldiers in African history. It was Sonni Ali who took the city of Timbuctoo from the rival kingdom of Meli after it had passed into the hands of the Tuaregs, the strange veiled warriors of the desert.

Sonni Ali pushed his conquests until his empire extended from west to east some 200 miles from the Atlantic Ocean and was bounded on the Gulf of Guinea and in the north by the slopes of the Atlas Mountains in Morocco.

**ALI DROWNS**

In 1492, (the year Columbus discovered America), Sonni Ali was drowned, returning from a successful campaign against the Fulani people. His son, who succeeded him, was weak and inexperienced. Mohammed Abu Bekr rose up against him and seized the vacant throne.

The sisters of the deposed king, hearing of this and resenting it, cried out, "Askia! Usurper!" The epithet was calmly accepted by Mohammad Abu Bekr



as the title of his dynasty. He became the first and the greatest of the Askias who ruled over Timbuctoo and the Songhay Empire. His dynasty lasted approximately 100 years and was destroyed by the Moorish invasion in the year 1592.

The German writer, Henry Barth, who spent some months in Timbuctoo in the middle of the nineteenth century and made a careful study of the country, pointed out that beside being a great soldier, Mohammed Abu Bekr was one of the greatest civil administrators who ever lived.

**Man of Affairs**

He stands high in the long list of Africans who have been competent men of affairs, for in his day the University of Sankore in Timbuctoo became the center of Muslim learning in Africa. Books, in those days before printing was invented, had to be written and copied by hand.

Mohammed Abu Bekr, Askia the Great, died in the year of 1538 when he was nearly 100 years of age. He had ascended the throne when Christopher Co-

lumbus was discovering America. He died when Henry VIII was still on the English throne, 50 years before the defeat of the Spanish Armada and 200 years before the first British settlement in Australia.

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